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Review of Sexual Difference, Abjection, And Liminal Spaces: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Abhorrence of the Feminine by Bethany Morris

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Review of Sexual Difference, Abjection, And Liminal Spaces: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Abhorrence of the Feminine by Bethany Morris

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4 **Sexual Difference, Abjection, And Liminal Spaces: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the**
5 **Abhorrence of the Feminine**
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7 Bethany Morris, Routledge, 2020, 156 pp., paperback, \$39.95, ISBN: 9780367173395
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11 Stephanie Swales
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16 In her deft explorations of what constitutes sexual difference, and of the anxiety provoked
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18 by women's desire and jouissance, the central figure in Bethany Morris's book is that of the
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20 dangerous, monstrous woman. Morris traces a number of iterations of this feminine monster
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22 throughout history: the Biblical figure of Eve, the female mystic or saint, the witch, the femme
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24 fatale in film, the melancholic pop star, the borderline, the mother who kills her child, and even
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26 the pregnant woman. What is dangerous about such female figures, what provokes anxiety and
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28 hatred, has to do with woman's desire and jouissance and the problematic of how to account for
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30 sexual difference. To take up the example of the pregnant woman, Morris's arguments are
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32 clearly relevant to the June 24, 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. In this
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34 decision we can read a kind of criminalization of woman's desire. This criminalization even
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36 extends, in some states such as Texas, to those seen as aiding and abetting a woman's desire
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38 (e.g., through helping her travel to a state where abortion is legal). Indeed, the whole of Morris'
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40 book is devoted to the interpretation of the role of the feminine in various socio-historical
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42 contexts, from the Middle Ages to the era of Enlightenment all the way to contemporary times
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44 marked by neoliberal capitalism. Morris primarily draws from the work of Jacques Lacan but
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46 also makes good use of the works of Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as well as
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48 that of Bracha Ettinger. More important, however, than any one analysis Morris makes in her
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50 book, she teaches us a way to read and interpret the position of the feminine and the aporia of the
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52 sexual relationship within any given historical moment and symbolic context.
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4 Lacan's concept of sexuation, or the non-rapport of the sexual relationship, features
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6 prominently in Morris's arguments. For Lacan, what defines men and women and relations
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8 between them is not ruled by genetics or biology but is the stuff of Lacan's order of the real, as
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10 they circle around always-already impossible attempts to be rendered into language. What
11
12 defines the sexes for Lacan instead has to do with the position each individual takes with respect
13
14 to the phallus and to the real. Morris explains sexuation "as a tripartite position" (p. 15). One
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16 part consists of an unconscious identification with masculinity or femininity. The second part
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18 "occurs in relation to jouissance, or how one enjoys, either exclusively through phallic means, or
19
20 via the not-all of the phallus" (pp. 15-16). The third position has to do with "how one
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22 understands his or her enjoyment in relation to the Other" such that "sexuality is not simply an
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24 identification or preference for a certain type of sexual relationship, but is rather an
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26 epistemological position" (p. 16).
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33 To elaborate further on the second position of sexuation, it is centered around the phallic
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35 function, or castration, and the phallus as a signifier of our fundamental lack in jouissance. One
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37 unconsciously identifies either with having the phallus (the masculine position) or being the
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39 phallus (the feminine position)—meaning that their jouissance is variously "determined by how
40
41 the subject experiences the lack" (p. 17). As a result, those occupying the masculine position
42
43 only experience phallic jouissance, whereas those in feminine position, identifying as embodying
44
45 lack, typically enjoy through phallic means but also have the potential to enjoy Other jouissance
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47 or feminine jouissance. One cause of the jealous hatred experienced towards women, then, has
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49 to do with woman's potential to experience the jouissance of the Other, which opens up beyond
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51 the limits of phallic jouissance.
