

Subject Embodied:
A Psychoanalytical Reading of the Body
In Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

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Abbreviations

Judith Butler

BP: The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva"

BTM: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*

GT: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

UG: *Undoing Gender*

Julia Kristeva

DL: Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art

PH: Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection

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Abstract

The role of the body in determining and destabilizing the subject's position within a given framework has been discussed with concentrated effort in feminist academia with a view to understanding the dilemma of sexual difference. It has rendered the body into the fragmenting frontier between the inner and outer, the psychic and the material. This dissertation adopts the psychoanalytical lens in examining Jeanette Winterson's postmodern fantasy *Sexing the Cherry* to investigate the limits to meanings attached to the body and its function in assembling and disintegrating the subject.

Chapter 1

On Body, Discourse and Psychoanalysis: An Introduction

For feminists, the body has almost always managed to be a point of contention or conflict, even though it has been ever-present in the feminist movements and discourses since its inception. From those earliest days, the body has been persistently defined by hard sciences in ways that affirmed it as the source of physical and corporeal difference, an understanding which was used to lend credence to logics determined to keep women socially and politically bound to their subordinate position. As such, it was in feminist interests to focus on the body, at least during its late-19th century liberalist beginning, only tangentially through the question of legal or political rights and personhood, so as to skirt the issue of “sexual difference” being appropriated to support “sexual inferiority” (Lacquer).

While feminist activism is one plane on which the place of the body and its importance to gender and sexuality was being etched, conceptualizations of the body were also developing on a different, distinct yet interrelated level, based on writing and scholarship produced by women, for women, and about women. Alongside guiding the course of the women’s movement by providing an ideological and intellectual base in which to ground it, such scholarship also served to shape the contours of the body and the meanings attached to it. It is the discursive construction of the body which is my primary focus.

Prior to the recent emergence of “body studies” as a specific field of interest in sociological academics, the body has appeared as a recurring motif at various times in multiple discourses, but continuously positioned in relation to a specific “other”. Many debates prominent to the feminist discourse originate out of the oppositional dynamic created between “nature” and “nurture”, with the body representing that which encapsulates nature and the natural while being

pitted against culture, rearing and socially inscribed notions of being (Schiebinger). This, under feminist purview, morphs into the more predominantly discussed binary between sex and gender, with the body once again understood in opposition to the socially and politically constructed category understood as gender. It is, therefore, not possible to understand the body—as construct, as corporeal, virtual, real, manifest, or any other—in isolation from these associated binaries and oppositions since these very associations helped assemble its forms and features as it stands in different discourses. The field of "body studies" is thus one that must necessarily adopt an interdisciplinary approach, piecing together the different facets that have manufactured the body as we find it today, without falling prey to the essentialist fallacies represented by those binaries.

Conversely, within the various disciplines where the body features as a prominent source of discussion, the skeins of thought and scholarship have run long and tangled enough that it is well outside the scope of this dissertation to ruminate on its entirety. Even within the feminist discourse itself, the development of a philosophical and academic framework spanning nearly three centuries has seen a many a shift in the concepts birthed from the body (and which have in return given birth to the body). There are, however, particular points within the discourse where the sheer volume of intersections and connections of various elements make it an inevitable locus of re-examination and reassessment as well as an inexhaustible source of discussions. It is thus only feasible for the purposes of this study to focus on a particular group of frictions and schisms that exist between two particular sets of arguments that lie suspended at a critical point between structuralist and poststructuralist feminist formulations. It is at this point, where the body intersects with discourses of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and selfhood, that I wish to situate my discussion.

This dissertation will therefore focus on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical conceptualizations that relate to the body, Judith Butler's review and critique of it, as juxtaposed against how these structures and perceptions are reflected in the postmodern magic realist novel *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson. My first chapter will explore the tensions existing between Kristevan and Butlerian body politics. I will outline how the body appears in relation to the semiotic and Symbolic dispositions as discussed by Julia Kristeva alongside how Judith Butler's analysis exposes certain gaps and problems in her conceptualization. The next two chapters will trace how these tensions and gaps are reflected in *Sexing the Cherry*, and if Winterson is able to institute a narration that can transcend if not reconcile these frictions. My second chapter will then examine the character of Dogwoman in light of abjection as understood by Kristeva, and subsequently reviewed by Butler. I will highlight the simultaneous establishment and subversion of the abjected mother figure represented by her while exploring in what ways the Kristevan notions of subject-formation is affirmed and disrupted through her physicality, her surroundings, and her positioning as principle narrator. My third chapter will attempt to trace the themes of nostalgia and return as a possible metaphor for Oedipal enactment, looking at the character of Jordan and his relationship with Dogwoman to assess if and how the Lacanian triangulation finds expression through them.

The choice of psychoanalytical perspective to identify the implications of the discursively outlined body stems from a desire to reorganize if not fully reconcile the mind/body binary which has helped frame discussions about the body as far back as the post-Enlightenment era. With the connection between subjectivity, the body, and the mind so clearly and variously organized through psychoanalytical inquiry, it is a convenient and established perspective that is not too entrenched and concretized to be amenable to creative literary appropriation. With an

understanding of literature and text as a reflection of the self and psyche, the psychoanalytical approach allows for a unique fluidity to the text and its meaning when applying its interpretive aspects to literary work, a reason for which it has been the basis for many of the newer post-structuralist branches of literary theory.

Even a cursory reading of the most important 20th century feminist writings will reveal that we cannot live with, but also cannot live without, Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis. From outright rejection to tentative or conditional acknowledgement, a whole range of reactions are present over the different waves of the feminist movement. The widely divergent reception and understanding of Freudian psychoanalytical framework can be illustrated quite fully even through a quick juxtaposition of two highly regarded 20th century second wave feminist authors who have taken the effort to alternately reevaluate and reassess Freud and his place in the feminist discourse. French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and American radical social and political activist Kate Millett approach Freudian theory from vastly different streams of academic inquiry, but their choice to engage with it reaffirms its importance to and influence on the evolution of feminist perspectives.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, where she traces the othering of woman and the female body from antiquity to modernity, devotes an entire chapter to the psychoanalytical point of view, parsing it not just for points of contradiction or ambiguity but also for points of agreement. Even while admitting to the validity of Adlerian criticisms against Freud's explicitly sexual explanation of penis envy and castration complex, she also recognizes the connection created by psychoanalytical theory between the difference in body and the mind as a progressive and refreshing take on gender for his time. The significance of the body, therefore, is one that the self ascribes onto it and for this she insists Freud be given credit. He analyses the construction of

the psyche as it relates to the body that houses the mind, which is concurrent to Beauvoir's central thesis that gender is not inherent but essentially a construct.

Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* is not so generous in her estimation. Freud finds a place in her discussion of patriarchal superstructures of society in a section presenting the emergence of psychoanalytical theory on women and femininity as one of the ideological obstacles to sexual revolution, right alongside radical fascism and Nazism of the 1940's. She opines that Freudian concepts only serve to bolster the old patriarchal order or male dominance and superiority by cloaking it in terms of science, biology and sexual psychology, all of which serve to trap the woman within the realm of bodily subjection and subjugation. The theory, she states, only means to "rationalize the invidious relationship between the sexes, to ratify traditional roles, and to validate temperamental differences" (178), because of which it is not one that can be accepted lightly.

Even while both theorists coincide in their criticisms of certain elements of Freud's femininity theory—tendency to focus too heavily on the sexual and biological without any room to account for influences of societal norms and mores emerges, or his conspicuous silence on *why* events psychosexual development takes the path he outlines—their critical interaction with his works highlights areas that which a later crop of feminists with interest in a critical reevaluation of psychoanalytical theory pick up as starting points for their own understanding of self, psyche, gender and body. As explained by Moi,

“We need more historically specific, more situated, and far more clearly defined accounts of women's lived experience and women's subjectivity than femininity theories can produce. To reject femininity theory, then, is not to reject the fact of

sexual difference. It is to reject theories that equate femininity and sexual difference, as if women were the only bearers of sex." (845)

Juliet Mitchell, another notable feminist writing in the 1970's, also recognized the relevance of classical Freudian psychoanalysis and emphasized the importance of situating this framework in relation to the feminist socio-economic discourses of the day. In her own words: "... psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but an analysis *of* one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it." (xiii). Her claim is that because it describes the psychic anatomy of the patriarchal mindset, it continues to be fertile ground for feminist academic endeavours.

Feminist academics generally tend to exhibit a more receptive attitude to Jacques Lacan's theoretical framework, preferring to use his constructionist models as a base from which to further their own conceptions even though its underlying assumptions accept and in most cases reformulate rather than reject Freudian concepts of femininity and psychosexual development. Regardless of this acceptance, Lacan's use of linguistics as a powerful indicator and shaper of psychosocial development and subject formation sees a redirection of psychoanalysis into more abstract, philosophical path. His hypothetical setup describes the process of subject formation and individuation through initiation into what he calls the Symbolic order, which uses language as the key tool through which the signifying process operates. His major claims with regards to subjectivity initiated a paradigm shift and came to be the foundation on which most French feminist psychoanalytical theories tend to find their grounding. Even as this redirection renders the psychoanalytical discourse less misogynist and more amenable to feminist appropriation, it also indicates a shift away from the elements of Freudian psychoanalysis which made it

important and groundbreaking for writers such as Beauvoir. The focus edges away from the body, whose presence in Lacanian study is more and more intangible (Moi 843).

Even though the Lacanian model created the foundation later used to facilitate analysis of gendered identity in relation to their production through language, its structuralist mode of investigation is a template that is readily applicable to literature and has often been used by literary theorists to reflect on the identities shaped discursively through representation via language. His recognition of the Symbolic as a masculine linguistically asserted order through which the subject must be articulated has been the topic of feminist speculation, appropriation and reclamation.

One of the central threads along which these conversations can be organized or understood is in terms of an inner/outer dichotomous setup. With Lacan, we realize that everything is inside the Symbolic order; there is no “intelligibility” outside it. An exterior exists but it is not comprehensible to us and if brought into comprehensibility through the masculine paternal organizing principle of language, it becomes interior to culture and the order. In a departure from this Lacanian perception, Kristeva not only imagines an exterior that has to be repressed in order for the cultural enclosure in the form of the symbolic order to exist, but also identifies that exterior as both feminine and maternal. She is also relevant in the sense that she tries to propose some form of permeability between the Symbolic order and entities existing outside of it—the semiotic, in her formulation—through the subversion of language, Lacan’s chosen ambassador of paternal culture and the Symbolic. Butler then consequently through her criticisms of Lacanian and Kristevan hypothesis, puts everything within the purview of culture, influencing and influenced by it. We can look at this latter concept as dissolving the very idea of an inner/outer dichotomy, or, as is more likely the interpretation butler wishes to support, we can

consider how the delineation of inner or outer is dependent upon power relation, decided by those benefitting from privilege and power as well as deciding who has privilege and power. Considering that power circulates and is a dynamic rather than fixed quantity, the borders are permeable, always moving and needing to be reinforced.

As elucidated in Toril Moi's rereading of Freud and Lacan, certainties in opinion regarding classical psychoanalytical theory are few and far between, with those that exist morphing and changing with time. It seems as good a reason as any why no one can seem to dismiss Freud for very long. Just as the field of psychology itself has attempted at various times to reframe his perspective by breaking away from it, reassessing it or simply addressing its discrepancies, feminists have also by turns appropriated it, criticized it, or refashioned it to the tune of contemporary times. This constant re-evaluation and reconsideration of what might have been considered by now, a century later, an outdated mode of thinking, suggests that some deeper truth must definitely exist in it—even if no one can quite agree on what that truth is. That feminist iterations of psychoanalysis have persistently been “descriptive and evaluative, not prescriptive and dogmatic” (Nolan and O'Mahony 159) has allowed fluidity to remain within what is by now an oft-harvested field. The interpretive space this creates within psychoanalytical theory is perhaps its essential appeal for students of literature.

