

## 5

*Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and  
Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a  
Post-Humanist Landscape*

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I want to focus on the discourses of suffering and dismemberment. I want to stay with the disarticulated bodies of history as figures of possible connection and accountability. Feminist theory proceeds by figuration at just those moments when its own historical narratives are in crisis. Historical narratives are in crisis now, across the political spectrum, around the world. These are the moments when something powerful—and dangerous—is happening. Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more “normal” rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders. Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity’s face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures; but, I believe, we must have feminist figures of humanity. They cannot be man or woman; they cannot be the human as historical narrative has staged that generic universal. Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a name; they cannot be native. Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility. For this process, at the inflection point of crisis, where all the tropes turn again, we need ecstatic speakers. This essay tells a history of such a speaker who might figure the self-contradictory and necessary condition of a nongeneric humanity.

I want here to set aside the Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity, the bearers of rights, holders of property in the self, legitimate sons with access to language and the power to represent, subjects endowed with inner coherence and rational clarity, the masters of theory, founders of states, and fathers of families, bombs, and scientific theories—in short, Man as we have come to know and love him in the death-of-the-subject critiques. Instead, let us attend to another crucial strand of Western humanism thrown into crisis in the late twentieth century. My focus is the figure of a broken and suffering humanity, signifying—in ambiguity, contradiction, stolen symbolism, and unending chains of noninnocent translation—a possible hope. But also signifying an unending series of mimetic and counterfeit events implicated in the great genocides and holocausts of ancient and modern history. But, it is the very nonoriginality, mimesis, mockery, and brokenness that draw me to this figure and its mutants. This essay is the beginning of a project on figurations that have appeared in an array of internationalist, scientific, and feminist texts, which I wish to examine for their contrasting modernist, postmodernist, and amodernist ways of constructing “the human” after World War II. Here, I begin by reading Jesus and Sojourner Truth as Western trickster figures in a rich, dangerous, old, and constantly renewed tradition of Judeo-Christian humanism and end by asking how recent intercultural and multicultural feminist theory constructs possible postcolonial, nongeneric, and irredeemably specific figures of critical subjectivity, consciousness, and humanity—not in the sacred image of the same, but in the self-critical practice of “difference,” of the I and we that is/are never identical to itself, and so has hope of connection to others.

The larger project that this essay initiates will stage an historical conversation among three groups of powerfully universalizing texts:

- 1) two versions of United Nations discourses on human rights (the UNESCO statements on race in 1950 and 1951 and the documents and events of the UN Decade for Women from 1975–85);
- 2) recent modernist physical-anthropological reconstructions of the powerful fiction of science, species man, and its science-fiction variant, the female man (pace Joanna Russ) (i.e., *Man the Hunter* of the 1950s and 1960s and *Woman the Gatherer* of the 1970s and 1980s); and
- 3) the transnational, multi-billion-dollar, highly automated, postmodernist apparatus—a language technology, literally—for the production of what will count as “the human” (i.e., the Human Genome Project, with all its stunning power to recuperate, out of the endless variations of code fragments, the singular, the sacred image of the same, the one true man, the standard—copyrighted, catalogued, and banked).

The whole tale might fit together at least as well as the plot of Enlightenment humanism ever did, but I hope it will fit differently, negatively, if you will. I suggest that the only route to a nongeneric humanity, for whom specificity—but emphatically not originality—is the key to connection, is through radical nominalism. We must take names and essences seriously enough to adopt such an ascetic stance about who we have been and might yet be. My stakes are high; I think “we”—that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history—need something called humanity. It is that kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called “that which we cannot not want.” We also know now, from our perspectives in the ripped-open belly of the monster called history, that we cannot name and possess this thing which we cannot not desire. Humanity, whole and part, is not autochthonous. Nobody is self-made, least of all man. That is the spiritual and political meaning of poststructuralism and postmodernism for me. “We,” in these very particular discursive worlds, have no routes to connection and to noncosmic, nongeneric, nonoriginal wholeness than through the radical dis-membering and dis-placing of our names and our bodies. So, how can humanity have a figure outside the narratives of humanism; what language would such a figure speak?

#### **Ecce Homo! The Suffering Servant as a Figure of Humanity<sup>1</sup>**

Isaiah 52.13–14:

Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. As many were astonished at him—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men—so shall he startle many nations.