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4 Morris explores reactions to the Other sex and to feminine jouissance as they manifest in
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6 various cultural representations of the monstrous feminine. A monstrous woman is one who is
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8 split between being a woman, in her position within the phallic symbolic order, and being the
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10 Woman as Other sex, with access to Other jouissance. A monstrous woman, for Morris, also
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12 involves eliciting what Kristeva referred to as an encounter with the abject. The abject is not
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14 simply what we consider to be grotesque, but something horrifying and yet captivating that
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16 threatens our status as a subject. The mother's body is the original abject object, from which the
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18 child must move away in order to enter into subjectivity. The witch is of course one early figure
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20 of the dangerous woman. The abject encounter with the witch questions the status of the phallus,
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22 "that is, subjectivity as we have come to know it" (Morris, p. 48), and the anxiety or horror
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24 therein provoke many aggressive responses—the most obvious in the case of the witch being to
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26 burn her at the stake. Certainly, the figure of the witch continues to unsettle us in the horror film
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28 genre.
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36 Indeed, a large portion of Morris's analysis of contemporary times centers around how
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38 our fantasies and fears are staged on screen, in literature, or via engagement with the internet.
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40 Each of these operates as a locus of discourses that circulate in our socio-historical time such that
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42 they are embedded with various modes of knowledge production about subjectivity. In the
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44 horror genre in particular, including film noir, Morris finds complicated portrayals of femininity
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46 in both the monstrous figures and the victims or protagonists, alongside anxieties about sexual
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48 difference, death, and unnamable objects of horror in the Real. Morris's sixth chapter,
49
50 "Fairytale and femme fatales", makes use of horror or thriller films such as *Basic Instinct* and
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52 *Gone Girl* but also film depictions of the Evil Queen from the story of Snow White to investigate
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54 the femme fatale.
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4 The femme fatale, functioning as Woman par excellence, is an unusually beautiful
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6 woman who manipulatively wields her powers of attraction over others to her own destructive
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8 and self-destructive purposes. Rather than assuming the position of being the phallus, she seems
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10 to have a lack of lack in various ways. It is the Woman as pure excess and the dangers of
11
12 feminine desire and jouissance that are depicted in the femme fatale. Toward this end, Morris
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14 discusses the femme fatale figure of Catherine in *Basic Instinct*, played by Sharon Stone, who
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16 falls more along the typical lines of the femme fatale than the melancholic pop star. Catherine
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18 has refused to assume the position of lack and instead, with her abundant beauty, wealth, and
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20 career success writing mystery novels (that closely resemble the actual murders of her
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22 boyfriends) seems to have the phallus. Morris points out that the typical interpretation of this
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24 film revolves around castration anxiety aroused by the male protagonist's fear that Catherine has
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26 murdered her boyfriends coupled with his powerlessness to resist giving into his sexual urges for
27
28 her. However, what Morris highlights is that the appearance of having the phallus in and of itself
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30 operates as an important locus of anxiety for the male character or spectator. The anxiety, she
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32 argues, has to do with the knowledge that although Catherine has it all, it's never enough.
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34 Phallic enjoyments do not suffice for Catherine, who as Woman has an insatiable desire for
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36 something beyond—one that threatens to ruin men's lives, potentially via murder. Femme
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38 fatales, for Morris, depict the anxieties attendant in the consequences of Woman pursuing her
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40 desires too far. Morris notes that in this sense, femme fatale narratives portray the idea that the
41
42 presence of a woman's desire is capable of destroying all of a man's jouissance, remarking that
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44 this belief fuels the discourse of the Incel and MGTWO (Men Going Their Own Way—who
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46 claim to remove themselves from all heterosexual relationships) communities. The fear and
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4 horror at but also fascination with feminine desire and jouissance propagates quite a bit of hatred
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6 toward women.
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9 In considering how femme fatale films might operate for female spectators, Morris
10 demonstrates an important way in which her arguments take her beyond typical feminist and
11 even psychoanalytic interpretations of film and cultural figures. For instance, she comments
12 upon the interpretation that the femme fatale appeals to women as a role model for resistance
13 against male domination and provides the critique that this interpretation “privileges conscious,
14 even subconscious perhaps, identification with the image of the fantasy and finds within it a
15 source of empowerment, meaning ego reifying” (p. 103). Instead, for Morris, the femme fatale
16 disturbs those who fall on both sides of sexualization in its depiction of feminine jouissance. This
17 Other jouissance manifests via an especially anxiety-provoking characteristic of the femme
18 fatale—whether embodied in film noir, evil queens of fairytale lore, or melancholic pop stars—,
19 that being her tendency to march eyes wide open toward her own self-destruction, toward the
20 abyss, rather than toward safer paths within the frame of the cultural sphere (e.g., the pleasures of
21 sex, capitalism, power, success, etc.). It is this beyond, this Other jouissance that deeply
22 unsettles both men and women, but, as Morris notes, female spectators or readers “occupy both a
23 phallic and feminine position in relation to the femme fatale, which allows for objectification and
24 empathy simultaneously” (p. 104).