The space for interpretation intrinsic to the postmodern genre also makes it an appealing canvas around which a psychoanalytical reading can be arranged. Originally, I had expected to find the theoretical discussion circling these particular elements ample enough for the purposes of this dissertation. This soon proved an unwieldy approach for a student of literature. It became apparent to me that literature can serve as not just a useful lens through which my specific points of interest can be brought into focus but also as an antidote to the tendency of psychoanalytical

discursive threads to fall into essentialist traps. The multiplicity of meaning and plurality of readings encouraged by texts with postmodern themes and conceits leave room to accommodate a whole host of alternative understandings of a text and what it might signify to a particular set of readers while preventing broad generalizations that might prove closed and exclusionary. Using a literary text grounded me, allowed me to contextualize rather than generalize.

Postmodern fiction by women writers have provided feminist critical theorists with a rich set of texts using which issues of gender and sexuality can be newly explored. It is intriguing to me that postmodern texts, in its blurring of reality, often manages to finesse complex thematic questions to project a version of the truth that is in many cases closer to life than any realist genre might be able to capture. Magic realism, for instance, mixes the real and logical with the fantastical and whimsical to capture and essential inexpressible dimension to human subjectivity that is otherwise unable to find expression in prose. When looked at through the prism of quintessentially postmodern themes such as time, memory, history and remembrance, sex and the body by association learn to mirror the fluidity inherent to those themes. In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeanette Winterson manages to weave together multiple narratives from different points in time and arrange them in sporadic bursts of nonlinear scenes to tell a fantastical version of the story of a mother and son in 17th century England. Whether the author manages to rewrite history, recreates memories of an imaginative previous life for the present-day characters, or uses the first narrative as the repressed base on which the second contemporary narrative can be superimposed remains unclear and entirely open to interpretation as befits any postmodern text. It imbues the narrative not only with a sense of reality being unstable and fragmented but also emphasizes that the multiplicity of truth lies in its representation. It is in its vague ambiguous spaces out of which most credible interpretations arise.

There are many aspects of *Sexing the Cherry* that make it a gold mine of a book for queer studies and postmodernist academics. The section relating the fate of The Twelve Dancing Princesses alone can inspire a slew of questions and debates on heteronormativity, motherhood, marginality, sexuality, gender and violence, all themes that feature prominently within the text. Its importance as a women's text is reinforced by the abundance and centrality of female characters to the novels' story and storytelling. While these have been clearly and repeatedly identified by other readers as the more interesting threads woven through the story, my choice is not so much to ignore and maneuver around them as to adopt a lens that is broader, which would allow me to simultaneously encapsulate and transcend certain categorical imperatives inherent to those particular thematic examinations.

The next chapter will review several ways in which Julia Kristeva has conceived of a place for the feminine within the psychoanalytical landscape, considering them alongside Judith Butler's concerns about the lack of political application and dynamism in those conceptualizations.

Chapter 2

Theories in Flux: Body in Kristeva and Butler

Lacan's theoretical stance on the relationship between the body and the psyche has drawn disciples and devotees as well as criticism and censure in equal measure. Toril Moi's recognition of the evident gaps in his framework as well as her own belated realizations regarding the limits of the scope of his theorization suggest that rereading Lacan in light of other later critical appraisals that rework his ideas can serve to reveal the necessity for a more nuanced hypothetical that can possibly seamlessly unite the psyche and the body that houses it. It remains, thereby, the most important foundational structure relevant to many psychoanalytical theorists, nearly all of whom have found ways to incorporate, and in other cases expand, his ideas in directions they then proceeded to make their own.

In the interest of brevity and relevance to my particular stream of thought, my examination will be confined to how the works of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler grapple with the body and its import in a post-Lacanian landscape. In this chapter/section I will be looking at how the tensions between Kristevan and Butlerian conceptualizations play out over the body and add further dimensions to our understanding of its place in the continuing conversation about psychosocial subject-formation and states of being. My discussion will therefore necessarily begin with a short review and assessment of Julia Kristeva's poststructuralist conceptualizations before continuing on to clarify the implications and problems in it identified by Judith Butler in her works.

Before entering into a discussion to unpack the possible critiques of Kristeva's message, it is important to understand and emphasize the many ways in which her theories have themselves represented an inaugural moment in feminist theoretical writing. Trying to engage

with Julia Kristeva's works is an interesting challenge for academics of any particular field, mostly because of its placement in relation to different areas of research is always slightly off-centre. In combining linguistics, philosophy, cultural theory and feminist enquiry through her development of psychoanalytical perspectives on language and women's writing, she has positioned herself at an important crossroads between structuralist and poststructuralist thought. This intentional placement is useful in the sense that while this means that her ideas never quite fully fit in only any one specific stream, it presents an important alternate voice to complement the existing discourse (*DL*, 11). It can be said that in some sense she creates a space for herself in the interstices and junctures of multiple discourses, making her works reflexively important to each. While most of her efforts provide focused analysis of the nature of structures and the processes through which they are erected, her work also serves as a springboard for many, through critique or extrapolation, towards illustrating the instability of those very structures, even as they come into being.

Her most significant and remembered contributions take Lacan's establishment of the Symbolic order and extends it by introducing the notion of the semiotic, drawing the pre-Symbolic into her expansion of the original theoretical parameters. While Lacan only cites the Imaginary as a state occurring before language and therefore one that remains beyond expression, Kristeva insists that this pre-Symbolic stage is the location of the inscrutable feminine which does not only predate language, and thus all patriarchal, paternal, Symbolic structures, but also threatens them.

Her main area of interest, however, is subjectivity—namely the development of the “split subject”, which arises out of primal repression and cleaves into semiotic and the Symbolic. The former is to be understood as a pre-Oedipal stage which is given to “the actual organization, or

disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives” (*DL* 18), while the latter encompasses the realm within which human subjectivity finds order and expression. Her work on semanalysis explores the formation of the subject through language. Her seminal treatise *Revolution in Poetic Language* centres around the role of language in creating and reinforcing subjectivity within a paternal patriarchal framework, while explaining in painstaking detail the signifying processes related to the semiotic and the Symbolic that develop the split subject. In doing so, she proposes poetic language as one possible way in which the semiotic finds expression and can subvert the dominance of the Symbolic order.