Isaiah 53.2–4:

He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 54.1:

For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. (“Is this a threat or a promise?” ask both women, looking tentatively at each other after a long separation.)

John 18.37–38:

Pilate said to him, “So, you are a king? Jesus answered, “You say that

I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

John 19.1–6:

Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged him. And the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and arrayed him in a purple robe; they came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again, and said to them, “Behold I am bringing him out to you, that you may know I find no crime in him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” When the chief priests and officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him.”

John staged the trial before Pilate in terms of the suffering-servant passages from Isaiah. The events of the trial of Jesus in this nonsynoptic gospel probably are not historical, but theatrical in the strict sense: from the start, they *stage* salvation history, which then became the model for world history in the secular heresies of the centuries of European colonialism with its civilizing missions and genocidal discourses on common humanity. Pilate probably spoke publicly in Greek or Latin, those languages that became the standard of “universal” European scholarly humanism, and his words were translated by his officials into Aramaic, the language of the inhabitants of Palestine. Hebrew was already largely a ceremonial language, not even understood by most Jews in the synagogue. The earliest texts for John’s gospel that we have are in Greek, the likely language of its composition (the *Koiné*, the common Greek spoken and understood throughout the Roman Empire in the early centuries of the Christian era). We don’t have the first versions, if there ever were such things; we have endless, gap-filled, and overlaid transcriptions and translations that have grounded the vast apparatus of biblical textual and linguistic scholarship—that cornerstone of modern scholarly humanism, hermeneutics, and semiology and of the human sciences generally, most certainly including anthropology and ethnography. We are, indeed, peoples of the Book, engaged in a Derridean writing and reading practice from the first cries of prophecy and codifications of salvation history.

From the start we are in the midst of multiple translations and stagings of a figure of suffering humanity that was not contained within the cultures of the origin of the stories. The Christian narratives of the Son of Man circulated rapidly around the Mediterranean in the first century of the present era. The Jewish versions of the suffering servant inform some of the most powerful ethical cautions in Faustian transnational technoscience worlds. The presentation to the people of the Son of Man as a suffering servant, arrayed

mockingly and mimetically in his true dress as a king and salvation figure, became a powerful image for Christian humanists. The suffering servant figure has been fundamental in twentieth-century liberation theology and Christian Marxism. The guises of the suffering servant never cease. Even in Isaiah, he is clothed in the ambiguities of prophecy. His most important counterfeit historically was Jesus himself, as John appropriated Isaiah into a theater of salvation history that would accuse the Jews of demanding the death of their king and savior in the root narrative of Christian anti-Semitism. The "Ecce homo!" was standardized in the Latin vulgate after many passages through the languages and transcriptions and codifications of the gospels. Jesus appears as a mime in many layers; crowned with thorns and in a purple cloak, he is in the mock disguise of a king before his wrongful execution as a criminal. As a criminal, he is counterfeit for a scapegoat, indeed, *the* scapegoat of salvation history. Already, as a carpenter he was in disguise.

This figure of the Incarnation can never be other than a trickster, a check on the arrogances of a reason that would uncover all disguises and force correct vision of a recalcitrant nature in her most secret places. The suffering servant is a check on man; the servant is the figure associated with the promise that the desolate woman will have more children than the wife, the figure that upsets the clarity of the metaphysics of light, which John the Evangelist too was so enamored of. A mother's son, without a father, yet the Son of Man claiming *the* Father, Jesus is a potential worm in the Oedipal psychoanalytics of representation; he threatens to spoil the story, despite or because of his odd sonship and odder kingship, because of his disguises and form-changing habits. Jesus makes of man a most promising mockery, but a mockery that cannot evade the terrible story of the broken body. The story has constantly to be preserved from heresy, to be kept forcibly in the patriarchal tradition of Christian civilization, to be kept from too much attention to the economies of mimicry and the calamities of suffering.

Jesus came to figure for Christians the union of humanity and divinity in a universal salvation narrative. But, the figure is complex and ambiguous from the start, enmeshed in translation, staging, miming, disguises, and evasions. "Ecce homo!" can, indeed must, be read ironically by "post-Christians" and other post-humanists as "Behold the man, the figure of humanity (Latin), the sign of the same (the Greek tones of homo-), indeed, the Sacred Image of the Same, but also the original mime, the actor of a history that mocks especially the recurrent tales that insist that 'man makes himself' in the deathly onanistic nightmare of coherent wholeness and correct vision."