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48 Morris does not stop at analyzing the ways in which the feminine has been figured socio-
49 historically or is inherently problematic on account of the non-rapport, but goes further to
50 examine depictions of female desire and feminine jouissance in terms of their potential for
51 political change. One such change revolves around what Deleuze and Guattari called molecular
52 becoming, a becoming-woman, which all becomings for both men and women must first pass
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4 through. Briefly put, Morris says of becoming-woman that it “challenges the duality of gendered
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6 bodies by occupying a space in between, composed in fluidity, characteristic of their machinic
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8 assemblages” (p. 26). Deleuze and Guattari cite Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness style
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10 of writing as exemplifying a practice of becoming-woman, as instead of relying upon her
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12 molarized female body—that is, upon the rigid ways in which women have been discursively
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14 structured by society’s gender norms—her writing was an encounter which questioned the
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16 boundaries of male and female and of self and other.
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21 Along with the figure of the borderline, who is the subject of the concluding chapter of
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23 the book, Morris locates such potential in engagement with the figure of the femme fatale. The
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25 femme fatale is a woman split between inhabiting significations around what it means to be
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27 female in the socio-symbolic and embodying the Woman who accesses feminine jouissance.
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29 Those female subjects identifying with the femme fatale might question what it would mean to
30
31 “submit to the Other within oneself” (p. 106). That is, the femme fatale’s desire is one which
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33 renders the Other strange or alien, and this, in turn, could alter the self in the process. As such,
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35 her desire has creative potential. In Morris’s estimation, the femme fatale does more than simply
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37 manipulate a man; she asks herself about the generative possibilities that might result from their
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39 pairing. The man tries to protect himself from her jouissance through the production of
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41 knowledge, but the femme fatale’s desire propels her towards the death of that knowledge, to kill
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43 the symbolic’s attempt to capture what it means to be a woman. To become-woman is to free
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45 oneself of the constraints of molar identity (as coined by Deleuze & Guattari), or of the dictates
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47 of each socio-symbolic matrix regarding what it means to be a woman and to desire and enjoy as
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49 a woman.
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4 Morris's fifth chapter, "Psychoanalysis and the mother-monster", investigates the
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6 impasse Freud reached when he posited his famous question "What does a woman want?" and
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8 how psychoanalysis has contributed to the notion of the monstrous mother. By way of examples
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10 in the horror genre as well as of mothers who murder their children, Morris argues that when the
11
12 question of Woman's desire within the mother is broached, the narrative becomes too disturbing
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14 and collapses. Morris's fourth chapter, "Sexual difference and the medical gaze", speaks to the
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16 monstrous mother from a different angle by way of the monstrous womb. Morris tells us about
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18 the 19th and early 20th century belief in the medical field that a pregnant woman has the ability to
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20 deform her fetus through maternal "impressions" or "imagination". In other words, "the
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22 mother's body becomes interpolated as the site of the abject" (p. 54), such that there resides in
23
24 the mother-to-be a dangerous feminine desire and jouissance that has the power to deform or kill
25
26 her fetus—that is, of course, unless medical science is able to intervene and make her submit to
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28 its authority. Even as Morris sees contemporary fears of the monstrous womb manifested in how
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30 pregnant women's bodies are governed through such means as dietary recommendations and
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32 instructions to avoid stress, she also mentioned the "heartbeat bills" that were, at the time of
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34 writing the book, then making their way through the U.S. courts at the state level.
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43 With the Supreme Court decision to reverse *Roe v. Wade*, we witness women's bodies
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45 and desire being governed through legal means at the state level—with many states enacting
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47 near-complete bans on abortions. Doubtless, there are numerous fantasies of Woman's desire
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49 and jouissance that fueled this decision as well as the contemporary discourses in support of it.