The body appears in Kristevan formulation mainly through her explorations of the feminine and the maternal, both of which she prefers to situate in what is concurrent with the pre-Oedipal stage of Freudian psycho-sexual development and as such beyond the expressions possible within the Symbolic. Her appropriation of the Platonic *chora*, for example, and her conflation of it with the maternal body diverges sharply from the Platonic ideal, in which the mother “remains a referential ground that can only exist as a metaphorical relations inserted within a linguistic structure” (Huffer 85). Her adaptation of the *chora* extricates it from the Plato’s more political envisioning of the individual and transforms it into a purely psychoanalytical model. (89)

By the time Judith Butler writes the influential *Gender Trouble*, the body has already been theorized in numerous directions but never quite managing to break out of the dualistic oppositional dynamics it has been mired in. I would not be wrong, I think, to state that the body has been for many queer theorists the entry point into the queer studies as an off-shoot from the feminist discourse. Such is the case for Judith Butler, one of founding names attached to gender and queer studies, who articulated her notion of gender as performance by first denying the

credence to the existing understanding of body, sex and gender. In doing so, not only has she expanded the feminist perspective in unexpected directions, but also laid the foundation for what would soon develop into the theoretical framework encapsulating normative and non-normative social actions and behaviours.

In this book, she chooses to engage with the works of eminent philosophers and theorists in order to systematically outline the instances in which their arguments fail to account for the presence and influence of power structures that not only interact and oppress but also create the other structures which are the subject of their discussions. Taking her cues from the post-structural direction of analysis adopted by many of her peers, Butler also chooses to critique the representation of the body as a mere *tabula rasa* for whatever theoretical and social constructs we care to draw on it. Her approach to this demands that any notion ascribing to the idea of a fixed interiority and exteriority, be it with regards to existing social metastructures or prevalent concepts that address the body, be thoroughly interrogated if not completely dismantled.

The treatment of the body in Butler's work symbolizes a break between more traditional feminist conceptualization and the newer post-structural direction taken by gender theorists who take up Butler's concepts as a starting point for a fresher more nuanced take on gender and sexuality. Questioning the binary arrangements within gender and sexuality, while not the newest approach to interrogating the constructedness of these aspects, was probably the most important feature of most discussions in the field. Butler however also breaks ground by taking the argument one step further by critiquing the assumption of a fixed or quantifiable interiority and exteriority and presenting the body as a "structure" like any other that is brought into being and then incorporated within other existing structures.

Butler's main problem with feminist formulations arising out of Lacanian theoretical understandings is with regards to its silence on—which reads as a seeming disregard of—the implications of sexual difference on any plane other than the symbolic. Psychoanalytical reworking of Lacan's model, as attempted by Kristeva for instance, continue to reinforce the totalizing importance of the symbolic realm, leaving unanswered questions about the hope for real social transformation or change in the way gender is perceived (*UG* 212). If, as psychoanalytical post-structuralists who discuss gender would assert, “sexual difference is a fundamental nexus through which language and culture emerge” (211) and if it occurs entirely on a symbolic level, then expectation of changes in material terms appears incompatible if not moot. Even though Kristeva's location of the feminine as the semantic existing “outside” of the Symbolic framework supplements what Lacan's original setup was missing, it does not reach beyond language and culture into the realm of the material and social.

Her problems with the placement and existence of the maternal body in Kristeva's writing borrow heavily from Foucauldian principles that connect prohibitive law and internalization of disciplinary practices with the creation of falsely stable bodily boundaries. By dismantling the notion of there being an ahistorical or fixed stable “natural” body upon which normative cultural codes can be inscribed, Butler questions Kristeva's attribution of a “maternal teleology to the female body prior to its emergence into culture” (*GT* 90). She remains unconvinced that the hypothesis outlined by Kristeva sufficiently answers questions regarding the ontology of the body. Kristeva's oppositional concept of the semiotic to the Symbolic also necessitates the existence of fixed boundaries does not appeal to Butler, who has argued persistently about the discursively reinforced idea about impermeable boundaries being invariably constructed under political heterosexist agendas and believes that the presence of a

semiotic *creates* the border between the two, reinforcing the hegemonic influence of the Symbolic even as it attempts to subvert it.

Her analysis of Julia Kristeva's the semiotic and Symbolic dispositions is particularly interesting because she raises questions regarding historicity and the existence of a fixed exterior from which this supposed prepaternal body originates. Butler's doubts about Kristeva's explanation of the suppression of a prepaternal maternal body, in order to construct and maintain the relational power position the Symbolic has been given, is based on her uncertainty about the idea of a "prepaternal"—a concept that seeks to create an exterior to the Symbolic by proposing the existence of drives prior to the existence of machinery that is responsible for the production of drives. The semiotic refers to "a pre-discursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but maintains an ontological status prior to language itself" (*BP* 105), a point Kristeva asserts in her discussion of poetic language as allowing for the expression of the semiotic, "the maternal body manifests in poetic speech" (*GT* 81). This notion assumes a structure that precedes and predates the Symbolic instead of trying to understand, as Butler would rather, the way in which the desires or manifestations of the semiotic, the so-called "maternal body", originate through, or are even produced by, the crystallization of paternal law. The possibility that Butler puts forth is the notion that "the pre-discursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause" (*BP* 106). There is a circular logic at play here that renders the expression of the maternal body through poetic language a paradoxical impossibility.

In creating a connection between Kristevan concept of the body and Foucauldian notion of the normative body being constructed, Butler is able to engage in a reflexive exercise that underscores the weaknesses existing in discourses of the body even as she extends it in another

direction. It is her adoption of the Foucauldian lens that leads her to question Kristeva's post-Lacanian psychoanalytics as she does. But it is also this lens that allows her to look at Kristeva's discussion of the abject body and extend it to the creation and maintenance of regions, and bodies, marginal to those within society, spaces where the abjected must exist as non-subjects so that the subjects may outline and preserve their own "domain".