#### But, "Ain't I a Woman?"

Well, children, whar dar is so much racket der must be something out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de women at de Norf

all a talkin 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places—and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?<sup>2</sup>

Sojourner Truth is perhaps less far from Isaiash's spine-tingling prophecy than was Jesus. How might a modern John, or Johanna, stage her claim to be—as a black woman, mother, and former slave—the Son of Man, the fulfillment of the promise to unite the whole people under a common sign? What kind of sign is Sojourner Truth—forcibly transported, without a home, without a proper name, unincorporated in the discourses of (white) womanhood, raped by her owner, forcibly mated with another slave, robbed of her children, and doubted even in the anatomy of her body? A powerful speaker for feminism and abolitionism, Sojourner Truth's famous lines from her 1851 speech in Akron, Ohio, evoke the themes of the suffering servant in order to claim the status of humanity for the shockingly inappropriate/d figure<sup>3</sup> of New World black womanhood, the bearer of the promise of humanity for womanhood in general, and indeed, the bearer of the promise of humanity also for men. Called by a religious vision, the woman received her final names directly from her God when she left her home in New York City in 1843 for the road to preach her own unique gospel. Born a slave around 1797 in Ulster County, New York, her Dutch master named her Isabella Baumfree. "When I left the house of bondage I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name."<sup>4</sup> And Sojourner Truth emerged from her second birth a prophet and a scourge.

Sojourner Truth showed up repeatedly at women's suffrage and abolitionist meetings over the last half of the nineteenth century. She delivered her most famous speech at the women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851 in answer to white male antisuffrage provocateurs who threatened to disrupt the meeting. In another exchange, she took on the problem of the gender of Jesus—whose manhood had been used by a heckler, a clergyman, to argue against women's rights. Sojourner Truth noted succinctly that man had nothing to do with Jesus; he came from God and a woman. Pilot was not this vagrant preacher's unwilling and evasive judge; but another man authorized by the hegemonic powers of his civilization stood in for him. This free white man acted far more assertively than had the colonial bureaucrat of the Roman Empire, whose wife's dreams had troubled him about his queer prisoner.<sup>5</sup> Pilot's ready surrogate, an irate white male physician,

spoke out in protest of her speaking, demanding that she prove she was a woman by showing her breasts to the *women* in the audience. Difference (understood as the divisive marks of authenticity) was reduced to anatomy;<sup>6</sup> but even more to the point, the doctor's demand articulated the racist/sexist logic that made the very flesh of the black person in the New World indecipherable, doubtful, out of place, confounding—ungrammatical.<sup>7</sup> Remember that Trinh Minh-ha, from a different diaspora over a hundred years later, wrote, "Perhaps, for those of us who have never known what life in a vernacular culture is/was and are unable to imagine what it can be/could have been, gender simply does not exist otherwise than grammatically in language."<sup>8</sup> Truth's speech was out of place, dubious doubly; she was female and black; no, that's wrong—she was a black female, a black woman, not a coherent substance with two or more attributes, but an oxymoronic singularity who stood for an entire excluded and dangerously promising humanity. The language of Sojourner Truth's body was as electrifying as the language of her speech. And both were enmeshed in cascading questions about origins, authenticity, and generality or universality. This Truth is a figure of nonoriginality, but s/he is not Derridean. S/he is Trinhian, or maybe Wittigian, and the difference matters.<sup>9</sup>

When I began to sketch the outlines of this essay, I looked for versions of the story of Sojourner Truth, and I found them written and rewritten in a long list of nineteenth-century and contemporary feminist texts.<sup>10</sup> Her famous speech, transcribed by a white abolitionist—*Ain't I a Woman?*—adorns posters in women's studies offices and women's centers across the United States. These lines seem to stand for something that unifies "women," but what exactly, especially in view of feminism's excavation of the terrible edifice of "woman" in Western patriarchal language and systems of representation—the one who can never be a subject, who is plot space, matrix, ground, screen for the act of man? Why does her *question* have more power for feminist theory 150 years later than any number of affirmative and declarative sentences? What is it about this figure, whose hard name signifies someone who could never be at home, for whom truth was displacement from home, that compels retelling and rehearing her story? What kind of history might Sojourner Truth inhabit?

