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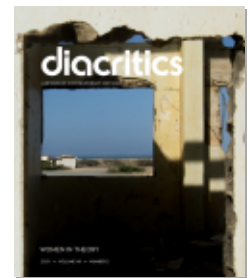
Risking Catachresis: Reading Race, Reference, and Grammar in
“Women”

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RISKING
C T CHRESIS:
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“WOMEN”

CHRISTINA A. LEÓN

The task of feminist political philosophy is neither to establish the proper meaning of “true,” nor to get caught up in a regressive pattern to show how the proper meaning always eludes our grasp, nor yet to ignore it . . . but to accept the risk of catachresis.

—Gayatri Spivak, *Outside the Teaching Machine*¹

I think how the articulation of theory is a gathering place, sometimes a point of rest as the process rushes on, insisting that you follow.

—Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*²

>> REFERENCE AND RACE

I still pause, whether by training or by visceral reflex, when someone makes a claim for or about “women” without qualification. The term itself has been troubled by feminist, queer, and critical race studies as a taxonomic designation easily enjoyed by few—resting, historically, upon binaries and modes of racialization that diminish the lives of many. Put another way, when someone makes a political claim on the grounds of being a woman without context or situating qualifiers, we’re left to question what assumptions undergird such a claim. And yet, this is neither a call to leave the term “woman” behind, nor is it a move to call out theory on behalf of women, which might carry an underlying assumption that theory is the conceptual terrain of those safely positioned in the masculine and that women are referential flesh. These concerns bring me back to a fundamental question of reference—one that the linguistic turn questioned and one that scholars, over a hundred years of scholarship across diverse fields, still grapple with, whether explicitly or implicitly. Coming back to the question of reference surely feels like a 1990s question, but we now have some considerable work done in postcolonial, decolonial, trans, queer, and Black studies that necessitates a revisitation of some of the discourses surrounding difference that populated much of the thinking at the turn of this century.

To that end, I ask: What does it feel like to be an overdetermined referent? Reference becomes a necessary relation to consider as an element of the political, the discursive, and the literary, especially when minoritized subjects, writers, and artists are often charged with the task of telling us how horrible the past was and/or laying out a path for a liberated future. Meanwhile, much of the systemic ontological imposition of racialized gender on non-white, non-cis, non-male people renders such lives as figures meant to maintain the larger symbolic system itself. It puts the labor of the past, the present, and the future on othered bodies, twisting and turning to fulfill various operations of meaning-making at once: seamlessly transfer information, excavate the past, and drill tidy tunnels into the future. If we still have a problem of reference, it has less to do with the status of signifiers as either arbitrary or performative, and more with how we collectively imagine the relationship between signifier and referent, especially as it concerns the tight tether between raciality and a supposed transparent affixing of that ethnic-racialized subject as object. This tight tether has been remarked upon by various scholars who show how the racial is

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taken as a transparent signifier, which is never transparent at all but instead mediated by a grid of intelligibility that is profoundly racist.³ And this racism grounds what we come to know as a sex/gender binary system. By what means might we consider the material need and the semantic gap that urges us to use identitarian terms in order to make certain claims on these hostile grounds? How might we get at the ambivalence of this abiding term: woman? With the urgency of this tense question, I turn to considerations of catachresis, especially as it arises in feminist theory committed to thinking representation and reference across theoretical schools of thought: critical Black studies, postcolonial studies, and deconstruction.