The next chapter will illustrate how both Kristeva and Butler coincide in their ideas about the abject body as well as what it means for the process of subject-formation. Central to this thesis will be the character of Dogwoman from *Sexing the Cherry* and how she conforms to and disrupts her embodiment in abjection.

Chapter 3

Abject Subjectivity: Dogwoman's Body

The postmodern genre has in many ways provided a most amenable playground for writers whose works reflect various forms of cultural and hegemonic resistance through literature. Through elements of fantasy, parody, humor and play, authors are free to devise a unique approach to topics of considerable weight and seriousness. While postmodern novels have been accused of making light of their chosen subjects of discussion, most critics agree that these lighter approaches add a new layer of complexity to the understanding and interpretation of textuality. Coupled with its at times outright dismantling of longstanding categories, postmodern conceits of writing find an interesting compatibility with the postcolonial poststructuralist and feminist author.

The body has emerged a recurring theme in postmodern fiction, going so far as to give rise to the posthumanist discourses that analyse the living human body as a threshold to human existence that can be pushed further through the use of science and technology. However, the female gendered body continues to be placed at the crux of the abstract and the corporeal, the sign and signifier, making it a curiously potent space where meaning percolates.

In this chapter I will illustrate how the character of appears as a manifestation of the othered and abject maternal within the text of *Sexing the Cherry* even as it finds ways to undermine its designation as an "other" to the self. While Dogwoman most clearly reflects an embodiment of Kristeva's concept of the abject, Winterson's use of first person narration for this character creates a psychic interiority for an abject character, creating a more ambiguous, unstable and unmediated sense of subject and self. Such a reading also occasions a questioning and destabilization of fixed interiors and exteriors, to self and society, a thematic that has been

woven into the fabric of the novel through its reflection on the abjection of Dogwoman's body and her surroundings.

Julia Kristeva addresses the relationship between the subject and the body specifically in *Powers of Horror* through her evaluation of the abject body as the site where "meaning collapses" (2). The body, and deviation from its most idealized forms or functions, has found particular expression in her work on the relationship between horror and abjection. In her analysis of the reaction to material or bodily elements that provoke disgust and dread, she establishes connections between the wretched non-normative body and the idealized intact subject that is created through a virulent horror-inspired rejection of it. While most of Julia Kristeva's works focus on subject-formation derived from a specific and layered understanding of language, semiotics, psychoanalytics and the body as ingredients important to the construction of the "normalized subject", in *Powers of Horror* she focuses on the body and its role in instituting an Other to this subject.

At its core, the abject has been defined by Kristeva as whatever inspires revulsion and horror. She begins by identifying these elements primarily in physical and bodily terms. It finds expression in the oozing, open, secreting aspects of the body which provoke disgust or challenges the idea of the body as a singular, intact, whole and pure surface on which signification is possible, within which the psychic subject is housed. Abjection serves to help create the subject by helping to embody that which is not the subject. It is through a negation and rejection of the abject that the subject can consolidate its identity. The existence of the abject, therefore, and its presence (within a text) is disturbing to the stability of the body as a signifier and to the process of signification. Consequently and conversely, the former's potential for disruption works as a reinforcement of the latter.

The abject body therefore, in the threat that it presents to the subject, is emblematic of instability in general. Aside from its bodily expression, she notes that it is present and presented in the form of anything that is thereby deemed “objectionable” and condemnable:

“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...” (*PH* 13)

Abjection, as a result, can be considered the embodiment of disruption, a conspicuous and persistent challenge to the unilateral hegemony of paternal law, i.e., the Symbolic order. Even while Kristeva establishes the role of the abject in defining the subject, the threat it poses to the latter in particular, and Symbolic order as a whole, help place it at the edges of meaning and signification. While the abject itself is neither object nor subject, but somewhere in between or beyond, helping to define the subject yet never approaching subjectivity itself.

Kristeva’s emphasis that any piece of literature that confronts the abject must thereby necessarily destabilize fixed categories of perception becomes important when applying her lens to literary text where subjectivity and abjection come into play: “One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality.” (*PH* 16). In other words, textual representations of abjection must therefore attempt to use it as a vehicle through which the limits of categories and the permeability of borders—of the self and other, body and mind, subject and abject—can be interrogated or even blurred. If the abject body is where meaning collapses, then the abject in literature must be that disturbing place in the text where the subversive and transgressive find expression.

Sexing the Cherry challenges these categorical distinctions, foremost through the character of Dogwoman, whose presence in the text upsets normative and definitive notions at every turn. Examining Dogwoman in light of the competing understandings of the body and of the inner/outer dichotomy presented by Kristeva and Butler is useful, firstly because of her importance as one of the primary first person narrators through whom the novel is delivered, and secondly because her abjected body illustrates the limits of boundaries that are drawn.

What sets apart Winterson's use of abjection and her portrayal of it in this novel is with regard to how the narrative presents it to the reader. Dogwoman's place in the novel as a primary first person narrator, whose perspective is crucial to the readers' perception of the world, is of importance here. She epitomizes the abject most obviously through the physical, in the ugliness of her features most casually relayed in her own voice at different moments throughout the text:

“How hideous am I?

My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas.” (Winterson 18)

This description is immediately followed by an anecdote that illustrates Dogwoman's bodily size large enough to unseat and project an elephant into the air. There are also multiple references to her questionable hygiene—not unusual for the average European in the 17th century—and instances of scatological humor that accompany it. Her impersonation of a diseased prostitute reads: “... for I have the Clap and my flesh is rotting beneath me. If I were to stand up, sir, you would see a river of pus run across these flags” (62).