For me, one answer to that question lies in Sojourner Truth's power to figure a collective humanity without constructing the cosmic closure of the unmarked category. Quite the opposite, her body, names, and speech—their forms, contents, and articulations—may be read to hold promise for a never-settled universal, a common language that makes compelling claims on each of us collectively and personally, precisely through their radical specificity, in other words, through the displacements and resistances to unmarked identity precisely as the means to claiming the status of "the human." The essential Truth would not settle down; that *was* her specificity. S/he was not

everyman; s/he was inappropriate/d. This is a "postmodern" reading from some points of view, and it is surely not the only possible reading of her story. But, it is one that I hope to convince the reader is at the heart of the inter- and multicultural feminist theory in our time. In Teresa de Lauretis's terms, this reading is not so much postmodern or poststructuralist, as it is specifically enabled by feminist theory:

That, I will argue, is precisely where the particular discursive and epistemological character of feminist theory resides: its being at once inside its own social and discursive determinations, and yet also outside and excessive to them. This recognition marks a further moment in feminist theory, its current stage of reconceptualization and elaborations of new terms; a reconceptualization of the subject as shifting and multiply organized across variable axes of difference; a rethinking of the relations between forms of oppression and modes of resistance and agency, and between practices of writing and modes of formal understanding—of doing theory; an emerging redefinition of marginality as location, of identity as disidentification. . . . I will use the term feminist theory, like the term consciousness or subject, in the singular as referring to a process of understanding that is premised on the historical specificity and the simultaneous, if often contradictory, presence of those differences in each of its instances and practices. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Let us look at the mechanisms of Sojourner Truth's exclusions from the spaces of unmarked universality (*i.e.*, exclusion from "the human") in modern white patriarchal discourse in order to see better how she seized her body and speech to turn "difference" into an organon for placing the painful realities and practices of de-construction, dis-identification, and dis-memberment in the service of a newly articulated humanity. Access to this humanity will be predicated on a subject-making discipline hinted at by Trinh:

The difficulties appear perhaps less insurmountable only as I/i succeed in making a distinction between difference reduced to identity-authenticity and difference understood also as critical difference from myself. . . . Difference in such an insituable context is *that which undermines the very idea of identity*, deferring to infinity the layers whose totality forms "I." . . . If feminism is set forth as a demystifying force, then it will have to question thoroughly the belief in its own identity.<sup>12</sup>

Hazel Carby clarified how in the New World, and specifically in the United States, black women were not constituted as "woman," as white women were.<sup>13</sup> Instead, black women were constituted simultaneously racially and sexually—as marked female (animal, sexualized, and without rights), but not as woman (human, potential wife, conduit for the name of

the father)—in a specific institution, slavery, that excluded them from “culture” defined as the circulation of signs through the system of marriage. If kinship vested men with rights in women that they did not have in themselves, slavery abolished kinship for one group in a legal discourse that produced whole groups of people as alienable property.<sup>14</sup> MacKinnon defined woman as an imaginary figure, the object of another’s desire, made real.<sup>15</sup> The “imaginary” figures made real in slave discourse were objects in another sense that made them different from either the Marxist figure of the alienated laborer or the “unmodified” feminist figure of the object of desire. Free women in U.S. white patriarchy were exchanged in a system that oppressed them, but white women *inherited* black women and men. As Hurtado noted, in the nineteenth century prominent white feminists were *married* to white men, while black feminists were *owned* by white men. In a racist patriarchy, white men’s “need” for racially “pure” offspring positioned free and unfree women in incompatible, asymmetrical symbolic and social spaces.<sup>16</sup>

The female slave was marked with these differences in a most literal fashion—the flesh was turned inside out, “add[ing] a lexical dimension to the narratives of woman in culture and society.”<sup>17</sup> These differences did not end with formal emancipation; they have had definitive consequences into the late twentieth century and will continue to do so until racism as a founding institution of the New World is ended. Spillers called these founding relations of captivity and literal mutilation “an American grammar” (68). Under conditions of the New World conquest, of slavery, and of their consequences up to the present, “the lexis of reproduction, desire, naming, mothering, fathering, etc. [are] all thrown into extreme crisis” (76). “Gendering, in its coeval reference to African-American women, *insinuates* an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse *and* within those discursive communities that investigate the problematics of culture” (78).