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51 From such a stance, the simple fact of a woman wanting an abortion might perhaps not only
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53 render her a murderous mother-monster but also demonstrate Woman's desire as pointing
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55 beyond the realm of phallic enjoyment, or beyond what is typically seen as fitting for a woman to
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4 feel in relation to the symbolic satisfactions of motherhood. Morris makes another relevant point
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6 when she argues that the “Lacanian understanding of sexual difference is essential to the analysis
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8 of social and economic stratification, in which the monstrous poor and the monstrous woman are
9
10 one and the same” (p. 55). Her argument is that the “ungovernable” poor, like the figure of the
11
12 monstrous woman, operate as an “unrepresentable excess that threatens the Symbolic function of
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14 the economy as law” (p. 55). It is perhaps no accident, then, that a common figure featuring in
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16 anti-abortion discourse is one that combines the two: the poor pregnant woman.
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21 Rather than pointing to injustices and problems within the system of neoliberal capitalism
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23 itself, or to instances in which the well-being (psychological, physical, financial, or otherwise) of
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25 the woman or the fetus is threatened by carrying a fetus to term, various neoliberal fantasies posit
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27 the pregnant woman in poverty as suffering on account of her own moral failings: her laziness,
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29 her desire to live off the government dime, her willful ignorance of contraceptive methods, her
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31 overactive sex drive, her illicit drug use, and so on. These all fit the basic recipe for a
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33 xenophobia of any type, which Derek Hook (2018) and other Lacanians have remarked centers
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35 on seeing the denigrated other as a thief of jouissance. In the case of the poor pregnant woman
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37 who desires to abort her fetus, she could be seen to pose a triple threat to the phallic order of the
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39 neoliberal socio-symbolic matrix by way of her desire as woman, or her right to choose, her
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41 feminine jouissance, and her poverty.
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48 The final chapter of the book, “The borderline, jouissance, and capitalist enjoyment”, is
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50 densely argued and challenges the reader to tackle one of the most difficult questions of our
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52 contemporary moment: how, Morris asks, can capitalist enjoyment be disrupted? Morris
53
54 provides an answer to this question via the figure of the borderline (a woman labelled as being
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56 borderline—regardless of whether or not she is diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder).
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4 Morris argues that the borderline is another female monster, split between embodying woman
5 and the Woman, but one which was created by neoliberal capitalist discourses in their attempt to
6 account for sexed identities. Morris points out that the borderline fits many of the contemporary
7 significations about what it means to be a woman: she is primarily concerned with relationships,
8 with being loved and defining herself in relation to others' esteem for her; she feels too deeply
9 and lets herself be carried away by the ever-changing currents of her emotions; she enjoys
10 herself too much. At the same time, Morris and others see the borderline as the contemporary
11 form of the hysteric (of the late Victorian age). It is as an hysteric that the borderline appears
12 both as protesting against and as embodying the dictates of neoliberal capitalism. On the one
13 hand, she critiques the psychiatric master's knowledge via her famous "treatment resistance"
14 which reveals the flaws in treatment models (e.g., Dialectical Behavior Therapy) that attempt to
15 turn her into the neoliberal ideal of the productive, self-contained, and self-controlled individual.
16 On the other hand, the borderline's characteristic enjoyment in adopting the signifier of BPD
17 speaks to her investment in the neoliberal capitalist symbolic order. In this vein, she follows
18 capitalism's superegoic commandment to "Enjoy!", pursuing jouissance to its destructive (and
19 sometimes lethal) conclusions at the expense of her desire. She might have too much sex, eat too
20 much, shop too much, do too many drugs, drive too fast, enjoy letting loose her temper, and so
21 on.

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Borderline subjectivity is, Morris argues, the site of particularly forceful surveillance on account of the danger the borderline poses in the assumption of the position of the abject, which—as she had argued earlier in her book, challenges contemporary discourses about subjectivity. The borderline achieves abject status by way of her characteristic symptom of self-harm. Morris speaks specifically to self-harm that involves a visible cut or mark on the skin, as

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4 it poses a threat to the other's "subjectivity by eliciting revulsion and thus effacing the borders
5 that demarcate I/Other" (p. 116). This awareness is immediately countered by an impulse to
6 bring the borderline's body firmly back into the phallic order through subjecting it to psychiatric
7 knowledge, examination, and treatment. This, Morris notes, further reinforces the authority of
8 the symbolic function.