Her nonchalant description of her physical appearance cuts through the horror of that description—when she describes herself as “too huge for love” (30) it is the self writing itself in

describing the body rather than the usual case of the subject designating an other by abjecting and rejecting it. This description and the nonchalance of delivery, while appearing at the beginning of the novel, is arrived at after occurrences that lead to the realization of her less than normal form. Her experience of unrequited love, for instance, vividly outlines how fear of her monstrous appearance is the basis for her rejection by the man she loves: “‘What is it?’ I cried. ‘Is it love for me that affects you so?’ ‘No,’ he said. ‘It is terror’.” (32)

In giving her a voice as a first person narrator the very concept of “the margin”, of an abject other residing therein and reinforcing the centrality of a subject through its negation, collapses. These experiences of rejection, fear and horror, when narrated by Dogwoman, instead of creating a distance between a psychic subject and the abject, seem to erase the boundaries and merge the two. The reader experiences the othering of Dogwoman—rather than being in a position of rejecting the abject, the reader experiences the rejection faced by the abject through Dogwoman.

The development of this subjective psychic interiority for a character that has been marked as abnormal and deviant is enhanced by the glimpse into Dogwoman’s inner thoughts, worries and justifications. Her ethical and political stance, in particular, is very clearly outlined by Winterson in the characters own voice, which manages to paint her morally and legally objectionable actions against the Puritan republicans in a more righteous if not entirely sympathetic light. From the outside, Dogwoman might be judged a brute monster who engages in violence against the state, but the readers’ perspective is necessarily tempered by Dogwoman’s voice and her royalist convictions. Even though her actions depict her as the “criminal with a good conscience” and “the killer who claims he is a savior” of Kristeva’s description, her inner monologue does not allow this to be the only aspect of her character which is visible to the reader.

The author's use of abjection veers curiously away from the gothic and towards the humorous. Humour is an unsurprising strategy given how the spirit of playfulness and celebration is a hallmark of postmodern writing. Although Dogwoman herself does not have much of a sense of humor or irony, most of her escapades and references to her grotesque form are read as amusing anecdotes rather than dire or terrifying—her interactions with armed sergeants or hypocritical Puritans, for example, allow her demonstrate her brute strength but also underscore the monstrous proportions of her body. Her narration is matter of fact rather than self aggrandizing or boastful, but this tone infuses the text with dramatic and situational irony.

Kristeva's discussion of the significance of abjection approaches it from a primarily psychoanalytical standpoint, exploring the creation of the subject as a discrete psychic entity. Her formulation thus traces the interiorized consolidation of the subject as a response to an external non-subject entity which is required for that consolidation to take place. Unlike her more critical and sceptical assessment of Kristeva's oppositional arrangement of the Symbolic and the semiotic, Judith Butler's view on abjection combines the basic understanding of Kristeva's explanation with a Foucauldian understanding of power and society to politicizes it. This reading is mediated by her interest in tracing the structures and operations of power in society, an approach that allows her to take Kristeva's purely psychic analysis and apply it to a communal and social setting. She uses this extrapolation from Kristeva's ideas to explain importance of abjection to the creation of definitions of normativity as well as to the categorization of non-normative groups in society.

For Butler, it is important that Kristeva's analysis frames exclusion as being crucial to the creation of power structures in society. Butler's formulation differs in the sense that instead of envisioning and necessitating the existence of an exterior she examines how the lines marking

the interior and exterior are created within the fabric of sociality, rearranging society into groups of visible normative subjects made distinct from a peripheral region where the non-subjects are relegated (*GT* 133-4). The latter is then an exteriorized space within social life which Butler describes as “uninhabitable”, populated by groups that are abjected with specific aim towards delineating this space. Both these formulations acknowledge the tenuous, unstable and illusory nature of the boundaries that require, according to Butler, constant reinforcement and can collapse quite readily at the first hint of flux.

She defines this operation as an “exclusionary matrix” which defines the borders of the domain to which the subject belongs and lays claim. Outside of this domain lies the area she describes as “unlivable”. She then goes on to show how these differentiations and divisions are innately false:

This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (*BTM* xiii)

The demarcation of these zones sees clear spatial representation in *Sexing the Cherry*, where London and the “black Thames” emerge as the uncertain base upon which these divisions are erected and simultaneously exposed as false. Abjection and wretchedness permeate the accounts of these spaces; in Dogwoman’s opinion, “London is a foul place, full of pestilence and rot” (Winterson 6). Her descriptions of the people that she encounters in these spaces are similarly

ugly; her witch neighbour, who lives in a kennel, is “a side of beef wrapped in muslim” and “a piece of leather like a football that serves as a head and a fantastical mass of rags that serves as a body” (6). These descriptions organize Dogwoman’s surroundings as those zones of unlivability within society against which subjective consolidation occurs.

These marginalized areas, however, being places where the subject and abject come into contact with each other, are also the regions where borders and boundaries keeping them distinct breakdown. These spaces become the arena where the dogma of paternal culture—represented in the book through the unilateral and rigid Puritan doctrine personified in the characters of Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace—is confronted by the Other it has set itself against. Dogwoman’s discovery of these characters engaged in what they themselves have classified as sinful and deviant acts results in her violent execution of them (86). This can be read either as the symbolic death of the subject when its transient and insubstantial nature is exposed in its contact with the abject, or as the resistance of the Other manifesting in violence against the Symbolic order and murder. This violent decentering of self and subject unseats the certainty of boundaries drawn within sociality.

The next chapter will analyse the placing of Jordan’s character in relation to Dogwoman, with a view to examining how the Oedipal triangle is simultaneously disrupted and enacted through them.

Chapter 4

Incomplete Subjects: Jordan and Dogwoman

The narration in *Sexing the Cherry* is one of its most exciting aspects of the novel, where various voices exist to complement the story and contribute different dimensions to it, giving the impression of a multi-layered chorus. Anchoring these voices are two primary characters who present the central relationship and tensions around which the novel is structured. As previously discussed, Dogwoman can be understood as the abject yet subversive presence in the novel, symbolizing and inhabiting spaces that would be considered marginal if it were not for her position as a primary narrator which flips and ultimately muddies many such categorical distinctions.

As the boy she rescues, raises and protects until his departure, Jordan's presence in the novel compounds the complexity of Dogwoman's character by painting her in the role of the mother. The aggressive and monstrous facets of her character belie the maternal cant of her relationship with him. The alternate side to a discussion of Dogwoman as an abject character, as a result, requires a detailed look at the character of Jordan and his placement with respect to Dogwoman.