Spillers foregrounded the point that free men and women inherited their *name* from the father, who in turn had rights in his minor children and wife that they did not have in themselves, but he did not own them in the full sense of alienable property. Unfree men and women inherited their *condition* from their mother, who in turn specifically did not control their children. They had no *name* in the sense theorized by Lévi-Strauss or Lacan. Slave mothers could not transmit a name; they could not be wives; they were outside the system of marriage exchange. Slaves were unpositioned, unfixed, in a system of names; they were, specifically, unlocated and so disposable. In these discursive frames, white women were not legally or symbolically *fully* human; slaves were not legally or symbolically human *at all*. “In this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of ‘otherness’” (67). To give birth (unfreely) to

the heirs of property is not the same thing as to give birth (unfreely) to property.<sup>18</sup>

This little difference is part of the reason that “reproductive rights” for women of color in the United States prominently hinge on comprehensive control of children—for example, their freedom from destruction through lynching, imprisonment, infant mortality, forced pregnancy, coercive sterilization, inadequate housing, racist education, drug addiction, drug wars, and military wars.<sup>19</sup> For American white women the concept of property in the self, the ownership of one’s own body, in relation to reproductive freedom, has more readily focused on the field of events around conception, pregnancy, abortion, and birth because the system of white patriarchy turned on the control of legitimate children and the consequent constitution of white females as women. To have or not have children then becomes literally a subject-defining choice for such women. Black women specifically—and the women subjected to the conquest of the New World in general—faced a broader social field of reproductive unfreedom, in which their children did not inherit the status of human in the founding hegemonic discourses of U.S. society. The problem of the black mother in this context is not simply her own status as subject, but also the status of her children and her sexual partners, male and female. Small wonder that the image of uplifting the race and the refusal of the categorical separation of men and women—without flinching from an analysis of colored and white sexist oppression—have been prominent in New World black feminist discourse.<sup>20</sup>

The positionings of African-American women are not the same as those of other women of color; each condition of oppression requires specific analysis that both refuses the separations and insists on the nonidentities of race, sex, sexuality, and class. These matters make starkly clear why an adequate feminist theory of gender must *simultaneously* be a theory of racial and sexual difference in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction. They also make clear why a theory and practice of sisterhood cannot be grounded in shared positionings in a gender system and the cross-cultural structural antagonism between coherent categories called women and men. Finally, they make clear why feminist theory produced by women of color has constructed alternative discourses of womanhood that disrupt the humanisms of many Western discursive traditions. “[I]t is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In so doing we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity of a female with the potential to ‘name,’ . . . ‘Sapphire’ might rewrite after all a radically different text of female empowerment.”<sup>21</sup> And, perhaps, of empowerment of the problematic category of “humanity.”

While contributing fundamentally to the breakup of any master subject location, the politics of “difference” emerging from this and other complex

reconstructings of concepts of social subjectivity and their associated writing practices is deeply opposed to leveling relativisms. Nonfeminist poststructuralist theory in the human sciences has tended to identify the breakup of “coherent” or masterful subjectivity as the “death of the subject.” Like others in newly *unstable* subjugated positions, many feminists resist this formulation of the project and question its emergence at just the moment when raced/sexed/colonized speakers begin “for the first time,” to claim, that is, with an “originary” authority, to represent themselves in institutionalized publishing practices and other kinds of self-constituting practice. Feminist deconstructions of the “subject” have been fundamental, and they are not nostalgic for masterful coherence. Instead, necessarily political accounts of constructed embodiments, like feminist theories of gendered racial subjectivities, have to take affirmative *and* critical account of emergent, differentiating, self-representing, contradictory social subjectivities, with their claims on action, knowledge, and belief. The point involves the commitment to transformative social change, the moment of hope embedded in feminist theories of gender and other emergent discourses about the breakup of masterful subjectivity and the emergence of inappropriate/d others.

“Alterity” and “difference” are precisely what “gender” is “grammatically” about, a fact that constitutes feminism as a politics defined by its fields of contestation and repeated refusals of master theories. “Gender” was developed as a category to explore what counts as a “woman,” to problematize the previously taken for granted, to reconstitute what counts as “human.” If feminist theories of gender followed from Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis that one is not born a woman, with all the consequences of that insight, in the light of Marxism and psychoanalysis (and critiques of racist and colonial discourse), for understanding that any finally coherent subject is a fantasy, and that personal and collective identity is precariously and constantly socially reconstituted,<sup>22</sup> then the title of bell hooks’ provocative 1981 book, echoing Sojourner Truth, *Ain’t I a Woman*, bristles with irony, as the identity of “woman” is both claimed and deconstructed simultaneously. This is a woman worthy of Isaiah’s prophecy, slightly amended:

S/he was despised and rejected by men; a wo/man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces s/he was despised, and we esteemed him/her not. . . . As many were astonished at him/her—his/her appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance . . . so shall s/he startle many nations.

