

INTRODUCTION: AMPLIFYING THE ABJECT

In being inspired by the work and continued relevance of Julia Kristeva's (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the 2019 PlatForum Editorial Team chose the abject as its central theme for Volume 17. She coins "the abject" as the subjective horror that results from the confrontation of what is thought to be real—the subject and the object, the self and the other—as they, each of these identities and relations, come into question, start to decay, and undergo their inevitable breakdowns. This concept remains salient for anthropology as it is a means to radically unearth the philosophical and cultural presuppositions upon which reality may rest. We invited contributors to challenge, examine, and expand upon this theoretical notion.

In other words, human beings through culture develop a comfortable concept of who they are and their place in the world. They come to believe that there is a certain way of being, doing things, or interacting that is "normal." Within this self concept, they understand clear boundaries between what is "good and evil," what constitutes the self and other, etc. But there may come a moment in one's life when this normative narrative is radically disrupted. Such a disruption forces us to QUESTION, RETHINK and REDEFINE all that was once presumed to be secure, predictable, and morally grounding. This moment of disruption can occur in a variety of ways, and it may challenge a host of preconceived binaries. Essentially, abjection involves three things as a process and events in one's interior life: *a*) a moment of disruption (crisis, confusion, marginalization, alienation, a state of being "cast off"); *b*) a questioning of all that was once believed to normal, true or secure (i.e. one's sense of self and concept of how the world works); and *c*) a development of a new perspective: a reorganizing or redefining of identity and values thereafter.

Not so surprisingly, there has never been a lack of near-overwhelming examples of the abject within the current frameworks of human lives vis-à-vis the daily horrors of the 21st Century. Modern existence has been reshaped and stripped within the short span a few months since

COVID-19 and its pandemic struck into the consciousness and bodies of people across the globe. The HBO miniseries, *Chernobyl*, which graphically and dramatically reconstructs the 1986 Ukrainian nuclear disaster at a mismanaged power plant, also signals the bone-chilling affect that can result when bad radiation and bad politics poison the human body and spirit. The necessary rise of and support for the BLACK LIVES MATTER movement in the wake of police brutality equally positions one to reconsider how nation-states have failed their citizens in protecting its property, power structures, and misanthropy. Not to mention the harrowing and silent pandemic of psychotic breaks, suicides, and overdoses that dot across the blighted landscape of North America's response to mental health issues, quality-of-life metrics, and economic wellbeing for less-desirable portions of society.

The abject is then a pervasive aspect of part of the human experience. And in honouring this space, authors tackle relevant topics across a spectrum of subjects through essays, stories, art, and poetry. The issue is divided into two sections from either a critical or creative approach in furthering explorations of the abject. That is to say, we are hopeful that this academic, peer-reviewed platform becomes a starting point for discussion and developing a greater awareness and toolkit for the abject as it interlocks within the embodied phenomena of culture. Each contributor then provides a brief engagement along these lines.

ABJECT ANALYSES

In her article "*Being Left-Handed in a Right-Handed World*," Sam Wauthier highlights a process of abjectification that occurs through the historical demonization and denaturalization of the left hand. In doing so, she illuminates how the reification of culturally constituted binaries (sacred/profane, good/evil, and even pure/impure) function to marginalize or ascribe moral value to certain behaviours and ways of being in the world, and in turn, result in a sense of being *cast-off* from larger society.

Leslie Maire Vesely in "*Facing the Third Country Agreement: The Precarious Life of Asylum Seekers Entering Canada through the US*" similarly invites readers to take a closer and more critical look at how a shifting political landscape in the United States under the Trump presidency—and the sudden increase and volatility in discriminatory

anti-immigration policies that have ensued—drastically changes the way the 2002 Third Country Agreement protects and plays out for people seeking asylum in North America and its communities.

Stephanie Arlt’s paper “*Donald Trump: White Hot Threat to American Democracy*” discusses a significant disruption and transformation in what constitutes ‘mainstream’ American politics following the 2016 Presidential Election. She particularly attends to the erosion of middle American (centrist) identity and Trump’s ‘predatory politics’ and dividing practices that give rise to white-nationalist far-right politics that further polarize and normalize racialized hate and violence in North America (and licence such intolerances internationally).

ABJECT ARTFORMS

By looking at disruptions of one’s self-perception schemas through claustrophobia and psychopathology, Verity Clayton’s “*Dead and Buried – Abjection and Cotard’s Syndrome*” gives her listener a visceral and eidetic taste of the abject in storytelling form, particularly when someone’s self, personhood, and body, and connection to space becomes *cast-off* into states of disarray. This little horror story of being buried alive and mediating on experiences of death-in-life presents a horrific redoubling of what in oneself might be considered the illusive boundaries of one’s humanness (and how these semi-conflicting identities struggle to fit in such normative petametres of liveness and self-awareness).

Sabrina Scott’s illustration, “*Death-wishes, Liars, and a Witch’s Coil,*” visualizes and plays off of Clayton’s themes by encapsulating the frothy creepiness and unsettling extremity of a direct and true-to-life encounter with the abject. The stillness and sensorial experience of how people engage with forms of reality can underlie the bitter shock of how human beings lie to themselves as they begin to witness the way the world becomes stripped of its consciousness and dies before them. The witch’s suffering in the radical and subversive act of deprogramming societal truths can then become a means to traverse through these imagined cross-sections of one’s decaying and past self-conceptions to rebirth themselves towards new sets of intersubjective relationalities and an ethic of spirituality that focuses on the value of connection. There is wisdom in embracing memento-mori totems.

Becca Campbell's "*(Witnessing the) Asking for Sex in a Holy Town in Karnataka*" also uses poetry to come to terms with the abject. Through experiencing how her identity as both an anthropologist and a concerned citizen became pitted against each other in spectating a public beating, she tries to make sense of this disjuncture in a town that also experienced a violent break in its rhythms and normative calm behaviour. In striving to then be objectively professional about these forms of fieldwork dissonance and instances of trauma, sometimes how anthropologists conduct and teach international research can get tangled in the morality and messiness of what it truly means to observe and empathize with others during participant observation. The subtext of Becca's poem asks an important question. Is one supposed to remain rigid in their role as an anthropologist, can they perhaps shift more in being helpful to select bystander, or is there a more nuanced way to reconcile both of these roles?

Through the creative expression of poetry in "*My First Graduate Philosophy Course*," Mar'yana Fisher at once shatters the normative communication and understanding of how one is taught in graduate school to come to terms with concepts such as ontology and epistemology. The description of her subtle but harsh mental shift between undergraduate and graduate thinking shows how it does not always require a tragedy to become dislodged from your current view of reality. Instead, the *way* one thinks can drastically change one's view of themselves and their place in their world.

CONCLUSION

This volume brings together pieces from anthropology and its various interlocutors to discuss the abject as a knowledge-making practice. It expands on how human beings can formulate resilience, meaning, and even a sharp measure of hope as a pressured result of these existential struggles for self. There is a renewed desire to (re)visit the abject.

Sincerely,

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