In this chapter I attempt to analyse Dogwoman in relation to Jordan to show how his character can be understood as the subject to Dogwoman's abject. In doing so, it becomes evident that even though the usual Oedipal triangulation—which remains the agreed upon base for desire and subject-formation in psychoanalytical tracts—is absent in the novel, the search for a unified self and subjectivity portrayed requires a departure from and return to the abject (m)other figure. While it is possible to take a deeper look into the possible Oedipal implications

of the relationship between Jordan and Dogwoman, my reading is confined to the ways in which it diverges from that established triad and yet enforces its metaphorical enactment.

Criticisms of Freudian framework that point out the masculinist aspects of his hypothesis have noted similar issues in the works of later psychoanalytical theorists due to their limited contestations of the phallogentrism inherent to his theories. The elements of Freudian formulation best appropriated by Lacan, for instance, outlined across multiple essays¹, have resulted in the rearticulation of the Oedipal drama organized around the mother-child relationship but still using the phallus as its central feature. As the signifier whose importance and role is central to his theory of sexual difference, the phallus and the consequence of its presence or absence in the given relational matrix has been posited as the object of desire for the mother and son. This premise underscores the rearrangement of Freudian triangulation, with the father as the fourth intruding element that triggers the complex, leaving intact concerns of sexist iteration.

Kristeva's discussion of maternity follows from this principle setup. She shifts her attention from the role of the phallus and the father in disrupting the pre-Oedipal relation in an attempt to reframe a feminist origin or basis for the arrangement. However, this approach emerges more as a confirmation and assertion of Freudian phallogentrism than a critique of it (Stanton 164). Even though her notions of the desire for motherhood invest it with non-Symbolic causality, i.e. suggesting it as a potential path to reestablishing connection with the repressed pre-Symbolic maternal body (*DL* 239), the biological teleology critiqued by Butler continues to be problematic when not considered in the context of society and the valuation of motherhood in it.

¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Routledge, 1966. Print.
Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book III. The Psychoses, 1955-56*. Trans. Russell Grigg. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

By analysing the desire for motherhood, a desire she agrees is psychic in nature, only as expressed through physical maternity, Kristeva does not leave room for conceptions of alternative modes through which this desire can find expression.

It can thus be clearly seen how the relationship between Dogwoman and Jordan does not strictly adhere to Lacanian concepts of mother-son correlation, breaking out of the triangular dynamics of desire and longing it proposes. There are several instances in the novel where characters relate with or reject certain categories that displace them from the most obvious roles within the hypothetical. The most obvious in its subversive potential is Dogwoman, whom Lacan's framework would most likely identify with the notion of the "phallic mother", but does not fit neatly into its boundaries. Her lack of possessiveness towards Jordan is highlighted through the fact that she gives him "a river name, a name not bound to anything, just as the waters are not bound to anything" (3). She rejects the male member explicitly multiple times throughout the novel, physically and metaphorically, unable to understand it or its relation to her sexuality. Considering she goes so far as to castrate an exhibitionist who bares his penis to her, Dogwoman can be viewed as being anywhere from indifferent to completely averse to phallic desire (38). She is not, as Freud would have it, worried that she has been castrated; the phallus is not the default anatomy for her. Counter to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical setup, Dogwoman does not feel her sex (in so much as she thinks of herself as being only her sex) as a "negative"—her acceptance of the absence of the phallus is cemented with her relief that she has "nothing to be bitten off" (Winterson 109).

Dogwoman also presents an anomaly to the Kristevan notion of maternity in that Jordan is not a child of her own body. Her acceptance of this rests upon the fact that "you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me." (3). If, as Kristeva suggests, maternity is

a way to attain reunion with one's own mother, Dogwoman's choice of adopting a foundling does not correlate with the biologically entrenched theoretical analysis presented in her work². The idea, then, that Jordan is the subject to her fashioning as the abject maternal other is an interpretation that is possible only as metaphor, and falls short of the Kristevan ideal.

As important as Dogwoman is to the bizarreness that is characteristic of the novel, Jordan's narration manages to eclipse hers in terms of its significance to the development of a subjective self. Jordan's character finds significance in its contrast and distinction from Dogwoman. From the very beginning we can understand that Jordan's character is more give to the inner and psychic, in comparison with Dogwoman in whom the tension between body and mind, inner and outer emerge more strongly. The contrast between the two proves inescapable—whereas Dogwoman is continuously described in reference to her corporeal and material existence, Jordan is drawn with greater emphasis on the imaginative inner world he inhabits. Her heavy bodily presence in the text is offset by Jordan's elusive astral projection into places where she or anyone else cannot follow. It also underscores Dogwoman's confinement in the text to those abjected spaces that remain the interface between Symbolic and the Other while Jordan is able to, sometimes in his mind and other times through actual travel, move beyond the reach to some undefined and unutterable exterior that exists outside of it (Kintzele 3).

It is also through Jordan's narration that the text ruminates on postmodern themes such as time, space and memory, all of which defy material or empirical conceptualization. His presence in the novel is characterized by disembodiment and exhibits a supernatant quality portrayed through his fascination with seafaring. His conviction that "we are no longer bound by matter, matter has become what it is: empty space and light" (Winterson 89) place him in a position directly antithetical to Dogwoman's, whose discussions are not only more chronologically linear

² Mainly in *Desire in Language*.

and materially bound, but also frequently becomes the avenue through which the bodily and the physical can inject itself into the story.

This inner thought-life is reflected in the sea-journeys that frequently take him away from Dogwoman and his home—he relates his sojourns as a psychological escape from physical geographical and temporal restrictions, referring to them at times as being interchangeable with bodily travel: “To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road.” (Winterson 10). This conflation of imagination, thought and physical travel is another way in which clear distinctions between the inner and outer breakdown in the course of the novel even as the novel tempts the reader to continue to place Jordan and Dogwoman in a dualistic binary consideration.

Dogwoman recognizes in Jordan, from the very beginning, the imagination and strong inclination towards travel which mark him as fundamentally different from her. She interprets this difference as a foreshadowing of his inevitable departure from her and the abjected space she inhabits. In a scene where mother and son both see a banana for the first time, Dogwoman rejects the fruit as resembling “the private parts of an Oriental” (5) but Jordan’s reaction is one of wonder:

He was standing with both arms upraised and staring at the banana above Johnson’s head. I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore and trees whose branches sang with green and birds in fairground colours and an old man in a loin-cloth.

This was the first time Jordan set sail. (Winterson 6)

Jordan's fascination with the banana can of course be read as his identification with the phallic, an element that is missing from his life with Dogwoman. Alongside her immediate and explicit rejection of it, this can be considered the point which marks the movement away from the mother, a transition into the Oedipal stage. This interpretation however is rendered uncertain when the movement away from the mother does not precipitate in Jordan an initiation into the paternal and Symbolic. The triangulation which ushers the Oedipal stage of development, and serves to ground the subject in the future is missing from Jordan's. As a result he is set adrift, quite literally as well as metaphorically, with a desire for the Other—represented in this case through the dancer Fortunata—a desire he himself admits is indistinguishable to him from a desire for self: “Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?” (37) This outward fixation and search for Fortunata echoes his desire for a consolidated self, one which he is denied by Fortunata's own devotion to the cult of Artemis and search for something other than heterosexual love and domesticity. When juxtaposed with Jordan's statement to Dogwoman that Fortunata is a woman that does not exist—one whose apparition she perceives for only a moment before it vanishes—Jordan's journey in pursuit of her becomes recast as an anticlimactic quest.

His return to Dogwoman is, in this sense, necessary to the shoring of a unified subjectivity for Jordan. Jordan's pull towards the water and travel to places beyond London and its squalor notwithstanding, he must find his way back to the (m)other figure who serves as the material base to his perpetually incomplete sense of self. This return, however, does not just signify a reunion with the maternal but also brings him back to the realm of the Symbolic paternal, proposing an alternate enactment of the Oedipal thematic. Mother and son's ultimate departure from a burning London indicates a kind of rescue actuated by Jordan that whisks his

mother away from the purview of paternal order to an uncertain and undefined “beyond” that exists outside of London.

What reinforces this one instance of departure and return into a cycle can only be understood in context of the later sections of the novel which take place in the 1990’s with characters that are projected as alter egos to their 17th century counterparts. Jordan’s return to Dogwoman is mirrored in the contemporary section of the novel with Nicolas’ search for and meeting with the scientist. This use of history as a fractured surface upon which one can reflect and connect multiple sets of progressions and realities allows for another type of recognition, and return to take place. Through a schizophrenic narration, Winterson deliberately juxtaposes characters and events from a particular significant point in England’s history against modern day characters who, while being in an entirely different temporal context from their 17th century alter egos, most definitely appear to be their alter egos nonetheless and project similar states of consciousness. The indistinct sense of connection between the two sets of characters across time and space resonates in the latter half of the novel very forcefully, in both Nicolas Jordan, whose love for ships leads him to join the Navy, and the unnamed female scientist, who feels the presence of a monstrous sentience inside of her, as though her body is a cage for “the other one, lurking inside” (129).

The contemporary characters operate without knowledge or memory of the alternate 17th century existence that precedes their introduction to the readers. Nicolas’ instant yet unexplainable interest in the ecologist who is camped out by the river assessing the toxicity of the water is complemented by the female scientist’s feeling of restless incompleteness. Her assertion “I had to get on to Blackfriars, there was someone waiting for me” and the inability to identify who it was speaks to the form of repression that is the basis of Kristeva’s refashioning of

the pre-Oedipal stage. The unnamed scientist and the manifestation within her personality of what readers can identify as Dogwoman's aggression is forcefully reminiscent of the suppressed maternal body which finds expression outside of the comprehensibility composed within language and the Symbolic order. Her rebellion takes the form of environmental research and activism, a more modern incarnation of railing against the contemporary structures of corporate and capitalist domination. Nicolas' recognition of her import and subsequent encounter with her mirrors the reunion achieved by Dogwoman and Jordan, and harks back the seamless semiotic union of mother and child as well as the final assimilation of subject and other.

Conclusion

The body as a permeable malleable interface between psyche and society is certainly not radically new as a concept. It remains however a very important thematic around which many discourses organize themselves and relate to one another. This dissertation attempted to lay out a few of the issues connected to understanding the discursive situation of the body and the various interpretations which exist with regard to its meaning and what it represent.

The psychoanalytical theoretical field being as diverse and divergent as it is, the arguments presented here were relevant to a very particular coincidence of ideas. In juxtaposing theories on the non-normative abject body, the maternal body, and its presentation in the context of one novel, I wished to illustrate the gaps that persist in these formulations regardless of the repeated examination and review. Superimposing these established frameworks on a literary field helps highlight the points at which the hypothetical and real (or, as Lacan might propose, the Real) correspond bringing bridging the break between premise and practice.

Focusing on the interplay between Julia Kristeva's works and Judith Butler's evaluation of the missing elements in those works is at the center of my discussions. In outlining first the former's determining notion of the semiotic and then unravelling its interwoven threads using the latter's critique of its aborted potential, the contestations and uncertainties that still surround ideas related to gender, the body and subjective development. Using the literature as a mediating point for these theoretical frictions dilutes the problematic elements highlighted. The postmodern approaches to writing and storytelling adopted by Winterson become especially important here, leaving spaces where interpretations that absorb some of these tensions can flower.

In focusing on the very specific points at which many of the concerns about body in discourse overlap and interlock, there are several angles and approaches that were unavoidably

deemed outside the scope of my discussion. In using the psychoanalytical framework in its feminist iteration, my decision to juxtapose Kristevan theories with the chosen literary text necessitated almost a type of tunnel vision in terms of application and interpretation. Even with the emphasis on feminist formulations of the body my analysis does not include a significant exploration of perspectives other than psychoanalytical. None of the themes could be discussed in isolation of others because of the complexity inherent to the text and to the layers present in any given psychoanalytical reading. If however this zooming into the precise juncture of various interrelated elements was able to project even to the smallest degree some larger truth of human embodiment and existence, then I will have considered myself successful.

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