This decidedly unwomanly Truth has a chance to refigure a nongeneric, nonoriginal humanity after the breakup of the discourses of Eurocentric humanism.

However, we cannot leave Sojourner Truth’s story without looking more closely at the transcription of the famous *Ain’t I a Woman* speech delivered in Akron in 1851. That written text represents Truth’s speech in the white abolitionist’s imagined idiolect of The Slave, the supposedly archetypal black plantation slave of the South. The transcription does not provide a southern Afro-American English that any linguist, much less actual speaker, would claim. But it *is* the falsely specific, imagined language that represented the “universal” language of slaves to the literate abolitionist public, and this is the language that has come down to us as Sojourner Truth’s “authentic” words. This counterfeit language, undifferentiated into the many Englishes spoken in the New World, reminds us of a hostile notion of difference, one that sneaks the masterful unmarked categories in through the back door in the *guise* of the specific, which is made to be not disruptive or deconstructive, but typical. The undifferentiated black slave could figure for a humanist abolitionist discourse, and its descendants on the walls of women’s studies offices, an ideal type, a victim (hero), a kind of plot space for the abolitionists’ actions, a special human, not one that could bind up the whole people through her unremitting figuring of critical difference—that is, not an unruly agent preaching her own unique gospel of displacement as the ground of connection.

To reinforce the point, this particular former slave was not southern. She was born in New York and owned by a Dutchman. As a young girl, she was sold with some sheep to a Yankee farmer who beat her for not understanding English.<sup>23</sup> Sojourner Truth as an adult almost certainly spoke an Afro-Dutch English peculiar to a region that was once New Amsterdam. “She dictated her autobiography to a white friend and lived by selling it at lectures.”<sup>24</sup> Other available transcriptions of her speeches are printed in “standard” late-twentieth-century American English; perhaps this language seems less racist, more “normal” to hearers who want to forget the diasporas that populated the New World, while making one of its figures into a “typical” hero. A modern transcription/invention of Sojourner Truth’s speeches has put them into Afro-Dutch English; her famous question retroubles the ear, “Ar’n’t I a woman?”<sup>25</sup> The change in the shape of the words makes us rethink her story, the grammar of her body and life. The difference matters.

One nineteenth century, friendly reporter decided he could not put Truth’s words into writing at all: “She spoke but a few minutes. To report her words would have been impossible. As well attempt to report the seven apocalyptic thunders.”<sup>26</sup> He went on, in fact, to transcribe/reconstruct her presentation, which included these often-quoted lines:

When I was a slave away down there in New York [was New York *down* for Sojourner Truth?!], and there was some particularly bad work to be done, some colored woman was sure to be called upon to do it. And when

I heard that man talking away there as he did almost a whole hour, I said to myself, here's one spot of work sure that's fit for colored folks to clean up after.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps what most needs cleaning up here is an inability to hear Sojourner Truth's language, to face her specificity, to acknowledge her, but *not* as the voice of the seven apocalyptic thunders. Instead, perhaps we need to see her as the Afro-Dutch-English New World itinerant preacher whose disruptive and risk-taking practice led her "to leave the house of bondage," to leave the subject-making (and humanist) dynamics of master and slave, and seek new names in a dangerous world. This sojourner's truth offers an inherently unfinished but potent reply to Pilate's skeptical query—"What is truth?" She is one of Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizas*,<sup>28</sup> speaking the unrecognized hyphenated languages, living in the borderlands of history and consciousness where crossings are never safe and names never original.

I promised to read Sojourner Truth, like Jesus, as a trickster figure, a shape changer, who might trouble our notions—all of them: classical, biblical, scientific, modernist, postmodernist, and feminist—of "the human," while making us remember why we cannot not want this problematic universal. Pilot's words went through cascades of transcriptions, inventions, and translations. The "Ecce homo!" was probably never spoken. But, no matter how they may have originated, these lines in a play about what counts as humanity, about humanity's possible stories, were from the beginning implicated in permanent translation and reinvention. The same thing is true of Sojourner Truth's affirmative question, "Ain't/Ar'n't I a (wo)man?" These were tricksters, forcing by their constant displacements, a reconstruction of founding stories, of any possible home. "We, lesbian, *mestiza*, inappropriate/d other are all terms for that excessive critical position which I have attempted to tease out and rearticulate from various texts of contemporary feminism: a position attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses, by what I like to call the "eccentric subject."<sup>29</sup> Such excessive and mobile figures can never ground what used to be called "a fully human community." That community turned out to belong only to the masters. However, these eccentric subjects can call us to account for our imagined humanity, whose parts are always articulated through translation. History can have another shape, articulated through differences that matter.

## NOTES

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writing and religious speech is inspired by, and dedicated to, Cornel West. Thanks to grants from the Academic Senate of the University of California at Santa Cruz.

1. Thanks to Gary Lease for biblical guidance.
2. Quoted in bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1981), p. 160.
3. I borrow Trinh's powerful sign, an impossible figure, the inappropriate/d other. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "She, the Inappropriate/d Other," *Discourse*, 8 (1986–87).
4. Gerda Lerner, in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, edited by Gerda Lerner (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 370–75.
5. Matthew 27.19.
6. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
7. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 17, 2 (1987), pp. 65–81.
8. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 114.
9. I am using "matter" in the way suggested by Judith Butler in her work in progress, *Bodies That Matter*. See also Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, translated by David LeVay (New York: Avon, 1975). The marked bodies and subjects theorized by Trinh, Butler, and Wittig evacuate precisely the heterosexist and racist idealism-materialism binary that has ruled in the generic Western philosophical tradition. The feminist theorists might claim a siblingship to Derrida here, but not a relation of derivation or identity.
10. A sample: bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*; Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Gerda Lerner, *Black Women*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Office, 1884; reissued New York: Arno Press, 1968); Harriet Carter, "Sojourner Truth," *Chautauquan*, 7 (May 1889); Lillie B. Wyman, "Sojourner Truth," in *New England Magazine* (March 1901); Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Edith Blicksilver, "Speech of Woman's Suffrage," in *The Ethnic American Woman* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1978), p. 335; Hertha Pauli, *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962).
11. Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects," in *Feminist Studies*, 16 (Spring 1990), p. 116.
12. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, pp. 89, 96.
13. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
14. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby."
15. Catharine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs*, 7, 3 (1982), pp. 515–44.
16. Aida Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color," *Signs*, 14, 4 (1989), pp. 833–55, 841.
17. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby," pp. 67–68.
18. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* p. 53.

19. Aida Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege," p. 853.
20. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, pp. 6–7; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1984).
21. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby," p. 80.
22. Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 265.
23. Gerda Lerner, *Black Women*, p. 371.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 372; Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner*.
25. Edith Blicksilver, "Speech."
26. Quoted in Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy*, p. 34.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
28. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1987).
29. Teresa de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies*, p. 145.

6

*Postmodern Automaton*

Rey Chow

for A . . .

**Modernism and Postmodernism: Restating the Problem of "Displacement"**

If everyone can agree with Fredric Jameson that the unity of the "new impulse" of postmodernism "is given not in itself but in the very modernism it seeks to displace,"<sup>1</sup> exactly how modernism is displaced still remains the issue. In this paper, I follow an understanding of "modernism" that is embedded in and inseparable from the globalized and popularized usages of terms such as "modernity" and "modernization," which pertain to the increasing technologization of culture. I examine this technologization in terms of the technologies of visibility. In the twentieth century, the preoccupation with the "visual"—in a field like psychoanalysis, for instance—and the perfection of technologies of visibility such as photography and film take us beyond the merely physical dimension of vision. The visual as such, as a kind of dominant discourse of modernity, reveals epistemological problems that are inherent in social relations and their reproduction. Such problems inform the very ways social difference—be it in terms of class, gender, or race—is constructed. In this sense, the more narrow understanding of modernism as the sum total of artistic innovations that erupted in Europe and North America in the spirit of a massive cultural awakening—an emancipation from the habits of perception of the past—needs to be bracketed within an understanding of modernity as a force of cultural expansionism whose foundations are not only emancipatory but also Eurocentric and patriarchal.