>> GRAMMAR LESSONS

Perhaps before we can answer that question, we need to consider how language grounds itself in reference. If we follow the tracks of rhetoricians back to where they find an origin or a foundation of language, we arrive at a rhetorical figure which has no grounding, no solid signifiatory purchase on reference, but is born out of necessity and lack: catachresis. From Quintilian to Cicero and onward, catachresis is thought of as an imaginative, desperate, and monstrous form of rhetoric. Catachresis, most often understood as an abuse or misuse of metaphor, is defined as a figuration that is improper; it signifies something for which there can be no literal referent. In this regard, catachresis emerges from the need to use a word where a proper one is lacking, proper in the sense of properly pre-existing or proper to an order. As a rhetorical concept, catachresis affords a way to consider improper or ill-fitted metaphors that emerge when one needs to figure something but there is a dearth of proper terms for that something. If catachresis is the unground upon which all metaphor, in one way or another, takes flight, then its rather humble, or desperate, origin begets dissemination because no one word will ever be enough.

Patricia Parker reminds us that “catachresis is a transfer of terms from one place to another employed when no proper word exists, while metaphor is a transfer or substitution employed when a proper term does already exist and is displaced by a term transferred from another place to a place not its own.”⁴ The economy of catachresis is linked to its strange status as metaphor. When identity markers function as a transparent, analogical metaphor, sloppy comparisons glide over truly uneven terrain. Thinking in neatly metaphorical terms keeps political claims in the realm of the proper, the proprietary, and the polished. Put another way, while the personal is political, the personal is very seldom easily substitutable. If we understand identity markers as the operations of catachresis—as a misuse or abuse of metaphor—then we have less recourse to use analogies for explanation, which makes equivocation and a one-to-one translation impossible. Because analogy and recovery of the true referent are impossible projects for catachresis, the figure qua figure draws attention to the economy of referentiality with a particular inflection to think both need and loss. No one person can be the referent of an identity, but neither can one person be understood without some identifying aegis that is grounded in the fraught apparatus of gendered signification which often hinges

upon a colonial, racial taxonomy or episteme. In this sense, to read identitarian terms as catachrestic would entail attending to the un-ideal scenes within which such terms rhetorically function to make claims born out of the tense relationship between the lack of a proper word and the need to make a claim. This seems to me one textured way of considering why the term “woman” may cause unease, and why it is a term that inspires and warrants questioning, genealogy, and contention within feminist theory. Judith Butler describes the operation in *Bodies that Matter*: “Catachresis is thus a perpetual risk that rigid designation seeks to overcome, but always also inadvertently produces, despite its best intentions.”⁵ I follow Butler’s and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s urge to accept “the risk of catachresis” by way of assembling a genealogy of thinkers who show how reference, transparency, and economy figure and structure the impact of referentiality on the political use of identitarian terms. I do so by treating theory as a gathering place and, like all gatherings, there are antagonisms and incommensurabilities.

Catachresis emerges between the lack of a word, or lexical loss, and the need for it. Some losses are constitutive beyond any abstract sense of subject formation in language. Indeed, some losses are the grounding negation that debase many, while the weight of their dispossession supports a few, both symbolically and materially. That catachresis is born of loss or lacuna does not mean that we can equivocate those losses and lacks. The following poem by Raquel Salas Rivera shows how nothings can be multiple and incommensurate. Borrowing its title from Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, “*a material substratum will always remain*” poetically traffics in deficit through a consideration of Puerto Rico’s vast debt—a debt that is both imposed, vastly disenfranchising Puerto Ricans on the island, and also actively invested in vis-à-vis a disavowed coloniality. Written as poetic responses to Marx, the poem underscores the ways in which nothingness, negativity, and loss cannot be equivocated:

“*a material substratum will always remain*”

scene 4:

cenex discovers there are multiple nothings.
like multiple infinities.

no they aren’t double nos.
more like nothings each one excluding the other completely;
the nothing of incommensurable fractions,
the nothing of honey anthills,
—quartz of snow and piss—,
the nothing of pink plantains,
the nothing of return,
the nothing of my frozen hands they’ve cut
and i carry like a rabbit’s foot.
cenex discovers there are worse worsts.

—Raquel Salas Rivera, *The Tertiary/Lo terciario*⁶

Pink plantains do not exist as such—the naming here is a catachresis that poetically figures an understanding of the untranslatability, indeed the emphatic incommensurability, of these nothings. “Double nos” is a slippery move between English and Spanish. Is it a double negation, two utterances of “no”? Or is it a double *nos* which, in Spanish, would always be double in the sense that it functions as an enclitic, first-person plural pronoun embedded within reflexive verbs and, therefore, both the object and the tacit subject of the verb’s work? To read this “nos” as *nos* would mean it is truncated, cut off from a phantasmatic transitive, reflexive verb. The poem already exists in a double, since *The Tertiary/Lo terciario* is published in both Spanish and English, with the direction of the pages inverted—a queer relation between these two colonial languages which seems most befitting for Puerto Rico. The doubled enunciations of the poems create an echo and a chasm between the languages and disorder: which is the original and which is the translation? At times, catachresis can operate a bit like an amalgam—creating entities of seemingly disparate parts; the most notorious examples being the face of a mountain or the legs of a chair. We could mistake these catachreses as anthropomorphisms, but not all legs belong to humans. And anthropomorphism, rhetorically speaking, often has the effect of showing the limitations around the ontological parameters of the human rather than sheerly granting human form to another entity. In other words, “there are worse worsts.”

One of the principal motivations for coming back to the question of reference and representation is that often the racialized subject is taken as data, as a given. Put another way, the burden of representation is more deeply demanded and more insistently felt alongside raciality. I use the term raciality to explicitly evoke the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva who claims that one of the biggest conceits and ruses of modern grammars of raciality is the transparency thesis. In this symbolic schema, the supposed givenness or native informancy of a racialized subject accrues more value than the actual lived or material experience of that subject. The noticeable difference of raciality, especially as it cathects onto Black and brown bodies, bears a different kind of referential status than white subjects who have a more seamless relation to subjectivity. Whiteness allows an alignment with a privileged form of subjectivity. For da Silva, the “Transparent I” marks the status of the white Western subject, who can move unmarked into the first-person pronoun, that tricky pronoun that is at once singular and universal.⁷ The move from the singular to the universal is an operation cloaked in the guise of the transparency thesis—this is the invisible tether to truth, to value, and to inhabiting language that concedes so much power to so few. From this privileged vantage point of Western subjectivity ensconced in language’s strange operations, deconstruction revealed that the privations of language showcase the center of Western power as neither self-sovereign nor self-same. But for many others marked as others, this alterity of non-coincidence does not exactly feel radical and, moreover, uses the same languages of exclusion, law, and difference that we use to consider ethnic, sexual, and racialized differences. These exclusions are not equivalent.

Rather than a *tout court* polemic against identity politics, I wonder how thinking about identity terms as catachrestic de-idealizes identity and thus attends less to the open idea of identity as a cipher of positive otherness and more to the material embeddedness, the negativity of alterity, and the contradiction or non-self-sameness of even those non-Western, non-white others. Rey Chow makes this point emphatically, articulating the double valence of negation involved in such a pursuit, which we may consider as the risk of catachresis for those who already suffer profound dispossession:

To be sure, this would be an arduous task, implying as it does the need to work negatively on those who are already bearers of various types of negation—of poverty, deprivation, abuse, distortion, discrimination, extermination. But this is also the reason their encounter with the *well-established* negativity of Western thought would prove poignant and provocative, providing as they will instructive antidotes to facile idealist and idealistic projections.⁸

>> RISKING CATACHRESIS

If the question of referentiality and grammar dominated much of the work of 1990s theory across many schools of thought, one might feel tempted to declare that with the displacement of the linguistic turn theory has moved past such a point. But a quick glance at the status of metaphor⁹ tells us that the problem of figuration in relation to raciality and racialized gender remains.

Iterity and difference were the terrain of culture wars in the 1990s and we see such warring factions reconfigured now. The payoff of a notion of language that operates based on a fundamental difference, or *differánce*, cannot simply be that meaning is deferred, that the original is a matrix, that gender is the performance of a repetition for which there is no original. The ground zero of no original is catachrestic (a ground and unground all at once), a quotidian practice which exposes our limit thinking when substitution can no longer suffice, when analogical thinking collapses into sameness with too much violence, where need and lack converge. What is important to note, for the purposes of thinking gender, raciality, and referentiality, is that metaphor operates in a specific chain of poetic substitutability on a one-to-one basis (that is, one signifier substituting for another, in order to make some sort of symbolic relation poetically felt). Metaphor, in this way, can employ a kind of analogical thinking that substitutes and, therefore, encourages a thinking of sameness rather than difference.

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More pointedly, the question of endless substitution or malleability arises through an attention to fungibility and plasticity.¹⁰ How can we think about catachresis in relation to the incredible dynamism that a concept like fungibility grants? Fungibility renders persons into things and then those things into endless use value. Fungibility is the underbelly of metaphorical substitution—a grammar lesson in the raciality that undergirds gender in the Americas and more globally. To substitute my love to the heavens, to call a loved one *mi cielo*, is an altogether different syntactical and material resignation than parceling out people into property. Not all metaphors and substitutions are pretty. Beyond the originary moment of violence, such impositions of ontological raciality happen processually and ongoingly. Hortense Spillers names this process as marking and branding: “We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments.”¹¹ Repeating initiating moments of marking and branding, the afterlives of slavery¹² transfer neatly into metaphorical substitution precisely because the meaning-making of this imposition is efficacious, because the grammar works, thus warranting further branding because this raciality, especially racial logics based in anti-Blackness, operates based on an overdetermined referentiality.

Catachresis is risky. Its operations may be so in a few ways: they risk being misunderstood, risk that the signifier will not do justice to the signified, and risk making claims on shaky ground. But following Chow’s logic, we must risk letting the question of referentiality bring to bear on the relation between loss and need. Though signifiers work in modes of deferral, some forms of active debasement demand that we use terms more roughshod and more direct than eloquent metaphors and theoretical polemics. In the realm of social justice, the horizon of addressing structural violence cannot afford to be perpetually *à venir*.¹³ This dual register speed is the difficult push and pull of politics and ethics; the need to act or claim as “the process rushes onward.” Noting such an ethical tension between the ontological and the political, especially in the realm of transnational feminism, Ranjana Khanna considers

affect as a concept that acknowledges the catachresis of the origin of a trauma and that leaves its trace on the individual. This allows for a reading of historical and political processes as instruments of violence on groups—racism, sexism, colonialism, slavery—rather than seeking an absolute origin that may posit, for example, ethnic violence as always rooted in the same psychological structure of lack; or, on the other hand, trauma as originating in a singular historical event that sidelines the everyday.¹⁴

The risk that is the charge of catachresis affords a capaciousness to consider how a term like “woman” carries incredible ethical, political, and ontological entanglements that cannot be avoided, especially in a world overdetermined by a racist and colonial violence that leaves its mark on the psyche, the body, and political structures at various scales.

In the nineties both Butler and Spivak considered a term like woman to be catachrestic, and now we see it reemerge in the richly theoretical discussions of contemporary

Black Studies. Alessandra Reango engages the trope of catachresis to explain the relation between seeing and saying, between the visual and the non-visual, as catachresis. Calvin Warren invokes catachresis as a trope that can begin to imagine the aporetic figure of the antebellum “free Black.” Words partake in the linguistic armature of ontological hierarchy. Modern grammars, especially of raciality, favor a form of idealism (metaphor) which is not ideal for those who have to do the representative work. In other words, the support that holds up certain hierarchies across the globe in the material and the semantic relies upon a grammar that renders Black life as plastic and fungible. These two concepts circulate in ways that have fundamentally transformed how we think about the ontological imposition of raciality. But these stretches and pulls, these renderings of material body and symbolic body also stultify.

Black feminists have long articulated a rigorous political rhetoric with attention to material conditions, an American grammar whose foundation is rupture and continuation. Note the inaugural moves of Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”:

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “untidy,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.¹⁵

Spiller’s illustrative opening lines play with the tension of being marked that leads to a confusion of names and ends on how such a positionality is structural to an anti-Black national project. To be marked is to be a target, to have an ontological condition written upon one, and to be somehow recalcitrant to any comfortable nominalization. The names disseminate into different names, but the condition of the named stays in a loop of this originary violence that divests the marked woman in service of a “national treasury of rhetorical wealth.” In a dazzling set of sentences, we move from what we have to face, to being marked, to a list of names that range from violently intimate to disenfranchisingly euphemistic to constatively respectable. But in the meeting ground of confounded identities, the marked woman is both a need and an almost-invention. She is necessitated.

If the grammars and modern representations we have received rest upon such radical debasement, then abuse of language may be one strategy for calling attention to that very structure of meaning-making. In catachresis, Paul de Man finds a monstrosity of figuration that can reorient our relationship to the supposedly given, the referential status of reality itself:

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buse of language is, of course, itself the name of a trope: catachresis. . . . They are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways, pairing man with woman or human being with beast in the most unnatural shapes. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopoeia, and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters.¹⁶

The positional power inherent in language that de Man articulated here reverberates even more forcefully with the Black feminist imperative of standpoint epistemology. Black feminisms and deconstruction “dismember the texture of reality” in the hope that it may reassemble into something unnatural, something that is not easily integrated into the lingua franca of hegemony. “world of potential ghosts and monsters” produces a hauntological resonance—the figurations that dwell on the limits of signification. We should welcome such hauntings beyond proper meaning, with all the urgency of need.

The relation between catachresis and metaphor is one that is slippery, because the improper can be made proper and vice versa. Quintilian separates catachresis as *abusio* and metaphor as *translatio*, but then concedes that poets often abuse language for flourish of meaning, for poetic license.¹⁷ If the two terms circle around one another, it seems to be less about them being exactly the same and more about the impact of catachresis on how we perceive metaphor: it can debase, misuse, abuse, and take up nearly dead metaphors. It can also reign in the realm of tropes as the originary figurativity of any language system—the tenuous gap and need from which language more generally arises. But this origin would only ever be metaleptically known. Catachresis, it seems, betrays something about language—shows its misfits, its desperate need, its lexical lacuna. Metaphor, though, can fashion substitution through resemblance—bringing along all the problems of sameness that come from resemblance, analogy, and simile. In this manner, Parker shows how metaphor has been aligned with ornamentality, with the “leisure class of rhetoric,” with friendly and neighborly transfers of meaning.¹⁸ Metaphor seems to have some ground, some settled land upon which to do its polite work. Catachresis, on the other hand, is “somewhat more desperate.”¹⁹ Catachresis makes itself known through a forceful movement of language that is and is not human:

The violent intrusions of catachresis and the possibility of transfers, that unwilling, subvert the very model of the controlling subject, are the gothic underside of the mastery of metaphor, the uncanny other of its will to control. . . . and words taking on a life of their own not only conflates the abuses of metaphor with the *abusio* of *catachresis* but informs a potential linguistic return of the repressed, the insinuation of figures in the most “familiar” and apparently “proper” discourse, the *unheimlich* return of the dead or slumbering to life.²⁰

The grammar lessons taught by Black feminists illustrate the potential of thinking catachresis as that which acknowledges violence, undoes mastery, shows need, and allows

for uncanny hauntings. Black feminist theories do not consider the violent origin of these grammars as historically sealed events in the past. The pursuit of origins is one that deconstruction would caution us against, knowing that any origin is a catachresis.

And yet, to come back to these moments of rupture, rather than firm foundation, has been a recursive tendency of theory across different discursive fields. To do so with the question of woman in mind means to take seriously the uneven tether to referentiality that those who are marked by raciality endure. It also means to come back again to the violence that structures many, many lives but does not throw our systems of knowing, thinking, and feeling into ethical crisis.²¹ Often, ethical crises that produce as much trauma as racialized and gendered violence are not at all representable in a straightforward grammar or narrative. In the difficult space between matter and meaning, we come to a dream of rigor that cannot be chastened by the affective landscape of shame and white guilt:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated” and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme, historiography and its topics, shows movement. . . . I would call it the Great Long National Shame. But people do not talk like that anymore—it is “embarrassing,” just as the retrieval of mutilated female bodies will likely be “backward” for some people. Neither the shame-face of the embarrassed, nor the not-looking-back of the self-assured is of much interest to us, and will not help at all if rigor is our dream. *We might* concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us.

The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an “American grammar,” begins at the “beginning,” which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation.²²

Spillers calls for us to get past the shame and the guilt, and to deal with the intertwined violence of both grammar and matter. The force of a hurled stick may break a person’s skeletal frame, but the architecture of American grammar kills. If this is so, is this abuse of language enough? I am not sure, but this short exercise in retracing my relationship to the term “woman” has asked me to come back again to grammar and matter as indelibly linked.

Thinking with catachresis is less of a polemic for or against catachresis, because it is in use all the time. Attention to catachresis as a fundamental, rhetorical operation invites us to be attentive to the politico-ethical ramifications of the pressures of signification for those who are overdetermined by their sign as a referent, as evidence. Woman, thought of as a catachresis, both grounds and ungrounds feminist claims. It may give us a way, too, to think through terms that arise in the tension between need and lack, the kinds of reflections that theory allows us to pause and linger over as “the process rushes on.” Perhaps the risk of catachresis comes in the form of thinking about referentiality at its limits, a thinking that cannot help but attend to the status of the referent, rather than only the sign. Instead, we may do well to think the status of referentiality—knowing that

these matters haunt our political terrain. For Chow, such a work of limit thinking would allow referentiality to interrupt the work of theory:

Let referentiality interrupt, to reopen the poststructuralist closure on this issue, to acknowledge the inevitability of reference even in the most avant-garde of theoretical undertakings, and to demand a thorough reassessment of an originary act of repudiation/exclusion in terms that can begin to address the “scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another.”²⁵

To allow referentiality to interrupt is not to allow those seen as demographic referents to be taken as raw data. It is instead to feel when theory or language may have hit a limit, perhaps an ethical limit. Attention to catachresis allows the conditions of referentiality to be thought anew, to be thought with urgency instead of with deferral or embarrassment. final observance: to use a phrase like the ground of language is itself catachrestic.

Notes

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- 1 Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 182.
- 2 Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, xi.
- 3 For more on critiques of transparency in relation to coloniality, ethnicity, and race, see Antonio Viegó's *Dead Subjects* and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.
- 4 Parker, "Metaphor and Catachresis," 60.
- 5 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 214.
- 6 Salas Rivera, *The Tertiary/Lo terciario*, 20.
- 7 da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 8.
- 8 Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, xxi.
- 9 For a recent debate on the status of metaphor in relation to decoloniality and anti-Blackness see Tuck and Wang, "Decoloniality is not a Metaphor," and Garba and Sorentino, "Slavery is a Metaphor."
- 10 For more on fungibility, in addition to the work of Hortense Spillers, see Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. For excellent critiques of the racialization of plasticity, see Jackson, *Becoming Human*, and Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.
- 11 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
- 12 Saidiya Hartman conceptualizes the "afterlife of slavery" in *Lose Your Mother*.
- 13 Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, 184.
- 14 Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 220.
- 15 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 57.
- 16 de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," 21.
- 17 Parker, "Metaphor and Catachresis," 61.
- 18 Parker, 69.
- 19 Parker, 67.
- 20 Parker, 73.
- 21 da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 35.
- 22 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65.
- 23 Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, 185.