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16 The other symptom that captures Morris's attention is that of identity disturbance, which
17 she reads as the borderline's refusal to remain in prescribed symbolic arrangements. It is in this
18 vein that Morris remarks upon the countertransferential reactions therapists tend to have toward
19 the borderline on account of the borderline's difficulties with boundaries—or rather, the
20 borderline's tendency to seduce the therapist into speaking and acting more like a mother, friend,
21 or lover to her. Morris argues that "the borderline is unable to constitute the phallus, refusing to
22 recognize the therapist, or friend, partner, etc., in the identity he or she has misunderstood
23 themselves for" (p. 117). The resulting difficulty is a loss of the other's false sense of
24 wholeness, bringing forth the experience of castration and, moreover, of the lack in the symbolic.
25 Of course, therapists tend to interpret their countertransference by way of psychotherapeutic
26 knowledge, and this, Morris says, allows the therapist to deny that in such countertransferential
27 moments, "he or she had actually become the borderline subject, caught between the neurotic
28 compromise and the induced psychosis brought on by the rejection of the phallus of the Other"
29 (p. 118). Although Morris acknowledges other sources of difficulty in clinical work with the
30 borderline, her claim is that these encounters with the borderline induce an anxiety
31 corresponding to a brief experience of liminality: a transitional moment when the signifier and
32 speech fail and the (Lacanian) real intrudes.
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4 The concluding argument of the book about the potential for political and subjective
5 transformation via an encounter with the abject of the borderline revolves around liminality and
6 liminal spaces. Morris makes use of Ettinger's notion of borderlinking and Deleuzian and
7 Lacanian ideas regarding the generative yet deconstructive potentials of liminal states in order to
8 argue that borders and borderlines are ideal for mobilizing reinvention. In the concluding
9 sentences of the book, Morris states that the borderline

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19 in the exacerbated hysteric's position, continues to refuse, always undermining the
20 hegemonic discourse. The borderline as the sight [sic] of sexual difference still has the
21 potential to undermine the empty surplus of capitalism because she draws on what cannot
22 be signified. (p. 121)

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28 As Morris had commented, however, the borderline all too often ultimately fails in this respect,
29 as we are experts in using the various discourses circulating in the phallic symbolic order to
30 explain away our encounters with the liminal, the abject, the Woman as Other sex. This is not to
31 mention that the individuals who embody monstrous femininity themselves—be it of the variety
32 of the borderline, femme fatale, witch, or woman in poverty with an unwanted pregnancy—are
33 seemingly never the ones who benefit. Instead, the figures of monstrous femininity are those
34 who pay dearly—sometimes with their lives, for breaking outside of what is expected of a
35 woman in their times and especially for their feminine jouissance. Still, it is in the power of
36 precisely the kind of liminal spaces Morris so lucidly describes that the potential for
37 transformative change lies—both in and outside of the clinic. More specifically, it is an
38 important point that while misogyny and other forms of aggression toward the feminine can be
39 provoked by encounters with the abject, by the monstrous feminine, such encounters with the
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4 real also mark the failure of the signifier—of the signifier within the neoliberal order—and thus
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6 could stir up the beginnings of a different relation to the phallic symbolic.
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9 With its creative and thoughtful use not only of psychoanalytic theory but also of
10 philosophy, feminism, historical and contemporary cultural phenomena, literature, and film, this
11 book will have a wide appeal to psychoanalytic readers from various disciplines who are
12 interested in sexual difference and the abhorrence of femininity. For clinicians, Morris’s book
13 might additionally serve as a persuasive argument about the vital importance of cultivating
14 analytic work which allows of course, for the inevitable insights and understanding that
15 investigation of the unconscious produces, but at the same time leaves room for experiences of
16 liminality. That is to say that the anxiety corresponding to irruptions of the real, to failures of
17 speech, can be mobilized toward becoming in a way that a dogged pursuit of knowledge-
18 production cannot. For all readers, Morris’s book provides a roadmap to interpreting our cultural
19 world, and to questioning how we can make use of rather than shield ourselves from encounters
20 with the abject feminine.
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41 The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Stephanie Swales, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Dallas and
a practicing psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist.