GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies

Gender and Captivity

Edited by
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About

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Editorial

By Sarah Youssef, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Confinement occurs in both relatively open and closed spaces, is not limited to the prisoner and does not always occur knowingly. It can occur in a nine to five day and in an abusive relationship; it can occur in the fictional world of an author as much as in reality. The three articles of this issue reflect the complex relation of gendered roles and sexual politics in the context of confinement. And while Val Xaviers statement in Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending* (1957) "[w]e're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life" holds true, the characters addressed in our following essays do certainly not submit to their respective restrictions.

2 Although written nearly three hundred years ago, Samuel Richardson's landmark novel, *Clarissa* (1748-49), remains painfully relevant to any contemporary discussion of women's liberation because of its depiction of the ways in which women are both cut off from and pitted against each other. Elizabeth Johnston examines in her essay the novel's venomous female communities and, in particular, its deployment of the trope of female rivalry. According to Johnston, the novel's narrative trajectory depends on Clarissa's exemplary model of virtue as a means by which others are reformed. However, this exemplarity materializes within an enclosed binary that pits the angelic Clarissa against other 'bad' or 'evil' women. In fact, the novel can be read as the evil woman's teleological regress, inversely mirroring Clarissa's progress towards spiritual redemption. As Clarissa becomes more saint-like, the women she encounters become increasingly monstrous. Consequentially, the narrative shifts the blame for Clarissa's kidnapping, rape, and ultimate demise away from her male oppressors and the patriarchal system within which they operate and instead displaces it onto other women.

3 Utilizing a feminist psychoanalytical approach to Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), Katie Jones's "Bluebeardean Futures in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015)" explores contemporary forms of female entrapment – particularly the sexual exploitation of women and the gendered influence of pornography on sexual identities. Jones argues that Garland' s critique of technological patriarchy manifests itself through his reworking of the Bluebeard narrative; however, the film also conforms to typified heteronormative representations of women through its reproduction of familiar cinematic tropes and norms. Moreover, the climactic escape of the central female character combines ambivalence towards technological advancement with dread of female

sexuality in a way that problematises feminist interpretations, despite its emancipatory suggestions. Hence, Jones examines *Ex Machina* as part of a feminist Bluebeard tradition that acts as a critique of current cultural norms that shape and control heteronormative desire, and a male gothic tradition that reflects fears regarding female-ness, abjection and the maternal.

4   Marquis Bey's "Between Blackness and Monstrosity: Gendered Blackness in the Cyborg Comics" gives a racial and gendered analysis of the Cyborg comics, which depict the life of Vic Stone, African American superhero cyborg. The essay's entry into Victor Stone's Black cyborg positionality seeks to do four things: first, articulate, with the help of Richard Iton's notion of the Black fantastic, the unsettling and destabilizing nature of Blackness and cyborg-ness; second, provide a gendered analysis of the Black (male) cyborg that, in part, questions the destabilizing potential of yet another male superhero; third, put Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness, which he alternatively describes as a transhumanness, in conversation with historical derogations and contemporary reappropriations of the notion of monstrosity; and fourth, highlight the salvific discourse surrounding Stone and speak to the temporal implications of being a Black cyborg.

5   This issue of *gender forum* addresses all aspects of captivity in relation to questions of gender and sexuality. What all three essays clearly show is that confinement is connected to issues of race, politics, economy and personal growth. All characters and concepts discussed underline the prevalent threat of confinement and artistic as well as literary possibilities of addressing the issue.

The Female Jailor and Female Rivalry in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*

By Elizabeth Johnston, PhD, Monroe Community College, USA

> *"Oh the deadly snares/That women set for women, without pity/Either to soul or honour! ...Like our own sex, we have no enemy, no enemy!"*
> - Thomas Middleton*, Women Beware Women* (1613/14; 1657)

> *"How much more cruel and insulting are bad women, even than bad men!"*
> - Belford, from Richardson's *Clarissa*

1 In Samuel Richardson's landmark novel, *Clarissa* (1748-49), the eponymous heroine escapes the arranged marriage her parents have tried to force her into only to be abducted and imprisoned by the aristocratic rake Lovelace. She ultimately reforms him—but after he rapes her and she languishes away for several hundred pages, mourning the loss of her virginity and chastising him via a steady stream of epistles (the book contains a total of nine volumes and 547 letters).[1]

2 *Clarissa* was enormously popular in its day. The French novelist Rousseau lauded the work: "No one, in any language, has ever written a novel that equals or even approaches *Clarissa*" (qtd. in Watt 219). Likewise, Samuel Johnson commended it as "the first book in the world for the knowledge it displays of the human heart" (qtd. in Watt 219). Widely read throughout the eighteenth-century, it enjoyed the production of five editions in Richardson's lifetime and generated numerous imitations across the continent, especially among the rising class of women writers. While it fell out of favor in the 19th century, *Clarissa* was again taken up by modernists in the 20th century and has since become a canonical text for students of British literature. It also continues to amass popular appeal: as recently as 2010, the British journal *The Guardian* named it the fourth best novel in the English language, and it has been adapted by BBC into both a mini-series (1991) and a radio play (2010). Even as recently as May 2016, *The New Yorker* featured an article about the novel's lasting impact.[2]

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[1] Given that several condensed versions of the lengthy novel exist and that, moreover, Clarissa is available electronically from several sources, I will be using the free online version available via Gutenberg and referring to the books and letters within which the quotations occur instead of traditional page numbers.

[2] See Adele Waldman, "The Man Who Made the Novel: Loving and Loathing Samuel Richardson," *The New Yorker* 16 May 2016. Web. 9 May 2016.

3   One of the primary arguments made about Richardson's novels (his two other landmark texts are *Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison*) is that they gave birth to new literary conventions and thus held a central role in reshaping the ideological landscape of eighteenth-century England within which the middle-class family emerged. As literary scholars like Ian Watt, Michael McKeon, and Nancy Armstrong have argued, the eighteenth-century novel was anchored by characters who embraced enlightenment values like rational autonomy, self-moderation, introspection, and psychological interiority; the narrative impulse to reward these characters for their integrity both reflected and promoted a shifting set of cultural values rooted in personal rather than economic merit. Importantly, the main character of these novels was often a woman from the gentry. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall explain: "A society based on market forces necessitated relationships beyond the grasp of the cash nexus, a site for moral order— located where else but in an idealized femininity and childhood, within the sacred bounds of family and home" (xxx). Eve Tavor Bannet terms this major literary shift to valorize the middle-class heroine the "domestic revolution." From the privacy of her heart and home, the heroine exerted her moral influence; her ability to reform those above and below her depended on eliciting their desire for intimacy (both sexual and platonic) with her. Hence, the seemingly depoliticized space of courtship within the eighteenth-century novel served the socio-cultural function of both defining and disseminating middle-class ideology.[3]

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[3] Nancy Armstrong makes this argument in her canonical text, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

4   Clearly, Clarissa's character and narrative trajectory function to disseminate a middle-class ideology based in a merit economy.   However, scholars have long debated whether Clarissa, either character or text, can be read as 'proto-feminist.' Yes, Clarissa stands up to her parents, rejects oppressive societal expectations, and though raped by Lovelace, expresses fierce autonomy in refusing to be possessed by him. It's also true that editorial commentary throughout the text lays blame for Clarissa's death on misogynistic norms, including men's rakish behavior and problematic marriage laws.[4]   Moreover, Richardson was a generous donor to major philanthropic projects dedicated to helping women, children, and infants; in particular, he both financially supported the Magdalen House, a home for former prostitutes, and wrote sympathetic pamphlets about the women there in the hopes of garnering public support for the project.[5] We also know that Richardson mentored a number of fledgling women writers from whom he regularly solicited advice as he drafted *Clarissa*. Elspeth Knights notes, in fact, that he borrowed from some of their experiences for his plots.[6]

5   Clearly, the text takes pains to emphasize its heroine's victimization at the hands of her father, uncles, Lovelace, and, by extension, the masculine empire over which they reign. To this end, Nancy Armstrong has even read *Clarissa* alongside the popular tradition of American captivity narratives wherein colonial women were captured by Native Americans whom they ultimately reformed and Christianized.   Armonstrong posits that *Clarissa* is a "sweeping condemnation of traditional male authority" ("Captivity" 377) and suggests Richardson chose the best-selling model of the captivity narrative to "demonstrate in extravagant terms that respectable women are no more safe in England than in British North America, [and] that England must become a sanctuary for them ("Captivity" 377). However, Armstrong cautions against a wholesale reading of the text as feminist. Clarissa's influence on the men around her depends on her lack of power: "by virtue of her helplessness and the danger in which she

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[4] For an overview of proto-feminist readings of the text, see Siohban Kilfeather, "The Rise of Richardson Criticism." *Samuel Richardson: Tercentenary Essays,* ed. Margaret Doody and Peter Sabor. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989. Terry Eagleton does not argue for a feminist reading of Clarissa, but does claim that Clarissa wields power in so far as she is able to wield rhetorical power and thus works to subvert her own oppression. See Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle*, U of Minnesota Press, 1982.
[5] See Martha Koehler, "Redemptive Spaces: Magdalen House and Prostitution in the Novels and Letters of Samuel Richardson," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22.2 (2010): 249-78.
[6] Apparently, not always with their permission. Both Elspeth Knights and Ruth Perry note that some of his women readers accused him of exploiting their personal tragedies. See Knights, "'Daring but to Touch the Hem of her Garment': Women Reading *Clarissa*." *Women's Writing* 7.2 (2000): 221-45.   Also see Perry, "Clarissa's Daughters: Or, The History of Innocence Betrayed." *Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the Clarissa Project*. Eds. Carol Houlihan Flynn and Edward Copeland. New York: AMS, 1999. 119-41.

repeatedly finds herself, [Clarissa] provides the categorical imperative for a new brand of masculinity" (379). In other words, it is precisely because Clarissa is weak and vulnerable that a reformed masculine ideal is necessary; because she is unable to save herself from bad men, good men must come to her rescue. Other scholars have similarly challenged claims concerning the novel's 'feminist' impulse, many noting that the 'heroine' dies trapped in a house (the symbol of the domestic ideal), able to exert her moral authority only via the mediation of her male executor and male author.[7]

6   Moreover, the novel's characterization of the other women of the novel is decidedly misogynistic. It is crucial to remember that the women of the novel are as violent, if not more violent, than the men and arguably crueler.[8] Clarissa is first bullied by her sister, then her sister's sadistic servant, Betty Barnes, and finally by the prostitutes who terrorize, drug, and assist Lovelace in raping her. Thus, Belford's condemnation of "bad women"—the epigraph with which I began this essay—likely rang true for readers of the novel: bad women *do* seem more cruel and insulting than bad men (Vol. 7; letter XV). Clarissa's abandonment by her mother is felt more keenly than her father's, her sister's cruelty cuts more deeply than her brother's, and Lovelace's misogyny pales in comparison to that of the savage women he employs, Betty Barnes and Mrs. Sinclair. While eventually both Clarissa's mother, sister, and servant, as well as all the men of the novel will express to some degree or another regret for their actions, the worst women of the novel—the prostitutes—die unrepentant. Thus, while Armstrong has argued that the novel purposefully draws parallels between Lovelace and the 'savages' of captivity narratives, I'd argue that—at least within the narrative-- the actual 'savages' from whose clutches Clarissa needs to be rescued are the women who surround her. In effect, the novel deploys the trope of female rivalry to shift blame away from male-perpetrated violence and the patriarchal system which normalizes it.

7   Throughout the text, heterosexual rivalry (by the eighteenth century colloquially termed 'the battle of the sexes') is displaced by female homosocial rivalry. In other words, for every bad man Clarissa encounters, there is a worse woman. The first of these is Clarissa's mother. Mrs.

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[7] See, for example, arguments on this subject made by Margaret Doody and Florian Stuber in "Clarissa Censored." *Modern Language Quarterly* Winter 1998: 74-88, and Tassie Gwilliam, *Samuel Richardson's Fictions of Gender*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.

[8] For a discussion of men's violence against Clarissa and her own sadomasochistic tendencies, see Laura Hinton, "The Heroine's Subjection: Clarissa, Sadomasochism, and Natural Law." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (1998): 293-308. . Much of what Hinton has to say about Clarissa's invitation of violence from men can also be applied to what I argue in this essay about her relationship with women.

Harlowe is not 'bad' in the way that the other women of the novel are bad. That is, she is not violent with Clarissa. However, the narrative implicitly and explicitly condemns her maternal failure to protect her daughter from male tyranny. Importantly, Mr. Harlowe's mandate that his daughter marry the aging Mr. Solmes so as to garner wealth for the family is largely ventriloquized by his wife, Mama Harlowe, who practices blind allegiance to his authority. Yet it's clear that both Mama Harlowe and Clarissa suffer from the former's failure to stand up to Mr. Harlowe. In letter after letter, Clarissa describes to her friend Anna how her mother vascillates between scolding Clarissa, threatening her, weeping, and cajoling her to marry Solmes. When her mother kisses her after they've argued, Clarissa confides to Anna, "Did not this seem to border upon cruelty?...It would be wicked [would it not] to suppose my mother capable of art? But she is put upon it, and obliged to take methods to which her heart is naturally above stooping" (Vol. 1, Letter 17). Clarissa's description makes clear that her mother is repressing her natural maternal instincts and, as such, their sacred bond is broken. Importantly, the reader learns from the first letter of the book that Mrs. Harlowe is unable to follow the dictates of her own heart because, although "she is admirably qualified. to lead" she has instead "submit to be led" (Vol. 1, Letter 1). In other words, although she could rescue Clarissa, she does not. When Clarissa is kidnapped, she sends her mother letters begging her help, but her mother responds by returning them, unopened. When she learns that Clarissa has been raped and is dying, Mrs. Harlowe resists sympathy, telling her daughter she must "sail with the tide" of the family's continued anger (Vol. 7, Letter 28). Thus, the text implies that Mrs. Harlowe is worse than Mr. Harlowe because *she* is a mother and should know better.

8   Ironically, while the era's conduct book literature celebrated the domestic ideal, in its literature there is a dearth of good mothers. Instead, novels of the period are swarming with monstrous mothers and orphaned heroines. Marilyn Francus argues that this is because "a 'good' mother, like her monstrous and spectral doubles, demonstrates agency, will, and action … As a consequence, 'good' mother narratives force the acknowledgement of legitimate maternal power and authority and implicitly compete with the patriarchal imperatives they were supposed to support" (16). In other words, while conduct book literature might promote the *idea* of an agency-wielding 'good' mother, an embodied fictional representation of that ideal proved too threatening. Thus, within a patriarchal narrative, Mama Harlowe cannot rescue Clarissa. She cannot embody the maternal ideal. The new masculine ideal (which, in the novel, will be

embodied by the reformed Belford) depends on Mama Harlowe's failure to save her daughter.

9   Arabella is equally as ineffectual as a sister and, because she is also a rival for male desire, far more cruel. Just as Mrs. Harlowe stands in for Mr. Harlowe, Arabella shifts attention away from the bad behavior of their brother James. Much of James' harassment of Clarissa is filtered through the letters he sends her, whereas Arabella consistently, sadistically, torments Clarissa in person—a violence the reader witnesses in Clarissa's letters. Throughout the text Arabella is depicted as materialistic, vain, self-complacent, coquettish, and jealous. In contrast to Clarissa's tempered rationality (a hallmark of eighteenth-century enlightenment ideology), Arabella is controlled by her passions. On several occasions, Arabella's violent rages cause Clarissa to believe she is about to hit her. Clarissa describes one encounter:

> My sister is but this moment gone from me: she came up all in a flame, which obliged me abruptly to lay down my pen: she runs to me—
> Oh spirit! Said she; tapping my neck a little *too* hard. And is it to come to this at last!—
> Do you beat me, Bella?
> Do you call this beating you? Only tapping your shoulder *thus,* said she; tapping again more gently-- …. (Vol. 2, Letter 9)

In the above scene, readers witness a woman who is entirely out of control, "in a flame," "foaming with passion," "out of patience" and intending "violence" against her sister. Worse, she refuses to recognize that she is her own sister's bully, even when Clarissa calls her out on her behavior. While James is also described negatively, the novel implies that Arabella's behavior, like Mrs. Harlowe's, is doubly toxic because she is behaving unnaturally—"natural" being implicitly defined as the way the female exemplar, Clarissa behaves.

10   In fact, Arabella's apathy toward her sister belies the fact that she is, herself, a victim of a misogynistic culture. Even Clarissa notes this irony, complaining, "Should not sisters be sisters to each other? Should not they make a common cause of it, as I may say, a cause of sex, on such occasions as the present?" (Vol. 1, Letter 14). Her question encourages the reader to condemn Arabella's sisterly (and womanly) failure and would seem to promote the need for female community. Yet the text fails to treat Arabella sympathetically, despite the fact that Arabella is far more disadvantaged by societal norms than her sister. After all, she lacks the physical beauty valued by her culture and which, in the absence of a sizable dowry, might attract a suitor. A marriage to a wealthy man might, in turn, bestow on her some financial independence and, with

it, agency. Yet, even Anna acknowledges Arabella's dim prospects for such a match precisely because of who her sister is: "What man of a great and clear estate would think of that elder sister while the younger were single?" (Vol. 2, Letter 2). Clarissa's inherent superiority is affirmed, yet Arabella is not an object of pity. Instead, both Anna and Clarissa mock Bella's "plump, high-fed" face (Vol. 1, Letter 7); Anna even jokes that only the heinous and hideous Solmes would make a good match for Bella since "the woman…*should* excel the man in features" and only Solmes might match that criteria (Vol. 1, Letter 10). The irony of her name, Ara*bella,* also seems a deliberately cruel choice by Richardson. Further, Clarissa is favored not only by her parents and by suitors like Lovelace (who Arabella initially desires) but by their grandfather, who leaves all of his wealth to Clarissa, and their uncles who would do the same.

11   Luce Irigaray, in her canonical feminist essay "Women on the Market," argues that because society assigns women value only in relation to men's desire and heterosexual exchange, women tend to interact with each other as rivalrous commodities. Clearly, a feminist reading of Arabella's behavior recognizes that she is behaving as a competing commodity. Yet, within the text Arabella and Clarissa are never reconciled and Arabella winds up married to a man who abuses her—an implicit punishment for her abusive behavior toward Clarissa and for her refusal to adopt Clarissa as a model of the feminine ideal. Any potential to use Arabella's position to challenge patriarchal authority is undercut and defused by the trope of female rivalry.

12   Clarissa finds more female rivals elsewhere. Given the dialectic relationship between eighteenth-century gender and class ideologies, it is important to note that the lower the social rank of the novel's women, the greater their violence towards Clarissa. Betty Barnes is a servant in the Harlowe household who behaves particularly sadistically. She is employed to spy on Clarissa by Clarissa's parents who confine the heroine to her room and tell her she cannot leave it without Barnes at her side. Barnes delights in spying on Clarissa, rifling through her letters, and reminding Clarissa of her impending fate as Solmes' wife. Clarissa despises Barnes, telling Anna: "[T]his creature has surprised me on many occasions with her smartness; for, since she has been employed in this controlling office, I have discovered a great deal of wit in her assurance, which I never suspected before" (Vol. 2, Letter 9). Clarissa's appraisal of Barnes' unlikely intelligence represents a desire to demarcate clear class boundaries. The fact that Clarissa is "surprised" that Barnes possesses such scruples serves to warn the reader of the

potential threat embedded in the working class woman whom they let into their homes and leave unguarded.

13   Additionally, the narrative warns against homosocial intimacies between women of the working class and those in the gentry, suggesting that the working class women will contaminate those above them.[9]   Indeed, Anna suggests that the primary reason Arabella is mistreating Clarissa is because she has made the mistake of "lay[ing] herself in the power of a servant's tongue!" (Vol. 1, Letter 15). Clarissa, too, scolds Barnes for interfering in her relationship with her sister: "She [Arabella] always preferred your company to mine. As you pulled, she let go" (Vol. 2, Letter 19). However, Clarissa also notes that the problem of upstart working class women is not confined to the Harlowe house; she predicts "that were the succession of modern fine ladies to be extinct, it might be supplied by those from whom they place in the next rank to themselves, their chambermaids and confidants" (Vol. 2, Letter 19). Clarissa makes explicit Arabella's mistake in allowing her servant so much power; in turn, Arabella has endangered not only their sisterly relationship but also the social hierarchy.

14   Again, a feminist Marxist reading of Betty Barnes might note that she, even more than the women who employ her, is disadvantaged by the system. She is, after all, employed by Clarissa's parents and merely following their dictates. Her economic well-being depends on trying to force Clarissa into marrying Solmes. Moreover, one might argue that she has as much a right to desire to cross class boundaries and enter the middle-class as Arabella and Clarissa have to marry further up the social ladder themselves. And yet, because Barnes' story is filtered through the letters of her social superiors and she is never given voice herself, the reader is encouraged to see her only as Clarissa's tormentor. She functions, by means of contrast with Clarissa, to draw further blame away from the underlying problems in patriarchy and to shift the readers attention onto class and gender-based rivalries. Further, she helps to displace some of the readers' anger at Arabella because she is so much 'worse' and might be, as Anna suggests, ultimately responsible for influencing Arabella's unsisterly behavior.

15   As argued thus far, Clarissa's exemplary status materializes by means of contrast with the other women of the novel. We see this occur symbolically in so far as, over the course of the novel, the materiality of Clarissa's body slowly gives way to its own ethereality, culminating in

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[9] See Susan Lanser for further discussion about the threat of homosocial relationships between working class and middle class women. Lanser, "Befriending the Body: Female Intimacies as Class Acts." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 32.2 (1998-99): 179-98.

her death, while the 'bad' women of the novel become increasingly more mired in their corporeality. Ironically, at the same time as the women become worse, the men begin to reform. While Lovelace is provided the rhetorical means (via letter-writing) by which to articulate his eventual reformation, none of the 'bad' women are provided such an opportunity. Arguably, as the novel progresses, Lovelace's focus turns from bodily desire to spiritual desire, mirroring Clarissa's movement toward ethereality. But her rivals sink further into their quicksand of their bodily appetites.

16   As the moment of her wedding to Solmes nears, a terrified Clarissa is duped by Lovelace (via Betty Barnes, whom he has employed) into running away. Rather than taking her to safety, however, Lovelace dumps her in a brothel, hoping that her isolation from her friends and family and the influences of the prostitute will eventually persuade her to consent to his sexual advances. Of course, Lovelace initially claims that he has taken Clarissa to an inn and that the innkeeper, Mrs. Sinclair, is a widow and the other women living there are her tenants and relatives. However, Clarissa soon discovers that Mrs. Sinclair runs a brothel and that her housemates are actually prostitutes.

17   When Clarissa enters the Sinclair household, she appears to be walking into Lovelace's trap, but the narrative eventually makes clear that 'bad' women, not Lovelace, are her truest adversaries. Janet Todd has said of the contrast between the women of the novel that "[t]he terrifying Sinclair may seem far from the weak and submissive Mrs. Harlowe, but their functions collide; both women minister to men and preside over houses whose genteel veneer barely hides the brutality beneath" (35).[10] In other words, both households are overseen by women who, at the behest of men, imprison Clarissa. However, it's also clear that the degree of brutality Clarissa experiences in these households depends on the social class of the woman in charge; moreover, the further down the social class the women are, the more the gender hierarchy is destabilized. By the time Clarissa dies, there is no longer any question as to who her greatest threat is: other women.

18   One of the most compelling ways in which the novel deflects blame away from the men's monstrous behavior is in the dehumanization of the prostitutes, reducing them to their most animal of features. Although Lovelace is Clarissa's rapist, throughout the text readers are granted

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[10] Although Todd is more interested in the portrayal of the friendship between Clarissa and Anna, she uses Clarissa's relationships with these other women as a point of contrast.

access to his psychological interiority via his letters. In his letters, readers discover he is sorrowful. Thus, he can be identified and empathized with. He is, in fact, so charming that a number of readers of the novel expressed desire for him. One reader, Lady Bradshaigh, admitted she could not "help being fond of Lovelace" (*Correspondence* 178). Richardson himself would lament, "Oh that I could not say, that I have met with more admirers of Lovelace than of Clarissa" and even revised the text in its second edition to make Lovelace more reprehensible (qtd. in Bloom 10). Even a number of modern critics have read Lovelace as a hero.[11] Yet the women he employs are offered no such subjectivity. Instead, they are mocked by even the worst of the novel's men. Lovelace writes to Belford to revel in Mrs. Sinclair's masquerade as an honorable woman:

> [Y]ou'll be ready to laugh out, as I have often much ado to forbear, at the puritanical behavior of the mother [Sinclair] before this lady [Clarissa]. Not an oath, not a curse, nor the least free word escapes her lips. She minces in her gait. She prims up her horse-mouth. Her voice, which when she pleases, is the voice of thunder, is sunk into a humble whine. Her stiff hams, that have not been bent to civility for ten years past, are now limbered into curtsies three deep at every word. Her fat arms are crossed before her; and she can hardly be prevailed upon to sit in the presence of my goddess. (Vol.4, Letter 4)

In this letter, as elsewhere, Mrs. Sinclair's perversity takes center stage, entertaining Lovelace, Belford, and by extension the reader, with whom Lovelace forms a bond by letting them in on the joke, so to speak. There is nothing human about this beast of a woman masquerading as a 'woman,' a guise that the men of the novel are able to see through and expose for the reader.

19   In another instance, the depiction of Mrs. Sinclair mirrors that of a wicked witch from fairytale lore. Maddened by Clarissa's temporary escape, Sinclair threatens bloody violence against the negligent maid who allowed it: "[M]ake up a roaring fire—the cleaver bring me this instant—I'll cut her into quarters with my own hands; and carbonade and broil the traitress for a feast to all the dogs and cats in the neighbourhood; and eat the first slice of the toad myself,

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[11] Martin Price, for example, calls Lovelace a restoration comedy libertine who scorns the hypocrisies of the world and its artificial hierarchies (34). Thus, he feels Clarissa is justified in desiring him, and that her desire signifies a rebellion against bourgeois hypocrisies. See Price, "The Divided Heart." *Samuel Richardson*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 33-42. Similarly, Anthony Winner suggests, "Theoretically, Lovelace offers freedom from bondage and a joint rebellion against the enslaving world" (44). He continues, "Since family and society have degraded Clarissa intro property, Lovelace's idealization of her as property appears a relative improvement" (45). Embracing Lovelace as a hero figure, Winner argues that "Richardson's celebrated empathy with feminine premises and psychology is carried over into Lovelace, who joins the traditional emotionalism of women to masculine force" (47). See Winner, "Richardson's Lovelace: Character and Prediction." *Samuel Richardson*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 43-50.

without salt or pepper" (Vol. 6, Letter 38). Here Sinclair extends the feminine violence first witnessed in Arabella; she threatens not just to beat but to devour her foe. Her appetite literalizes the desire for power earlier expressed by Barnes and, more implicitly, Arabella. Again, although the text makes clear that the prostitutes became prostitutes because of men, these gestures seem half-hearted or obligatory. Instead, the text appears to relish in the transgressive behavior of its 'bad' women.

20   Perhaps nowhere more damning of the prostitutes' excessive corporeality is the description of Sinclair's deathbed scene, narrated by the novel's hero Belford. After Clarissa's death, Sinclair falls and breaks her leg and develops a fatal infection. She calls Belford to visit her. He describes to Lovelace his horror at her appearance:

> Her misfortune has not at all sunk but rather, as I thought, increased her flesh; rage and violence perhaps swelling her muscly features. Behold her then, spreading the whole tumbled bed with her huge quaggy carcase: her mill-post arms held up, her broad hands clenched with violence; her big eyes goggling and flaming-red as we may supposed those of a salamander; her matted grizzly hair made irreverence by her wickedness (her clouted head-dress being half off) spread about her fat ears and brawny neck; her livid lips parched, and working violently; her broad chin in a convulsive motion; her wide mouth by reason of the contraction of her forehead (which seemed to be half-lost in its own frightful furrows) splitting her face, as it were, into two parts; and her huge tongue hideously rolling in it; heaving, puffing as if for breath, her bellows-shaped and various-coloured breasts ascending by turns to her chin and descending out of sight with the violence of her gaspings. (Vol. 9, Letter 25)

Mrs. Sinclair is, again, excess embodied. Richardson, via Belford, places particular emphasis on her transgressive, power-hungry body: its swelling, spreading, heaving, puffing, and ascending in direct contrast to Clarissa who hovers over the text, an ethereal composition of words. Whereas Clarissa has assumed her idealized position as the spiritual muse, Sinclair refuses to disappear; she insists on being seen and recognized. Belford goes so far as to make the comparison explicit, stating that "it is evident, that as a neat and clean woman must be an angel of a creature, so a sluttish one is the impurest animal in nature" (Vol. 9, Letter 25). Ironically, however, the "neat and clean woman" in the text—Clarissa—is able to exist in her pure state only as an idealized angel. Sinclair's monstrosity, in contrast, is evidenced even in her refusal to die; she literally refuses to part ways with her body. Alhough Belford attempts to convince Sinclair to accept her fate and repent to a clergyman, she refuses, raving against death until the end. Importantly, the prostitutes who surround her are described as equally monstrous, and though seeing their

mistress die so wretchedly does give them pause, Belford notes that theirs is only a "transitory penitence" (Vol. 9, Letter 25).

21   Another way in which the novel works to shift the blame from men and patriarchy on to women is in its depiction of Lovelace as another victim of the prostitutes' bullying. They initially appear to be Lovelace's lackeys, like Barnes had earlier, spying on Clarissa so as to relay to him her habits and disclose where she hides her letters. However, the longer Clarissa remains in the brothel, the more Lovelace appears to lose control over the women. Indeed, their hatred of Clarissa far exceeds Lovelace's desire for her. So badly do the women of the Sinclair house desire Clarissa's fall, they begin to encourage Lovelace to quit procrastinating and rape her. While Lovelace tries to attain Clarissa's consent, the prostitutes bully Lovelace because they think he is not being aggressive enough. Lovelace complains of their badgering to Belford: "Sally, a little devil, often reproaches me with the slowness of my proceedings" (Vol. 4, Letter 21). In another instance, Lovelace tells Belford of the prostitutes' behavior when Clarissa has refused to dine with him:

> All the women set me hard to give her cause for this tyranny. They demonstrated, as well from the nature of the *sex,* as of the *case,* that I had nothing to hope for from my tameness, and could meet with no worse treatment were I to be guilty of the last offence [rape]. They urged me vehemently to *try* at least what effect some greater familiarities that I had ever used with her would have" (Vol. 4, Letter 36).

Here we see that Lovelace *prefers* to take things slowly with Clarissa. However, the "bad women" with whom he associates negatively influence him. He concedes that they have swayed him: "their arguments being strengthened by my just resentments…I was resolved to take some liberties…. (Vol. 4, Letter 25).

22   Indeed, the women not only push Lovelace to rape her, but offer tips for helping him to do so. As the novel progresses, Lovelace makes some headway with Clarissa which the prostitutes tell him he can use to his advantage:

> Mrs. Sinclair and the nymphs are all of the opinion that I am now so much of a favourite, and have such a visible share of [Clarissa's] confidence, and even in her affections, that I may do what I will, and plead violence of *passion;* which, they will have it, makes violence of *action* pardonable with their sex…and they all offer their helping hands. Why not? They say: has she not passed for my wife before them all?...They again urge me, since it is so difficult to make *night* my friend, to attempt in the *day*. They remind me that the situation of their house is such, that no noises can be heard out of it; and ridicule me for making it necessary

for a lady to be undressed. *It was not always so with me,* poor old man! Sally told me; saucily slinging her handkerchief in my face. (Vol. 5, Letter 4)

In the above passage, a number of important strides are made in characterizing these "bad" women as worse than Lovelace. First, they justify his rape of Clarissa by assuring him that women will forgive those who rape them if the rapist does so out of passion. Further, they blame the victim, arguing that because Clarissa has pretended to be his wife to save her reputation, she has implicitly consented to his advances. They also argue away the excuses that Lovelace has brought forth, telling him he neither needs to wait for the cover of night or for Clarissa to willingly undress for him. Here, too, we see that a motivating cause for their hatred of Clarissa is that they resent Lovelace's desire to treat her better than he had treated them. Again, the novel invokes the trope of female rivalry, just as it had done with Arabella.

23   Viewed through a feminist lens, it's clear that the women despise both Clarissa's exemplary status and Lovelace's desire for what has become increasingly clear to them (and to him) is not her body, but the economy of virtue she represents. It's an economy within which these 'fallen' women have no capital; it's the economy Luce Irigaray criticizes because of its commodification of women like Arabella that leads, in turn, to female rivalry. Yet, as with Arabella, the prostitutes are more monstrous than sympathetic. Eventually, the prostitutes succeed in persuading Lovelace to rape Clarissa. He justifies his crime to Belford, explaining he really had no other choice: "In this situation; the women ready to assist; and, if I proceeded not, as ready to ridicule me; what had I left but to pursue the concerted scheme…?" (Vol. 6, Letter 36). The prostitutes drug Clarissa and help hold her down while he rapes her. Importantly, Sinclair's face - not Lovelace's - is the last thing Clarissa remembers seeing before she is raped, symbolically suggesting that Sinclair is the actual rapist.[12]

24   Afterwards, Lovelace continues to blame the women for the rape. He moans, "The cursed women, indeed, endeavored to excite my vengeance, and my pride, by preaching to me of me. And my pride was, at times, too much excited by their vile insinuations" (Vol. 9, Letter 31). He

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[12] The Sinclair household is clearly a more brazen version of Mrs. Jewkes from Richardson's first novel, *Pamela* which Bradford Mudge examines. Mudge says Jewkes "serves both to dramatize Pamela's virtues and to highlight the disparity between 'good' femininity and 'bad' femininity" (192). He notes the scene in which Jewkes and Pamela wrestle in front of a peeping Mr. B; in this scene "they physically act out the novel's central conflict between 'good' and 'bad' femininity, between one definition of womanhood that celebrates women as the corporeal vessels of religious virtue and another definition that portrays them as the embodiments of satanic vice" (194). Pamela ultimately wins and wins over Mrs. Jewkes, who reforms. See Mudge, *The Whore's Story: Women, Pornography, and the British Novel 1684-1830.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

also considers how he might, himself, have reformed in time but for the bad women's influences: "Had I carried her [I must still recriminate] to any other place than that accursed woman's—for the potion was her invention and mixture; and all the persisted-in violence was at her instigation, and at that of her wretched daughters, who have now amply revenged upon me their own ruin, which they lay at my door—" (Vol. 9, Letter 31). Again, the women - not his own desire - have brought about his and Clarissa's ruin.

25   Because he has positioned the women as the actual captors and rapists, Lovelace can thus reposition himself as Clarissa's protector; in this manner, by means of contrast with the bad women, the narrative pushes to transform Lovelace from aggressor to quasi-hero. On a number of occasions, he tells Belford he is afraid to leave her alone with the prostitutes. Clarissa also seems to accept Lovelace's role as protector; she is demonstrably more afraid of Sinclair than Lovelace, even begging him at times to protect her from the other women. Clarissa's 'recognition' of the greater threat posed by the women confirms for the reader what might otherwise be read as Lovelace's deflecting of blame. The fact that Clarissa is more afraid of the women than him suggests they 'really are' her real captors.

26   Further, the novel routinely makes explicit the misogynist truism that women, in general, are far worse than men when it comes to cruelty and violence. Lovelace complains: "A mischief which would end in simple robbery among men-rogues, becomes murder if a woman be in it" (Vol. 6, Letter 16). In other words, men's bad behavior has a moral limit, whereas women's does not. Later, he proclaims of the prostitutes' behavior that it is "a scurvy villainy (which none but wretches of [Clarissa's] own sex could have been guilty of" (Vol. 6, Letter 7). Indeed, he makes this point over and again, suggesting women have more to fear from the machinations of other women than they ever could of men. Lest it be argued that Lovelace's claims are ironic and that his unreliability as a narrator undercuts his condemnation of the women, consider that both he and Belford make nearly the same statement in two different parts of the text. Lovelace, writing to Belford moans, "A bad woman is certainly, Jack, more terrible to her own sex than even a bad man" (Vol. 6, Letter 31). Belford, the only male moral authority in the novel and arguably both a foil and reformed version of Lovelace, later reiterates this same statement: "How much more cruel and insulting are bad women than bad men" (Vol. 7, Letter 15). If Belford, in his moral progress via Clarissa's guidance, is supposed to be moving further away from Lovelace's influence, it's telling that he echoes these misogynistic truisms. Moreover, in the

conclusion of the novel, Richardson (via Belford) returns to tell the story of the prostitutes, apparently to reiterate their wickedness. In so doing, he reminds readers of what Lovelace would often say: "Let not any one reproach us Jack: there is no wickedness like the wickedness of a woman." Richardson then underscores this truism with reference to a biblical verse (Ecc.xxv 19) from which this sentiment derives; in so doing he implicitly grants divine sanction to Lovelace's and Belford's misogyny.

27   Yet, while Clarissa, Lovelace, and even Belford explicitly denounce the prostitutes, it is their own self-condemnation that best evidences the novel's misogynistic impulses. At Sinclair's death, Sally is forced to admit of herself and Mrs. Sinclair to Lovelace that Clarissa's "ruin was owing more to their own instigations than even [savage as thou art] to thy own vileness" (Vol. 9, Letter 19). Sinclair concurs, "For though it was that wicked man's fault that ever she was in my house, yet it was mine, and yours, and yours, and yours, devils as we all were (turning to Sally, to Polly, and to one or two more), that he did not do her justice!" (Vol. 9, Letter 25). Importantly, the prostitutes do not repent. They are only acknowledging their own vileness and owning their monstrosity. They are affirming what Lovelace, Belford, Clarissa, and ultimately the novel, have already insinuated: that women are the root cause of all evil.

28   The depiction of communities of women as dangerous can be read, as I have argued elsewhere,[13] as evidence not only of a general distrust of the potential power that lies in female homosocial intimacy, but more specifically in respect to the threat posed by female literacy and a growing community of women writers in the eighteenth century. These women writers threatened to offer up counter narratives, to disrupt patriarchal authority.   Some evidence suggests that Richardson at times attempted to silence rival female authors.[14] Thus, we might turn once again to what Lovelace has to say about the prostitutes. Exasperated with their aggression against Clarissa, he cries to Belford,

> damn the whole brood, dragon and serpents, by the hour…The great devil fly away with them all, one by one, through the roofs of their own cursed houses, and dash them to pieces against the tops of chimneys, as he flies; and let the lesser

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[13] See my article, Johnston, Elizabeth. "'Deadly Snares': Eighteenth-Century Women Writers and the Trope of Female Rivalry," *SLI: Studies in the Literary Imagination* 47.2 (2014) [special edition of Cambridge Scholars Publications, Ed. Kristine Jennings].

[14] See Ellen Gardiner's essay concerning Richardson's tendency to assert control over both Clarissa's narrative and the narratives of the women writes whom he patronized. Gardner, *Regulating Readers: Gender and Literary Criticism in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999.

devils collect their scattered scraps, and bag them up, in order to put them together again in their allotted place, in the element of fire, with cements of molten lead. (Vol. 7, Letter 12)

Here Lovelace imagines the prostitutes' "scraps" burned into nonexistence. Given the "scraps" of paper exchanged for nearly one-thousand pages of the novel, and given Clarissa's "scraps" of paper willed to Belford, it's not much of a leap to imagine the "scattered scraps" in this passage as stories told by women, stories which threaten male authority. But if we could rescue these scraps, piece them together, I think what we would find is something very much like what I have tried to knit together here: a counter-narrative that exposes the ways in which even a text which appears to challenge patriarchy ultimately works in its service.

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Bluebeardean Futures in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015)

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Abstract:
Utilising a feminist psychoanalytical approach to Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), this article explores contemporary forms of female entrapment – particularly the sexual exploitation of women and the gendered influence of pornography on sexual identities. Garland's critique of technological patriarchy manifests itself through his reworking of the Bluebeard narrative; however, the film also conforms to typified heteronormative representations of women through its reproduction of familiar cinematic tropes and norms. Moreover, the climactic escape of the central female character combines ambivalence towards technological advancement with dread of female sexuality in a way that problematises feminist interpretations, despite its emancipatory suggestions. This paper examines *Ex Machina* as part of a feminist Bluebeard tradition that acts as a critique of current cultural norms that shape and control heteronormative desire, *and* a male gothic tradition that reflects fears regarding female-ness, abjection and the maternal.

1   A potential figure for the deconstruction of raced and gendered sexual identities, the cyborg body also acts as a site where technological patriarchy manifests itself and "conventional understandings of the feminine" are fortified (Doane 110). The male-created feminised cyborg thus serves as a reflection of fantasy. However, artificial intelligence (AI) complicates this understanding as the consciousness of the fembot develops in ways that are uncontrollable by her designer. The feminine AI thereby combines the fear of new technology – represented in films like *The Matrix* (1999) or *iRobot* (2004) – with ambivalence towards women's emancipation and the dismantling of imperialist heteronormative patriarchal values. In this way, the AI gynoid may serve as a means through which to explore female ontological concerns and the effects of male fantasy on women's bodies. In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), the representation of technology, surveillance and power reproduces many of the thematic elements of his earlier films and novels as well as science-fiction more generally. However, the inclusion of a series of raced and feminised AI cyborgs establishes the film as part of a SF sub-genre that combines the fascination and fear of technology with anxieties regarding the 'unruly' woman and autonomous female desire. In *Ex Machina*, the central gynoid figure is a 'white' model named Ava (Alicia Vikander). Ava's consciousness is highly regulated by spatial boundaries: she is mostly confined to a secure room without windows and kept behind a glass divider, which allows the two male characters to view and question her. This said, *Ex Machina* is more accurately described as an arthouse film that strategically employs generic conventions – fairy tale, SF, horror – in order to unsettle and manipulate audience response.

2   The film also contains a number of dissonant strands which have ignited debates as to whether it can be viewed as a feminist work. On the one hand, as numerous critics have pointed out, it fails The Bechdel Test[1] and contains repeated and unjustified full-frontal female nudity, whereas the men remain fully-clothed (Watercutter; Rose); on the other, the emancipation of a woman objectified and confined by her position between men drives the narrative. Additionally, while the film contains scenes of nudity and victimisation that conform to the conventions of exploitation cinema, the narrative also works as a critique of such trends. Moreover, Laura Mulvey's seminal analysis of fetishized feminine aesthetics in film, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema", exerts a significant influence on *Ex Machina*, and while Garland is reluctant to state that he actively made use of this theoretical framework, he acknowledges that Mulvey's thesis may inform the film (Wiliens). Garland describes *Ex Machina* as "a prison break movie" (qtd. in Emblidge), and Ava eventually does escape her cell; however, her identity as an emancipated subject is left unimagined and the film's suitability as a method of critique for addressing women's objectification and disposability under patriarchy remains questionable. This article examines the aesthetics of entrapment in *Ex Machina*, in particular the film's intertextual use of the Bluebeard plot, which multiple critics have noted (Robinson; Perry), and Garland himself references in an interview (Opam). Specifically, I trace the components of *Ex Machina* that present a complex allegorical critique of mainstream porn-culture and female entrapment in the feminine sexual identities constructed in the image of hetero male fantasy. It is important to note that, while I read Garland's critique of the widespread objectification of women under patriarchy as referring to pornography and analyse scenes with the aim of teasing out this particular thread, this is just one aspect of a multi-faceted narrative. *Ex Machina* does not overtly criticise, condemn or condone pornography, but Garland describes his film as partly "about the objectification of women" (qtd. in Lewis), and therefore the references to pornography are relevant inasmuch as they chime with debates regarding the objectification of women in the media (Walter; Gill).

Ex Machina and Bluebeard

3   A generically gothic trope, confinement is intensified and domesticated in Bluebeard narratives in which "things-within-caskets-within-castles heighten the gothic structures of containment" (Barzilau 96). Above all, of course, it is women whom the tale – and the gothic

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[1] A film passes the Bechdel test if it has two or more female characters who are shown having a conversation that is not about men.

more generally – seek to objectify and contain. In some ways a folk reformulation of Eve's non-compliance, the curious heroine of the Bluebeard tale transgresses her new husband's orders and enters a forbidden room, discovering the dead (often dismembered) bodies of her husband's former wives. In his analysis, Bruno Bettleheim focuses on the magic key that becomes permanently bloodstained when the heroine drops it upon sight of the dead bodies, reading this trope as a metaphor for the wife's infidelity, bringing the sexual dynamics of the tale, in particular male control over women's sexuality, to the fore. In *Ex Machina*, Garland reformulates the Bluebeard plot with a significant alteration: the usual role of the young bride is replaced by a young, male software engineer named Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), invited to his employer's secluded home-cum-research facility in order to perform the Turing Test[2] on the cyborg Ava. Her creator, Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac), performs the Bluebeard role and his association with combat sports, as well as his beard, visually indicate his hegemonic male-ness, while his surname connotes a murderous style of masculinity.[3] In contrast, Caleb's youth, inexperience and the limitations placed on him by Nathan – for instance, he only has access to certain rooms, and Nathan is secretive regarding his techniques for creating AI – infantilise him, positioning him as less masculine/feminised.

4   Garland modernises the principle motifs of Bluebeard gothic such as the ancient castle, relocating the action to a high-security, subterranean research facility/apartment, located in an overgrown wilderness – a perverse Eden. Anne Williams emphasizes the significance of Bluebeard's castle, arguing that it not only reflects the patriarch's psyche, it constitutes "a complex metaphor for the structures of cultural power" and for the gender arrangements they "both found and mirror" (47). In Bluebeard's castle, "'woman' equals 'the material'" (43) – a sentiment literalised in *Ex Machina*. By murdering his disobedient wives, Bluebeard returns them to their patriarchally defined status as lifeless matter, meant only to reflect his masculinity and power back at him, either through their obedience, which constitutes symbolic death, or literal death. In Garland's film, the research facility and the position of the gendered and raced subjects within perform the same task as, for Nathan, Ava functions as an embodiment of *his* intelligence and inventiveness. In Bluebeard narratives, the old gothic castle denotes history and patrilineage, highlighting the structure's genealogy *as part of* culture, disturbing the notion that the hidden secret exists as a perversity divorced from patriarchy. While the setting in *Ex Machina* is ultra-modern, the first names of the

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[2] A test to decipher if a computer can 'pass' as human.

[3] Bateman is the surname of the titular psycho in Bret Easton-Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), and 'Bateman' is also a mutation of 'Bates,' the surname of the voyeuristic antagonist of Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959) and Alfred Hitchcock's film of the same name (1960).

principle characters create ties to Judaeo-Christian traditions. The well-known connotations between Ava/Eve and curiosity/disobedience relate both to the Bluebeard narrative *and* to Nathan's 'god-like' creation, while Caleb's name may refer to the biblical character sent by Moses to spy on the inhabitants of Canaan, establishing his association with the gaze within the film. As well as this, Nathan's musical and artistic tastes (Mozart, Jackson Pollock) establish the pseudo-womb prison/research facility as an extension of patriarchal space, particularly as Caleb likens him to Mozart, stating their shared genius, thus carving out Nathan's position in a masculinist genealogy of creators. Nathan affirms his mastery over the space when he gives Caleb an electronic pass that opens some doors, but not those deemed off-limits. By forbidding entry to one room, and thereby limiting his wife's freedom, Bluebeard – like Nathan – accentuates his hegemonic masculinity and authority. In *Ex Machina*, the bloody chamber that customarily conceals the murdered wives exists in two realms: camera footage of Nathan creating, interviewing, and dismembering an array of former models, and a room containing their bodies. The surveillance footage shows Nathan dragging the lifeless bodies of previous models across the floor and, as the legs of the cyborg disappear from the shot, the scene is more reminiscent of a murderer with his victim, rather than a scientist with a robot. The assembling process and creation of the fembots also literalises the influence of male fantasy on the female body, and the objectification of women.

Bluebeard's Chamber and Pornography

5   Numerous writers and critics have drawn parallels between the Bluebeard narrative and porn; for instance, Anne Williams compares the nameless heroine with other female protagonists of male gothic, concluding that, like pornography, conventions of the genre "express the 'abject,' the otherness of the *mater*/mother who threatens to swallow or engulf the speaking subject" (106). In Bluebeard narratives, the abject "gruesome materiality of Male Gothic" (106) is most apparent in the room containing the dismembered bodies, echoing filmic techniques that 'dismember' or fragment the body, close-ups, for example. However, various feminist authors, critics and directors have re-interpreted the tale, focusing on the murderous style of masculinity that Bluebeard represents and the concealed murder of women symbolically encoded within the patriarchal structure. In feminist adaptations such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1979), Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and Catherine Breillat's *Bluebeard* (2009), the narrative is reworked so that the negative connotations of the heroine's curiosity transform into a sign of her intellect and/or autonomous desire. In this way, later characterisations of the wife's

disobedience/curiosity come to represent a commitment to feminist ideals and an unwillingness to conform to traditional gender roles or be dominated by a husband. Carter specifically utilises pornography as a theme and references Félicien Rops' erotic art, thus taking "the latent content" of the traditional story, which is "violently sexual" (Carter qtd. in Simpson ix), and bringing it to the fore. Just as *Ex Machina* displays conventions of male gothic as outlined above, it also explores the feminist concerns displayed by Carter's short story.

6   As Caleb Sivyer points out, the gaze of Carter's Bluebeard figure, the Marquis, "is not tied to him as an individual but is rather an abstract position of power that is assumed by him" (13). Furthermore, by renaming her villain the Marquis, Carter also alludes to the aesthetics of sadomasochism found in works by the Marquis de Sade, i.e. that of the "sexual education of one person in the fantasy of another" (L. Williams 224). In "The Bloody Chamber" Carter invokes Sade's *Justine* (1791) through her masochistic heroine, and, as Robin Ann Sheets observes, the Marquis's resemblance to the Comte de Gernande, the aristocrat in Sade's novel. "The Bloody Chamber" explicitly demonstrates the impact of male fantasy on feminine sexuality during the heroine's sexual initiation with her husband, during which the Marquis positions his new bride to resemble a pornographic etching. The narrator notices herself in the mirror and sees that she is the "living image of an etching by Rops", the one depicting "the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her" (12). The pornographic etching, created by a male artist and purchased by the Marquis, signifies a male economy of desire, as well as containing an explicit portrayal of male fantasy within the piece itself through the figure of the lecher. The viewer/object dynamic displayed in the etching, mirrors the husband's influence on the construction and shaping of the heroine's sexual identity.

7   Carter and Garland's versions of the Bluebeard fairy-tale share a number of common themes,[4] and the imagery employed in *Ex Machina* conjures strikingly similar associations as those utilised by Carter. For example, in *Ex Machina,* Nathan's authority is intrinsically bound up with the gaze through his access to surveillance footage of the premises and the knowledge available to him through his position as CEO of a search engine. In contrast, like the previous models of feminised AIs, Ava appears behind a glass screen, highlighting her function as connotative of to-be-looked-at-ness within the viewer/object dyad. However,

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[4] Poet and online blogger, Helen Heath, also notices this similarity, except she reads Caleb as a stand-in for the extra-marital love-interest of Carer's short story, rather than the heroine.

while Carter brings her tyrant out of his medieval setting and associates him with nineteenth- and twentieth-century arts, literature and pornography, Garland reimagines Bluebeard as a derivative of the Frankensteinian model of male scientist. In *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), Carter states that the libertine of Sade's fictions feels "a helpless rage at the organs of generation that bore us into a world of pain" (135). Robin Ann Sheets cites precisely this point and relates it to "The Bloody Chamber," noting that the immolation of "the woman upon [the Marquis's] ancestral bed becomes an act of protest against his mother" (648). In this vein, Sheets's connection between "The Bloody Chamber" and what Carter sees as rage against the mother/the life-producing vagina in Sade's pornography is relevant to *Ex Machina*. Like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Nathan attempts to usurp the mother's place through his creation of 'life,' and redesigns woman without her generative capabilities, depriving women of one of the scant sources of their power historically, namely motherhood, suggesting a rage similar to Carter's Marquis through the desire to eradicate the maternal function. Furthermore, Nathan's design and construction of his AIs, along with his exploitative sexual use of the fembot Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), whom he has reprogrammed to be a silent puppet to his will, mirrors Carter's illustration of the stifling effect of male fantasy on female sexual expression and identities. Indeed, both of the male characters are computer programmers, while all the female characters are computers. The appearance of the AIs also reflects the influence of fantasy, as their bodies are sexed, and possess highly cultivated pubic hair. Additionally, like Carter who refers to pornographic etchings, Garland also references pornography. While Nathan contrives that Caleb has been randomly selected to perform the Turing Test on Ava, it later transpires that Caleb's selection is not accidental; rather Nathan selects Caleb because the latter is lonely, longing for a heterosexual relationship and consolidation of his masculinity. In one of the final scenes, Nathan explains the real test: "Ava was a rat in a maze... To escape she'd have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality and empathy" (Garland, *EM*). During this scene, Caleb asks whether Nathan designed Ava's face based on his pornography preferences, which Nathan has access to through his search engine company, explicitly linking the identity of the AIs to porn. While this constitutes the only overt reference to pornography in *Ex Machina*, its significance for the pornographic subtext that pervades the film is difficult to overstate.

8   After his first meeting with Ava, Caleb, unable to sleep, switches on the television in his bedroom and finds that it is linked to the security cameras fixed on Ava. He creeps out of bed and approaches the television. Transfixed by the screen, he stands there watching her. The cinematography reinforces the impression of transgression that this act signifies as, while

the cameras are always there, the location and temporal setting (Caleb's bedroom at night) imply the voyeurism associated with watching pornography. Additionally, though, Caleb's viewing constitutes part of his task to ascertain whether Ava passes as human, chiming somewhat with Mulvey's words regarding the avenues available to the male unconscious to escape the castration anxiety that the woman signifies, namely "investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery" (840). In tandem with Caleb, whose gaze fluctuates between voyeuristic and scopophilic[5] while he performs the Turing test and develops an attraction to Ava, the audience also attempts to decipher whether Ava constitutes a threat. This scene may attest to anxieties regarding our relationship to technology – particularly as Caleb seems almost hypnotised by the screen, which rather than just a medium or tool, almost becomes an extension of his gaze.[6] In the direction for this scene, Garland specifies that Caleb is mesmerized by "the imagery…The curve of the breasts on her synthetic torso" (Garland, "Ex Machina Clean Shooting Script"), confirming the sexual connotations of his looking. The POV shots as Caleb watches a television screen aligns his voyeurism with the audience's, suggesting that his gaze may be a surrogate for our own or, perhaps more accurately, the heterosexual white male viewer. At this moment Ava looks towards the surveillance camera and the television cuts out, signifying a power cut, which automatically triggers security lockdown causing an alarm to sound and a colour-palate change: the emergency lighting is red, which bathes the shot in the same colour. It is later revealed that Ava causes and controls these power cuts, thus framing them as her rebellion against the intrusive male gaze. The sudden departure from the blue glow and the quiet of Caleb's bedroom underpins the transgressive nature of his act, and the red lighting and alarm externalises the sense of panic and shame often associated with watching porn. However, this sudden transition, insofar as it interrupts both Caleb's *and* our voyeuristic pleasure, also constitutes a meta-narrational device. While Caleb's mesmerised state may engage with concerns regarding our vulnerability to technology, it simultaneously interrogates these debates, instead demonstrating our complicity with the darker, potentially violent side of technology. Caleb's unarticulated, conveniently supressed knowledge of Ava's entrapment is what affords him the pleasure of viewing her in this way, thus making him complicit, and as his gazing mirrors the audience's, we are also implicated.

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[5] My distinction between 'voyeurism' and 'scopophilia' is in direct correlation with Mulvey's, i.e. the voyeur's "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt", whereas the scopophilic gaze enjoys the over-valuation of the image of woman as "icon" (840).

[6] See Zabet Patterson's "Going On-Line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era" for a discussion of the representation of pornography viewing by mainstream media, particularly pages 104-108 where he discusses concerns of the blurring between human and machine and how the media represents this.

9   These ideas are more explicitly explored upon Caleb's entrance of the forbidden room, which creates associations between pornography, the abject, and murder. Caleb steals Nathan's key pass and hacks into camera footage of Nathan's interviews with previous models. In the interview scenes the AIs, who appear far more human than Ava as they have hair and skin, are entirely naked and, in contrast to Ava, do not have a silver-blue metallic body. Through POV shots, the audience's gaze is aligned with Caleb's as he watches the footage, containing the construction, interrogation and subsequent dismemberment of former models Jasmine, Katya, Jade, Lily and Amber. This episode is also visually linked to the scene described above, which takes place in Caleb's bedroom, through his transfixed facial expression and the blue colour palate, as well as the POV shots. The sense of transgression echoes the visual similarity between these two scenes (Caleb is hacking into Nathan's computer, whereas earlier he watches Ava unbeknownst to her). In this way, the content of what he watches is connected: in the first scene, he observes Ava in her room and becomes entranced at the sight of her; in the second, he is horrified at the explicit depictions of violent entrapment. Ava's imprisonment and Caleb's (and our) voyeurism and/or scopophilia become analogous to – or at least comparable with – the violence in the surveillance footage, and the introduction of a digital Bluebeard's chamber seems to affirm this reading as it links objectification through filmic practices to a form of death. Jade (Gana Bayarsaikhan) is seen behind a glass screen, sitting naked on a chair while Nathan questions her, repeating the Bluebeard trope of interrogation. In the footage, rather than obediently responding to Nathan, Jade merely repeats the same question: "Why won't you let me out?" (Garland, *EM*), before we see her in fast-time screaming and beating her fists against the glass until her arms splinter and break. This image of entrapment, accentuated by Jade's quasi-self-harm, constitutes yet more abject imagery through the willed destruction of body parts. The visual link between this and the bedroom scene suggests the similarities between Nathan's interrogation of his AIs, and Caleb's interviews and observation of Ava, reconstructing Caleb as a budding Bluebeard, rather than a benign figure.

10   After viewing these scenes, Caleb enters the forbidden room containing the bodies of former AI models. The *mise-en-scène* evokes an erotic scenario, and Kyoko is naked and lies on a bed, which is surrounded by mirrors. But these erotic associations jar with Caleb's discovery as he moves around the room opening the mirrored doors, revealing the bodies of the previous AIs, which are not intact. By displaying Kyoko's multiple reflections in the open doors among the lifeless, dismembered AIs, connections are drawn between symbolic death and Kyoko's highly regulated – indeed, programmed – sexuality. The mirrors around the

room and Kyoko's many reflections also resemble the Rops episode in Carter's short story, already described in brief. The primary difference is that Carter's scene takes place in the marital bedroom prior to the bride's gruesome discovery, not the forbidden chamber: "[the bed's] white gauze curtains billowing in the sea breeze. Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold…[I] watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors" (14). Carter also invokes imagery that foreshadows the secret room: when the Marquis dresses her in a variety of costumes, he says "I have acquired a whole harem for myself" (14). Just as the young bride of Carter's story becomes "a multitude of girls" (14), so does Kyoko. This imposed de-individualisation, anonymity and interchangeability is reinforced by the series of sexualised AIs, as well as in one of the final scenes when Ava replaces her own damaged skin and body parts with those of her predecessors.

11   As discussed, entry into the secret chamber in Bluebeard gothic narratives has been compared to porn through abject displays of Otherness and 'un-wholeness,' such as disembodied limbs/body parts, which, conversely, may also connote castration. In *Ex Machina*, Kyoko approaches Caleb as he enters the forbidden room and peels back the skin on her midriff, revealing that she, too, is a robot, despite Nathan's earlier claim that she is an immigrant worker. The presentation of Kyoko in this scene (nude, in a bedroom) in conjunction with the film's pornographic subtext, allows for a reading of Kyoko's revelation as analogous to the separating of vaginal lips in porn: an act designed to allow the male viewer access to woman's 'mysterious' Otherness, as her naked body and the way she makes eye-contact with Caleb before she exposes her inner mechanisms seems to both unsettle and eroticise the episode. Annette Kuhn's observation that "in pornography it is the woman's sex that is constructed as the prime object of curiosity", an image which "addresses the spectator as desiring – desiring specifically to penetrate this mystery... – and says that knowledge is to be secured through looking" (40). Whereas pornographic scenes exhibit *female* 'Otherness,' 'open-ness,' and 'lack' (in relation to masculinist norms such as bodily unity), in *Ex Machina* Caleb 'penetrates' to the mystery of Kyoko and her silence when she reveals her robotic Otherness. However, the presentation of Kyoko as a sexualised subject in this scene creates a link between porn aesthetics and the film. Through this reading, the abjection of the murdered wives in the Bluebeard tale is connected to pornography, and these strands are connected to the symbolic death of women and feminine desire constrained by male fantasy. Clearly, there are differences in representations of genitalia and the robot interiority of fibres and wires, but Kyoko continues to peel off her skin in a way that creates both a striptease effect *and* a link

between the exposure of her interiority and castration anxiety. After removing a square of skin from her upper-midriff (notably leaving her breast intact for Caleb and the viewer's gaze), she proceeds to strip it from her face, leaving two bulging eyes – connotative of the Medusa's stare that Freud famously links to castration ("Medusa's Head"). Kyoko's initial reveal of her robot mechanisms first and foremost forces Caleb to confront her Otherness as a robot in a way that echoes the display of feminine 'lack' in porn, framing Kyoko's mechanical interiority as symbolic of the vagina. However, on a more basic level, the accusatory stare confronts Caleb – and the audience – with his complicity in her subjugation. For Linda Nead, while the fetishized feminine aesthetic subject seeks to contain and "seal-up" the female body, in many (straight) pornographic narratives woman's 'abject' female-ness "is examined and probed for its hidden secrets" (97). With this in mind, it could be said that in *Ex Machina* Ava functions as the fetishized 'whole' as she offers Caleb the scopophilic pleasure that dissipates castration anxiety (her metallic body, performed passivity, entrapment and idealisation attest to this), in contrast to the former AIs' abject 'open-ness' as displayed in the scenes described above. Although, paradoxically, Kyoko's revelation – read here in terms of 'lack' – also implies Ava's difference, framing them as distorted mirror-images of each other.

12   However, Ava's characterisation is ambiguous and, like Carter's heroine, who sees her ability to seduce her husband as a means of "changing his determination of her story" (Gamble 86), Ava performs patriarchally constructed femininity, *qua* vulnerability, masochism, and exhibitionism, in order to manipulate Caleb and facilitate her escape. One example of this is when she tells Caleb that "sometimes, at night, I wonder if you're watching me on the cameras and I hope you are" (Garland *EM*). Ava's comments raise questions regarding complicity, a theme often associated with feminist Bluebeard narratives. For example, in Karin Struck's *Blaubarts Schatten* [*Bluebeard's Shadow*] (1991), the heroine "is Bluebeard's partner in crime, a shadow who subordinates herself to the moves he has choreographed for her" (Tatar 129). As the title of Struck's text suggests and Tatar confirms, the identity of the Bluebeard figure relies on its Other, a victim to perform the masochistic and passive part in the gendered sadomasochistic roles that Bluebeard narratives – particularly Carter's – tend to portray. As a viewer, we cannot be sure whether Ava's remarks constitute a reflection of her programmed heteronormative femininity, or if the comment is part of her plan to seduce Caleb as a means to escape. Either way, Ava's performance corresponds with Catherine Mackinnon's deconstruction of heteronormative femininity: "each element of the female gender stereotype is revealed as, in fact, sexual. Vulnerability

means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance" (530). In this sense, Ava's physical entrapment, which fixes her and renders her accessible to Caleb via surveillance footage of her room, consolidates and combines with her performed femininity and appearance, while veiling her with the image of 'damsel in distress.' This reading chimes with Judith Butler's question as to "whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation" (523). Ava's somewhat infantilised position, with limited experience and knowledge, as well as her rosy-cheeked youthful appearance, also suggest her conformity to scripts of heteronormative femininity as outlined by MacKinnon, i.e. passive and receptive to the penetration of the male gaze and/or phallus. While conceptually youth and virginity are inapplicable to robotic bodies, Ava's presentation as young and trapped like the virginal princess of romance narratives, carries traces of this culturally constructed 'innocence.' Arguably, then, for Caleb Ava functions as a means for him to construct his masculine identity as, compared to his limited power in relation to Nathan, Ava's restricted position contrasts with his relatively greater power (of movement, of the gaze), thus mitigating his attenuated masculinity.

Between Men

13   The power dynamics made manifest by the relationship between object/viewer, passive/active offer a pertinent critique of gender roles, and also highlight the fantasies that regulate masculine heteronormative identities. As Helen Lewis points out in her review of *Ex Machina*, "Nathan imagines himself as a creator-God, and his AI's femininity reflects her presumed subservience. The naive Caleb, on the other hand, casts himself as a knight in shining armour, saving Ava from the clutches of her callous jailer". Lewis's term for Caleb – knight – calls to mind the medieval Romance, which is well-known for its love-triangle structure. This point raises questions regarding Garland's significant departure from the traditional Bluebeard schema. In this fairy tale and its revisions, concealed wife murder "is the foundation upon which patriarchal culture rests: control of the subversively curious 'female,' personified in his wives" (A. Williams 41). By inserting Caleb into the traditionally female role, a shift occurs whereby the relationship becomes triangular, and the rivalry/ power play between Nathan and Caleb overshadows the latter and Ava's developing romance.

14   The asymmetry engendered by the power imbalance of this love-triangle corresponds with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of homosocial bonding. Sedgwick analyses

examples of the male-male-female love triangle and frames it as a structure for building male bonding, in which the woman acts as a mediating figure to dispel fears of homosexuality in the service of compulsory heterosexuality. Sedgwick writes that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structure for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25, original emphasis). Sedgwick's thesis resonates with Luce Irigaray's Marxist analysis of the exchange of women, in which she states that man's "relationship to productive nature, an insurmountable one, has to be denied so that relations among men may prevail" (185). For Irigaray, the reduction of women to enveloped, veiled and fetishized commodities functions as part of this process of denial. In *Ex Machina*, Nathan's creation of 'life' reflects this sublimation, as does the explicit objectification of the feminised subjects. Nathan alludes to a form of exchange when he remarks that Ava has "a crush" on Caleb, whereas he is more "like her dad" (Garland *EM*), a comment that linguistically silences the maternal as, while Nathan's sex is male, his relation to Ava is not biological and therefore mother may be a more – or at least equally – apt term as it carries more explicit associations with the creation of life. However, his role as 'father' and Caleb's configuration as a suitor, also brings to mind the marital tradition of the father 'giving away' his daughter; though, conversely, at times Nathan seems to take on the role of a pimp when he boasts that he created Ava's body as penetrable, and on a separate occasion when he seems to offer Kyoko to Caleb, telling him to dance with her. These exchanges between Caleb and Nathan, centred on Ava, exemplify Sedgwick and Irigaray's critique. Ava features as a figure through whom Caleb and Nathan bond, primarily during conversations about her (while she is absent). They discuss her linguistic abilities, and Nathan hints at her potential as a sex object/slave as he takes on the role of mentor to Caleb. After his first meeting with Ava, Caleb drinks beer with Nathan and, as the conversation turns towards technical matters, Nathan says "[I just want] to have a beer and a conversation with you. Not a seminar… Just answer me this. What do you feel about her? Nothing analytical" (Garland *EM*). Caleb appears perturbed by this cue to adopt a less formal persona, but responds: "she's fucking amazing," to which Nathan replies "dude, cheers" (Garland *EM*) as their beers clink together, a modernised crossing of swords. These terms – "fucking amazing," "dude" – evoke a distinctly teenage masculinity. With this in mind, the film's utilisation of sci-fi conventions, a genre often (mistakenly) associated with boys and men, may be seen to invite men to come together, to bond, to identify with Caleb as Ava's knight, only to punish this identification at the film's climax.

15   While Garland is not the first to employ SF conventions to represent Bluebeard gothic, the genre creates connotations that correspond with this reading of the film, as SF is a traditionally white male genre, configured as such due to constructed "connections between science, rationality and masculinity" (Wimmler 1). Arguably, this deliberate generic shift frames the film as specifically addressing the white heterosexual male gaze. Thomas Waugh and Kat Banyard both highlight the role pornography plays as a facilitator of homosocial bonding. In this sense, one of the means for creating bonds between men is the exchange of images of women. Like in Carter's short story in which the exchange of fantasy between men (the Rops etching) is made into reality, the design of the AIs bodies, and the fantasies of the male characters regarding Ava's sexual potential would supposedly have been explored either by Nathan whose sexual enslavement of Kyoko shows us Ava's fate, or by Caleb if his rescue attempt had been successful. This evolution from fantasy to reality works to interrogate notions that the two are always entirely distinguishable as they overlap and bleed into each other.

Escaping Patriarchy?

16   While Ava outwardly performs a passive style of femininity, the film's climax and her control over the intermittent power-cuts that shield her from the male gaze contradict her characterisation in these terms. As mentioned, the fetishized feminine subject is, within the patriarchal matrix of representations, opposed to the corporeal abject, most readily associated with the feminine (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*). The red lighting that signals the power cuts carries associations with red-light districts, perhaps connoting the traffic of women in support of the suggestions I have already made. However, with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in mind, the red lighting may also connote blood. Indeed, the initial part of Ava's escape from pseudo-womb prison-house uses this colour palate, potentially suggesting a kind of (re)birth as she moves through the corridors towards her freedom. According to Kristeva, blood is connected to murder, as well as to the feminine through menstruation and fertility, indicating "the impure" and constituting "a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together" (96). With this in mind, the blood-red lighting may act as a signifier for the unspoken, or taboo, feminine body – the body which is repressed and redesigned by Nathan, as we can be sure that, though "anatomically complete" (Garland *EM*), he did not design his gynoids to menstruate.

17   Ava's escape is also depicted with abject imagery, although it initially corresponds to generic horror/thriller conventions in which the persecuted (usually female) protagonist overcomes and escapes the threat of abject death/entrapment. According to Carol Clover's formulation of "the Final Girl" (201) in slasher/horror movies, the defeat of the (typically male) monster/murderer is readable in terms of overcoming the "disabling cathexis to one's parents that must be killed and rekilled in the service of sexual autonomy" (211). Clover also notes the way the viewer is first encouraged to identify with the (usually male) murderer's gaze, and then later with the lone survivor, or final girl, as she defeats the monster/murderer, which is usually depicted as an appropriation of phallic power combined with symbolic castration of her persecutor – gouged eyes, slashed belly, or severed hand, for instance. In *Ex Machina*, this formulation is employed as a tool that allows for the audience to celebrate Nathan's defeat, however because we are encouraged to identify with *Caleb* up to this point, this framework also (albeit very subtly) aligns *him* with the figure of the monster/serial killer/Bluebeard. As the viewer's identification shifts towards the film's climax, the audience is more closely aligned with Ava as she vanquishes Nathan with the help of Kyoko, and, like in the slasher movie, her emancipation is depicted as phallic: Kyoko stabs him in the back, before Ava takes the knife to Nathan's gut, holding the blade near to her waist and it seems to enter him slowly and silently. However, her defeat and escape from Caleb reinstates, as opposed to overcomes, the abject in that it delivers the threat of containment and engulfment that characterise abjection and by Ava's freedom carries the possibility of more victims. As Caleb is superficially presented as a somewhat benign, unwitting figure with his complicity and Bluebeardean potential never fully articulated, when Ava abandons him trapped, presumably to starve to death, the horror provoked may be doubly so for hetero male viewer. Caleb's 'affection' for and attraction to Ava, which is deeply entwined with her subjugation and objectification, is rewarded with immobilisation and entrapment as Ava abandons him in the pseudo-womb prison, which is bathed in red emergency lighting. As a figure representing the hetero male audience, Caleb's punishment implies the viewer's complicity, while also conforming to conventions of male Bluebeard gothic narratives that express the abjection associated with the mother and the need to regulate female curiosity.

18   In some feminist examples of Bluebeard – like Carter's and Campion's – the Oedipal model of development is challenged by refocusing on a mother/daughter relationship. The ending of *Ex Machina* is also readable in these terms, particularly during the final scenes of *Ex Machina* when Ava is freed and she encounters Kyoko. Presented with soft-focus lighting and close-ups of the women's hands gently touching, Ava leans-in to Kyoko's ear as if to

whisper something. The sensitivity evoked in this scene and the sympathy between the two brings to mind Irigaray's semiotic, a feminine space that constitutes a potential starting point for a feminine symbolic, engendering what Hélène Cixous calls *ecriture féminine*, or Irigaray refers to as *parler-femme*. As a reworking of the Bluebeard plot, this meeting between 'wives' constitutes a major difference whereby the two oppressed figures can commune, and this female bonding empowers them to finally vanquish Nathan. When Ava finally leaves the prison-house, the wild and brightly coloured jungle landscape contrasts with the clinical and technological apartment, and Ava's wonder and pleasure in experiencing the lush green forest and the blue sky may suggest a kind of escape, particularly given that Caleb connects a blue sky to his mother when describing his earliest, barely accessible memory, associating it with a lost/repressed Irigarayan feminine/maternal realm. Additionally, at the close of the film we see Ava's face as she observes a busy traffic intersection before she disappears into obscurity, potentially hinting that her emancipation cannot be represented because, for a film that involves the audience and critiques the viewer's gaze to the extent I have argued, liberation depends upon anonymity and is incompatible with the practices of film.

19   However, this liberatory reading is complicated by the continued references to patriarchal institutions and the ongoing effects of male fantasy. Before Ava abandons Caleb in the research facility, she puts on a white dress mirroring a Gustav Klimt's wedding portrait of Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), which is in the background of the shot, strongly connoting masculinist traditions of art and philosophy, though perhaps more obviously male visions of femininity and the exchange of women through patriarchal institutions. Furthermore, as she leaves the apartment, Mozart plays in the living room, acting as a potential metaphor for patriarchal language/culture, which she cannot escape. The preceding scenes support this reading. Once Nathan has been vanquished, Ava asks Caleb to wait for her as she enters the room containing the bodies of her predecessors. She replaces her damaged limbs, as well as her silver/blue body with the spare body parts available, until she appears as a nude young, white woman, an image of anthologised femininity. The audience sees her from behind as she looks in the mirror, allowing a view of her naked body from the front and back, and the edges of the mirror contain her, implying that, despite her physical escape, she remains entombed by the patriarchal symbolic as she embodies the fetishized feminine subject. Like Kyoko's framed reflection discussed earlier, Ava is also imprisoned by the body created by Nathan and the mirror's frame. As well as this, Caleb watches her on a monitor, again acting as voyeur, like the audience. This mirror scene encourages a distinctly Lacanian reading, particularly as it follows the (albeit technologized)

'birth' and female bonding scene already described. For Lacan, the mirror stage signals the child's entrance into the patriarchal symbolic, marking the painful severing of maternal dependence, which is substituted with, and/or repressed by, the pleasure of her/his independent image. Upon catching sight of her/his reflection, the child is forced to consider the disjointed experience of their uncoordinated form in comparison to an image of wholeness, thereby allowing the subject to "anticipate in a mirage the maturation of his power [which] is given to him only as *Gestalt,* that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted" (Lacan 503). This final point signals a paradoxical element of the mirror stage. While this process of separation from maternal authority signals a form of freedom, the child merely enters into a new form of subject-hood governed by a patriarchal Other, i.e. language. Nathan's search engine, Blue Book, which uses the same software as Ava's 'brain,' conspicuously refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein's notes, which hold obvious importance as a reference to linguistics and the philosophy of language. It also aligns Nathan with semantics, power over knowledge, language, and constructed norms, given that a search engine works by making (and creating) associations between words. Additionally, the name Blue Book also hints at Andrew Lang's "Blue Fairy Book" (1889), which contains the Bluebeard story. Moreover, the connotations of the colour blue (blue movies) encode the covert concerns of the film, namely pornography as a system for the regulation of (female) bodies and sexuality.

20   The role of language in regulating the feminine manifests itself in the terms used by Nathan when he discourses on his AIs. During one of their conversations about Ava, Caleb asks Nathan "why did you give her sexuality?" (Garland *EM*). After a short initial response, Nathan adds "And, yes. In answer to your real question: you bet she can fuck. I made her anatomically complete. […] She has an opening between her legs, with a concentration of sensors. Engage with them in the right way, and she'll get a pleasure response" (Garland *EM*). The lexicon utilised by Nathan combines the scientific and sexual/pornographic – "fuck", "pleasure response", "concentration of sensors", "opening" – and his phallocentric determination over the pleasure of the fembots is explicit as his words imply the subordination of non-penetrative sex. Moreover, this technological vocabulary is wholly inadequate for the human body, not merely because it simplifies and reduces us to mere function, but because it represents a failure. Rather than talking about the corporeal body, our physicality is fetishized in that we talk about mechanisms in order to *not speak* about our bodies. The body mechanised by language is sanitised and, while the AIs are not human, their feminised and objectified bodies act as a metaphor for the regulation of the female body,

particularly the suppression of the feminine 'abject,' namely the maternal body. Through the AI gynoids, the vagina is literally and linguistically reconstructed by Nathan as an "opening" – a hole for the sole purpose of receiving a penis – thus regulating the sexualised feminine body, configuring it as a purely sexual object in the image of male fantasy.

Bluebeardean Futures

21   As discussed, Caleb functions as something of a mediator or on-screen surrogate for the white, hetero male gaze and/or audience, whom Garland addresses through his employment of SF conventions. As well as this, Caleb is repeatedly shown looking at screens, and his interviews with Ava also allude to audience/viewer aesthetics, reaffirming his position as a representation of the viewer. While Caleb's entrance into the forbidden chamber frames him as the disobedient wife, his association with voyeurism suggests that he actually functions as a developing Bluebeardean patriarch, embodying a Bluebeardean future, rather than a 'white knight,' benevolent love-interest, or innocent victim. However, when Ava abandons Caleb, leaving him imprisoned in the womb-like research facility as she once was, she reconstructs him as a quasi-husband victim – while she, by implication, assumes the Bluebeard role. With this in mind, superficially Ava's escape seems to play on a kind of dread of female liberation, as she is constructed as a *femme fatale*, the woman who uses her sexuality against men, thereby obliquely reiterating the necessity to control the feminine. For some critics, the Bluebeard plot is a mode incompatible with a feminist epistemology because "for female gothic writers, escape is not possible from the fundamentally patriarchal nature of the gothic genre" (James). Ava's escape into the patriarchal symbolic may reflect this, but likewise so does the cinematography in *Ex Machina*, as (re)presenting women on-screen as disempowered, sexualised, fetishized objects between men cannot rupture the ubiquitous objectification of women in film, even though it may critique it. Ultimately, the portrayal of passive femininity, repeated scenes of female nudity and the exploitation cinema aesthetics of *Ex Machina* merely duplicate and consolidate the cinematic tropes of fetishized/abject femininities. These points frame the film, like Bluebeard tales, as unsuited for transgressing the margins that constrict and confine a potentially limitless space for new ways of being, becoming and desiring as a woman.

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Between Blackness and Monstrosity: Gendered Blackness in the *Cyborg* Comics

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Abstract:
This essay gives a racial and gendered analysis of the *Cyborg* comics, which depict the life of Vic Stone, African American superhero cyborg. The essay's entry into Victor Stone's Black cyborg positionality seeks to do four things: first, articulate, with the help of Richard Iton's notion of the Black fantastic, the unsettling and destabilizing nature of Blackness and cyborg-ness; second, provide a gendered analysis of the Black (male) cyborg that, in part, questions the destabilizing potential of yet another male superhero; third, put Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness, which I alternatively describe as a transhumanness, in conversation with historical derogations and contemporary reappropriations of the notion of monstrosity; and four, highlight the salvific discourse surrounding Stone and speak to the temporal implications of being a Black cyborg.

> "You're asking the cyborg fugitive and the wild animal to be the welcoming committee? That's adorable."
> —Marissa Meyer, *Cress*

> "The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities."
> —Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows*

Birth of a Cyborg

1   The term *cyborg* is short for 'cybernetic organism,' and was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. Used today to describe a being that is part human and part machine, it was originally used to describe being technologically altered to better cope with the conditions of outer space. Moving away from the astronautic context, a cyborg is now symbolic of the ways in which "technology is transforming and maybe even transcending the human" (Muhr 339). Cyborgs disrupt traditional categorical definitions of 'the human'; they, in a sense, unsettle homeostasis. The cyborg interrogates what qualifies as human, and to what end the human exists as human.

2   Conventional understandings of cyborgs, though, are complicated when, like DC comic book superhero Victor Stone, the cyborg is Black, understood here as extending beyond mere

epidermal hue. Victor Stone as Cyborg first appeared in the pages of a series called *The New Teen Titans*, back in 1980. A former Teen Titan and current Justice League member, Stone is a young African American born as a "*human computer*" (Sable et al. n.p.), his father used to say, with an IQ of 170. He was nearly killed in a laboratory explosion, only to have his life saved, and his body restored, through the use of advanced cybernetics. Stone being a *Black* cyborg is consequential: it modifies, disrupts, and complicates cyborg-ness, so to speak. In the context of contemporary policing and ontological invalidation of Black bodies via fatal police brutality— and Victor Stone himself being subject to gangs, drugs, and racism in Detroit—João Costa Vargas and Joy James say this about the Black cyborg:

> a black cyborg: a modified, improved human whose increased ethical, spiritual, and physical capabilities generate unusual strength, omniscience, and boundless love. In this narrative, the black cyborg is a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important social construction, a world-changing fiction."…[T]he black cyborg is able to overcome the brutality of imposed limits—the conditions of social and physical death. (Vargas and James 18)

Black cyborgs are superhuman insofar as that superhumanness rests on their Blackness. Contrary to discourses about Black inhumanity, pathological monstrosity, and subhumanity, the Black cyborg subverts those assumptions and exudes a more-than-human ethos. In this context, what Stone says about himself is even more telling: "There's more to being a cyborg than artificial limbs and sonic disruptors" (Sable et al. n.p.)—namely, his Blackness.

3   Vic Stone exists in corporeal paradox in more ways than one. He is both human and machine, yes, but his machinery, his 'Cyborg,' is also "his disability," says David F. Walker, the writer of the 2015 solo series of *Cyborg*. But Walker also says that "Cyborg isn't so much of persona as it merely is his state of being—the result of this devastating accident that almost took his life. The technology that is used to keep him alive makes him look more like a robot, gives him incredible strength, and allows him total access to the Internet by way of the computer implanted in his brain" (Clark n.p.). Stone is 'disabled' by his accident and machinery, yet this disability is in fact the acquisition of superhuman abilities. While Blackness is not a disability, it typically carries with it burdens and ontological circumscriptions (e.g. beliefs of Black subjects' intellectual inferiority, perceived innate criminality, licentiousness, undeservingness of life, Afro-pessimistic position of abjection, etc.) that 'disable' the subject. However, Vargas and James's characterization of Black cyborgs as superhuman marks Black cyborgs as

simultaneously 'disabled' and in possession of superhuman qualities. This paradoxical, but generative and insightful, state is expressed on the front cover of the first issue of the 2015 series of *Cyborg* on which Vic Stone stands powerfully in the foreground, part (Black) human, part machine—'disabled' in many ways—while in the background is the iconic image of Vitruvian Man, the 'perfect' human. Vic Stone, the underlying message says, is (or can be) archetypically human too, and Sarah Charles, Stone's ex-girlfriend, says as much. She tells Stone, "You are *not* a piece of machinery, Victor! You are a *human being*. Or am I the only one who realizes that?" (Walker n.p.). Her insistence on Stone's humanity, coupled with the front cover image, asserts the validity of Stone being human rather than *part* human. Stone's cyborgian Blackness, in his superhuman human-ness, interrogates the purported naturalness of the human and reveals what Sylvia Wynter calls the human as "meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos* (or, as I have recently come to redefine it, *bios* and *mythoi*)" (McKittrick 16–17).[1] The front cover image and Charles' anthropo-reminder deconstructs and rearticulates what bodily perfection is, critiquing the whiteness and able-bodiedness of corporeal perfection, making the Black cyborg not merely archetypically human but archetypically superhuman.

4   This essay supplements the slowly-growing conversations concerning the intersections of race and technology, a conversation whose intellectual force is captured in Amiri Baraka's question in *Kawaida*: "What are the black purposes of space travel?" (Chaney 261). Since the term *cyborg*, as stated above, originally referred to the use of technology to better cope with space travel, Baraka can be read as asking, "What is the purpose of a Black cyborg?" Beginning the academic conversation about cyborgs is Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto," which defines the fused embodiment of human and machine. Haraway argues for a way of thinking the body that moves away from traditional categories of embodied being and celebrates the restructuring of what the body is, can be, looks like, and says: questions of the cybernetic are, for Haraway, "a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears, and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange." By modeling "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and

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[1] Wynter goes on to write, "Or, as Fanon says, phylogeny, ontogeny, *and* sociogeny, *together, define what it is to be human*. With this hypothesis, should it prove to be true, our system of knowledge as we have it *now*, goes. Because our present system of knowledge is based on the premise that the human is, like all purely biological species, a natural organism." This is all to say, simply, that the human is a very specific construct predicated on racial and gender and geographic biases, which Vic Stone, I assert—and which Blackness, Wynter asserts—troubles and interrogates.

personal self," Haraway's cyborg comes to represent, as Viviane Casimir explains, a "new 'ontological' space that anyone can occupy" (Haraway 163–164; Casimir 278). My entry into Victor Stone's specific Black cyborg positioning seeks to do four things: first, articulate, with the help of Richard Iton's notion of the Black fantastic, the unsettling and destabilizing nature of Blackness and cyborg-ness; second, provide a gendered analysis of the Black (male) cyborg that in part questions the destabilizing potential of yet another male superhero; third, put Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness, which I alternatively describe as a transhumanness, in conversation with historical derogations and contemporary reappropriations of the notion of monstrosity; and four, highlight the salvific discourse surrounding Stone and speak to the temporal implications of being a Black cyborg.

Fantastic Blackness, Black Fantastic

5   A theorization that understands Blackness differently than mere skin color is helpful here in delving more deeply into Cyborg's corporeal significance. Blackness in this context is understood as what Richard Iton calls "fantastic." Iton himself was a child of Caribbean immigrants and moved between Montreal, Toronto, Baltimore, and Chicago, thus his work and understanding of (Diasporic) Blackness is inflected by "the different forms of knowing, the various identities, and the diverse methods of expression that inhabit the word 'blackness'" (Bascomb 148). And in the realm of the superhero different forms of knowing span galaxies, universes, and dimensions across time. The multiplicity of Blackness becomes even more multiplicitous when that Blackness is affixed to a superhero.

6   Iton's book *In Search of the Black Fantastic* casts the term "black fantastic" as, essentially, the productive and telling mess before the masterpiece. The Black fantastic sits in a liminal space, a space of productive chaos and possibility. Iton presents the outlaws, the marginalized, "the underground," and those "notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, against, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern" as fantastic. In other words, Iton says that "[t]he *black* in black fantastic, in this context, signifies both a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular 'always there' interpretations of these agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices generated by subaltern populations" (Iton 16). Blackness as fantastic is the already outside, but an outside that is generative; an outside that is not vacuous but productively underdeveloped.

7   Near the end of the text, Iton suggests the close similarity between the effects of Blackness and the effects of the fantastic. He writes:

> If we think of the fantastic as a genre that destabilizes, at least momentarily, our understanding of the distinctions between the reasonable and the unreasonable, and reason itself, the proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those potentials we have forgotten, or did not believe accessible or feasible, I would suggest its effects are not at all that dissimilar from those of blackness. (Iton 289–290)

The fantastic, like Blackness, interrogates and destabilizes notions of propriety and reason. These Enlightenment-esque virtues, if you will, promote stability, but Blackness and the fantastic undermine their stability, throwing into question identity itself as a fixed categorical identifier of entities.

8   So if we think of Blackness (and cyborg-ness) as disrupting of a stable identity—indeed, identity as such—what might it mean that Vic Stone is one of the very few characters in the DC universe without an alter ego? "Superman has Clark Kent, Batman has Bruce Wayne, Green Lantern can be Hal Jordan, John Stewart, Guy Gardner, or someone else—they have these secret identities and personas that Vic simply doesn't have," says David F. Walker, so how might Stone's being the only Black superhero in the above string of heroes matter to his lacking an alter ego (Clark n.p.)? Fantastic Black subjects, or what Fred Moten would call "the undercommons" (Harney and Moten 9)[2] arguably do not need an alter ego because their very 'ego' (the 'I' or the 'self') is itself 'alter.' Blackness as fantastic and undercommon, as an "anoriginal lawlessness" (Moten 223), marks a pre-being that inhabits the alter ego itself insofar as it is always alter to itself.

9   This para-self that is Back fantastic-ness disrupts quantifiable, structured, policeable, and hegemonically limned understandings of classifiable selves. But ironically, breaking down these borders—Iton's sense of putting "all space into play"—has the potential to create a productive

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[2] In Jack Halberstam's preface to the text, he writes: "the undercommons is not a realm where we rebel and we create critique; it is not a place where we "take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them." The undercommons is a space and time which is always here. Our goal – and the 'we' is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. Moten and Harney refuse the logic that stages refusal as inactivity, as the absence of a plan and as a mode of stalling real politics. Moten and Harney tell us to listen to the noise we make and to refuse the offers we receive to shape that noise into 'music.'" The undercommons is what Moten has called elsewhere the "minor key" subjectivity; it is the underlying subversive "lower frequencies," to purloin the words of Ellison's protagonist.

tension. If alter egos rely on masks to obscure the (white) subjects behind them, then considering that "The mask destabilizes but hardly obliterates subordination," as Iton says, shows the distinct nature of alter ego-less Black superheroes (Iton 211). Foregoing the mask and supplanting it with one's revealed/revealing Blackness—a Blackness, by its nature, that is un-masking—obliterates rather than merely destabilizes subordination because Blackness rejects the tenets of subordination, viz. fixity and Law. The fantastic unsettles one's very understanding of 'the Law' since the Law is the political (and social) means by which subjects are fixed and statically situated in the world. "[T]he public sphere, and civil society," Iton says, "depend[s] on the exclusion of blacks and other nonwhites from meaningful participation and their ongoing reconstitution as raw material for the naturalization of modern arrangements" (Iton 17). This, I would argue, is precisely because inclusion of Black and nonwhite bodies would fundamentally unsettle and destabilize civil, i.e. fixed, society.

10   But what of the cyborg? The cyborg too unsettles civil society and traditional understandings of the public sphere. For Vic Stone, then, his existence as a cyborg is also related to his Blackness/fantastic-ness. Even the language used to describe the cyborg in Donna Haraway's interview with Nicholas Gane cites the fantastic. "There is a kind of fantastic hope," she says, "that runs through the manifesto [her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"]" (Gane 152). This "fantastic hope" Haraway cites "is a fantastic contagion moving through ready transmission routes" (Orr 273). The destabilization that Black/fantastic-ness causes is infectious, a contagion needing to be quarantined by governant Law (whiteness), yet it inspires hope in that it, like the technological thinking of cyborg identity, points to the not-yet or the to come. Indeed, hope rests on destabilization because hope for a future that is not present, an unknown future, requires the demolition of the current order of things. Herein lies the unfixing characteristic of Black/fantastic-ness.

11   And this unfixing and demolition of stasis is located in Vic Stone's body. Stone is the site of unfixing; he is the locus of unsettled Law. That he becomes 70 percent machine disrupts the organic-ness of his body, the homeostasis and equilibrium, one could say, of his corporeal self; that his Blackness clashes with traditional superhero lore and iconography unsettles the governed narrative of racialized superheroes. Stone evades the literal meaning of his very name and becomes anything but solidified, hardened, and concrete ('settled' cement)—he shifts, detonates,

and unsettles. Via his cyborg identity and his Blackness (as fantastic), Vic Stone disturbs space, time, and thought. But how might Stone's *gendered* Black cyborg-ness factor into this theorization?

When the Man Meets the System

> "Cyborg: man inside the MACHINE!"
> - Front cover of *Cyborg #1*

12 Returning again to the image on the front cover of *Cyborg #1*, it is important not to extrapolate Vitruvian man's 'perfection' to cover 'human' perfection as well, as that would erase female and trans subjects, and to an extent dehumanize all but white male bodies as representative of humanity. While Vic Stone's presence critiques the whiteness (and 'humanness') of the perfect human body, it still presents the archetypal human as male. In this section I wish to walk the fine line between holding (cisgendered) maleness accountable for its systemic exclusion of the feminine while also reckoning with the arguably gendered plight of Black masculine criminalization and weaponization (Mutua xvi–xvii).[3] Black maleness is posed as the epitome of superhuman-ness yet still subject to circumscriptive assumptions of its unindividuated and criminal essence.

13 Even in the comic book world Black subjects are susceptible to race-based interactions and assumptions. As the city is being destroyed by Ron, Stone's former best friend who was arrested, "found religion" (presumably a Black Nationalist/Nation of Islam sect of religiosity based on the religious garb in which Ron is illustrated), and was eventually infused with the same cyborgian hardware as Stone, Stone is thought to be the perpetrator. When Stone figures out the suspect motives behind the military's plan to use his hardware, he threatens to take it all to the media. However, military commander Mr. Orr notes that "the footage from Ron's attack on this lab is enough to have you taken into custody for an act of terrorism. Think the public is

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[3] Mutua writes, "…at times black men were oppressed by gender in addition to race….black men, like black women, had unique experiences of gendered racism….Is the racialized gendered oppression that black men face exemplified in racial profiling, sexism? Or is it simply a product of racism?" These questions make interesting points about the possibility of a gendered racism betiding Black men as well. However, I wish to also note that this is not to say that Black men have it 'just as bad' as Black women, an assertion I find to be absurd. We see Black women profiled and killed by police as well, in comparable numbers. This is meant only to raise the question of a specificity in Black masculinity when it comes to things like the weaponization of Black male bodies and the implied violence inherent in them.

really going to be able to tell the difference between two black cyborgs?" (Sable et al. n.p.). Orr is drawing on the age-old racist discourse that "all Black people look the same," thus Ron will be indistinguishable from Vic. As well, though, it draws on the discourse surrounding purported Black criminality. If all Black men look alike, in the context of the criminalization of Black masculine subjects all *violent* Black men are not only alike but the same.

14 The violence ascribed to Black masculinity is also internalized. Stone is not simply violent because of race-based ascriptions; he is also ontologically reduced to violence by virtue of him being a military weapon. Stone describes people like himself and Ron as "living weapons" (Sable et al. n.p.); his very being, in large part, is a means of violence. And this corporeal weaponization, amidst turmoil, is turned inward—Vic Stone becomes "A man at *war* with himself" (Sable et al. n.p.). But might this be more subversive that one might first think? If 'himself' is 70 percent machine—70 percent rigid, structural, state-imposed steel—perhaps warring with himself is Stone warring with fixity and stability; perhaps it is him doing the destabilizing work his Blackness and cyborg-ness call for. But since he is a cyborg on the basis of his machinery—though admittedly being a cyborg is not equivalent to being machine since cyborg-ness implies a human, biological base—it is arguable that his Blackness is doing the destabilizing work that other normative cyborgs could not. And perhaps this distinction is made evident when Stone thanks Sarah Charles, his ex-girlfriend with whom he is still very much in love and who is part of the research team that maintains his metallic structure. When Charles asks why Stone thanks her, he replies, "For caring more about the *man* than the machine. For being *you*" (Walker n.p.). The 'man' is separate from the machine because the man, not the machine (again, different from the 'cyborg'), is driven by the destabilizing, subversive Blackness. The machine is the hegemonic structure; the man is bringing the structure down.

15 But it remains that the cyborg, insofar as it is implicitly codified as male in science fiction discourse, but also the liberated female in Haraway's cyborgian sense, is still, as Haraway says, the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (Haraway 152). By this logic, cyborgs of all stripes are mired in a particular system, thus bestowing upon the (Black) cyborg its subversive potential. "Without the system that they try to escape," argues Sara Louise Muhr, "they would not be these tough and capable beings….cyborgs are constructed as superior beings because of, and thus thanks to, the oppressive system that they try to escape"

(Muhr 340–341). But I part from this characterization because it assumes whiteness and not the anoriginal, "undercommon" Blackness I add via Vic Stone. While the qualifier-less (white) cyborg needs a system to make its biological critique, the Black cyborg, at least in part, does not need the prevailing system to be its rebellious self because Blackness is itself that which critiques, subverts, and is the messy, cosmic stuff that precedes system-ness. However, that Vic Stone is a Black *male* cyborg, in a sense, maintains part of the (patriarchal) system, belying the subversive power of his Black/cyborg-ness. The narrative might be much different and much more cyborgian if the protagonist of this comic book series was LeTonya Charles, a.k.a. Cyborgirl.

16   Cyborgirl is Villainy Inc.'s female villain version of Cyborg. Unlike Stone, Cyborgirl is said to have been "the cause of all her own troubles. She became a Tar [an addictive illegal substance] druggie, which destroyed much of her body" ("Cyborgirl" n.p.). It is questionable, first of all, whether Charles was truly "the cause of her *own* troubles" considering the real-life historical phenomenon of Reagan's racialized 'War on Drugs' and the systematic relegation of a disproportionate number of people of Color to impoverished, violent, drug-filled areas. This aside, Cyborgirl is also Black, has many of the same abilities as Cyborg, and is perhaps more subversive because she conveys, with an added radicalizing Blackness, Haraway's cyborg, which describes the cyborg as a metaphor for the liberated woman. In Muhr's words, "[Haraway] calls on readers to use technology to resist the conventional models that shape us as human beings in a patriarchal society" (Muhr 340). Hence, Cyborgirl would more readily dismantle the 'system' that exists within (as mechanical, rigid steel) and without (the hegemonic white patriarchal order). She is even less metal—"I'm *not* like you. For one thing, I'm not completely covered in metal" (Sable et al. n.p.), she says—which signifies less of a connection or complicity in patriarchal, hegemonic, rigid structures.

17   In readers' first experience with Cyborgirl in the Teen Titans Spotlight issue of *Cyborg*, Cyborgirl yells at Mr. Orr, "Don't *tell* me I'm a token," to which Orr responds, "On the contrary, *Cyborgirl*, I think you're absolutely essential….Hell, if revenge isn't good enough motivation for you, think of it like this: kill him and you can take the 'irl' off your name" (Sable et al. n.p.). Vic Stone's existence as a male cyborg stands in Cyborgirl's way as *The* Cyborg. Orr sees the 'girlness' of Cyborgirl as an impediment, which may initially simply index an underlying misogyny. However, that Orr represents white, militarized, patriarchal maleness implies that

Cyborgirl's girlness is only a problem because Orr wants to subsume her under his control and whim, therefore necessitating that she not be a 'girl,' i.e. disruptive of the (patriarchal) system. Exterminating Cyborg does not mean that Cyborgirl can take over as herself, but that she can become the next Cyborg, losing her identity as Cyborgirl and fitting neatly into the patriarchal order.

18   The attempt to subsume Cyborgirl and collapse her specificity as Cyborg*girl* (though she is far beyond girlhood) is an attempt to quell her disruptive force. Indeed, if she were granted permission to be Black *and* cyborg *and* female she would pose too much of a disintegrative threat to the white/male/human order. In essence, to invite her to be all of herself would be to invite the demise of the hegemonic structure.

What Came First, the Blackness or the Monster?

> "Call me crazy, but I had this vision
> one day that I'll walk among you a regular civilian."
> - Eminem, "The Monster"

> "Man, machine or monster?"
> - Back cover of *Teen Titans Spotlight: Cyborg*

19   Blackness, since its epidermal solidification and construction as an axiomatic signifier of all that is perverse, has been tied to notions of monstrosity. Notions of the monstrous have long operated racially as a means by which colonial forces differentiate the civilized from the barbaric, the human from the nonhuman. Indeed, "*Human* and *black* have been constructed as oxymoronic for at least half a millennium in the West (and longer elsewhere)," thus Blackness automatically denoted nonhumanness or monstrousness (James 68). The monstrous and those who are deemed monsters were characterized by sheer bodily alterity—accounts of 'monsters' in history ranged from headless monopods to one-eyed giants to fanged cannibals, and these accounts "disseminated lurid tales of monstrous bodies that promised by the very nature of their physicality to confound any efforts to perceive humanness in the monstrous form" (Johnson 182). Tales of the monstrous work to classify, to divide and stigmatize, and determine who in fact deserves the status of 'human.' Racialized understandings of the monstrous act as ways to exhume from Black bodies an inherent antithesis to the prevailing order of things; Blackness-as-

monstrous does the work of deciding, with epidermal certainty of subcutaneous truth, the political, moral, and ideological perversity of undesired subjects.

20   Recently, however, the figure of the monster has been reclaimed by Black subjects and used to capitalize on notions of difference. The monster is articulated with the difference of positivity-in-perversity as it signifies superior abnormality. Often seen most pervasively in athletics and hip-hop—arenas dominated by Black subjects—the monster (and its derivatives, among which are the beast and the alien/Martian) is redeployed as a desirable characterization insofar as it denotes the subject's otherworldliness and ability to do things mere humans cannot. The monster for those Black subjects that affiliate themselves (or are affiliated) with it has come to act as a site of immense agency, usurping the externally imposed limits onto Blackness and demonstrating inhuman autonomy via their Blackness. Vic Stone says himself, as he is ignored by his father and the research team, that "It's better to be the monster in the room that everyone fears or pitties than to be the thing they *don't even see*" (Walker n.p.). To be monstrous grants him at least some agency and is to that extent desirable. To be a monster grants Stone agency through visibility, and the feeling of invisibility has long been a trope in the African American literary canon. For Stone, then, he would rather take on the monstrous identity only as it allows him to be seen, not so he can tout otherworldly skill, because by virtue of his being a Black cyborg he is already ontologically a beast, a monster, a Martian.

21   Adjacent to racial resonances of the monstrous are gendered ones as well, transphobic uses of the monster also drawing upon notions of physical monstrosity (i.e. uncategorizable bodies) to buttress the naturalization of binary sex and gender. As with the monstrous history of Blackness, monstrous identificatory assaults on bodies that fall outside of traditional gender categories attempted to dehumanize nonnormative gendered bodies, invalidating their claim to humanity and thus validating mistreatment and extermination of them. So too have trans and nonnormatively embodied subjects reclaimed the figure of the monster despite the monster's transphobic and injurious history. "It is precisely the monster's ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect," says transgender and queer studies scholar Anson Koch-Rein, "that appeals to trans* people reclaiming the monster for their own voices." The 'monster' used to derogate trans subjects is reappropriated as "a site of agency that negotiates a queerly complex relationship to nature, origin narratives, and language" ("Keywords" 135).

22   Vic Stone lies at the intersection of these historical discourses. As a Black cyborg—part human and part machine—Stone can be read as trans, as "across, beyond, or over" the fixity of the human (and subsequent racial, gendered, sexual, etc. identities predicated on humanness). Stone sees himself as thoroughly something else, as monstrous. In his words, "None of them know what it's like *to be a monster*" (Sable et al. n.p.). For Stone, his monstrousness is rooted fundamentally in his identity as a cyborg. If human subjects' epistemic anchor is their being-in-the-world as humans, then becoming a cyborg uprooted Stone's very understanding of the world. He then undergoes a radical reformation of embodied knowledge, and it is this epistemological rewiring, so to speak, that marks Stone's body-technology as one of thinking. And as Donna Haraway says in an interview, "almost any serious knowledge project is a thinking technology insofar as it re-does its participants. It reaches into you and you aren't the same afterwards. Technologies rearrange the world for purposes, but go beyond function and purpose to something open, something not yet" (Gane 154).

23   Here, then, we also see the connection between Stone's body-as-cyborg (i.e. trans/human) and (his) Blackness. Blackness as fantastic, in its openness and unfixing for the not-yet-known, maps seamlessly onto Haraway's above mentioned thinking technology. As well, if Stone's thinking technology and its fundamental rearrangement of the world rests intimately in his being a cyborg, then his transhumanness is linked quite closely with his Blackness. One might ask: is Victor Stone a Black cyborg, or is it, like Iton's Black fantastic, a redundant formulation? Does Blackness automatically denote transhummaness, i.e. a fundamental epistemological rearrangement of the world on the basis of one's being-raced and cyborged-in-the-world? After all, "Monsters can and do change shape," according to Jackie Orr (Orr 277). In changing their own shape, does not the shape of the world alter as well?

24   "The name's Stone," Cyborg soliloquizes, "Vic Stone. A.K.A. Cyborg. As in, part man, part machine. I've alternately considered the name and what it describes as a *blessing* and a *curse*" (Sable et al. n.p.). Within his name, his cyborg identity, lies a paradoxical site of inhabitation. This paradoxical site is a constant struggle for Stone, a state of constant crisis, and thus a site of violence due to its conflagration of a stable subjectivity. It is perhaps this constant state of identificatory violence that characterizes Stone's specific Black cyborg-ness as monstrous insofar as the monstrous, in the context of a Black subject, defines a Black habitus as tolerance for and necessity of "a fundamental familiar violence [and] multiple subjections"

(Sharpe 2). The 'curse' of this state of fundamental violence 'blesses' him by being the very constitutive foundation for his subjectivity as Black/cyborg. Without the violence and monstrosity of his existence as a Black cyborg Vic Stone as such would cease to exist.

25   But perhaps herein lies an even deeper paradox: if Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness constitute his monstrousness, and to be a monster is itself to fall outside of a normative classifiable human being, Cyborg *transes* two of his most fundamental identities; Cyborg is transhuman *and* transBlack. But further still, this trans-monstrousness, so to speak, is itself Stone's enactment of Blackness if Blackness is considered "anoriginal lawlessness," the unfixing of stability ("Do Black Lives Matter?"). So to the question posed in the heading for this section, the answer is neither and both—Blackness ushered in, via itself, the monstrous, and by virtue of its monstrousness—its unclassifiable humanity—it brought with it Blackness.

Black Salvific Futures

> "I may get in trouble for saying this, but superheroes are the modern equivalent to the gods of ancient mythology. These are power fantasies and morality tales that are meant to help us better understand the way we live our lives, and give us an escape from both the mundane and horrific that we face on a daily basis. A great superhero comic is brimming with the same things we deal with, only exaggerated to the most wild of extremes."
> - David F. Walker

26   If Vic Stone's name, his identity, is Cyborg, and identities are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past," but a cyborg connotes the not-yet or the radical break from a historically rooted organic body, then for Vic Stone to be a cyborg is for him to be simultaneously rooted in history and a futuristic entity (Hall 225). Stone stretches back and forward through time, becoming simultaneously historically rooted and unknown future.

27   In a telling panel in *Teen Titans Spotlight: Cyborg*, Vic and his best friend-turned-evil cyborg Ron are drawn on opposite ends of the panel, charging toward one another in mid-air as the ground crumbles beneath them. The image recalls the final scene in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in which the protagonist, Milkman, and his best friend-turned-militant Black radical Guitar leap off a cliff toward one another. A novel characterized thematically by biblical

allusions, mythologies, African American folklore and the history of slavery, Black ancestral and cultural roots, and the 20th century Civil Rights Movement, *Song of Solomon* as a literary imagistic reference point for these two futuristic Black cyborgs situates them squarely in the past and the future. The links to Blackness, ancestry, and a book very much about reckoning with the past places the *Cyborg* panel in literary and cultural history, while at the same time the futuristic bodies of Vic and Ron, not to mention the link to *Song of Solomon*'s unsettled futuristic last line describing the leaping scene—"If you surrender to the wind you can ride it"—locates them in an uncertain, precarious, and unknown future.

28   Vic Stone as Cyborg is both tied to the past through the signification of trauma supervening on his Blackness in an American context and projected into the future via the futuristic connotations of his technological makeup as well as the very 'presence' of Cyborg 2.0, his future self come back to erase his (own) memory. The futurity of the cyborg is definitionally linked to it because the cyborg marks "the end of [human] time and space as conventionally understood and relied on," and what is this marking of an end if not a revolution (James 63)? Indeed, "the cyborg glimpses the possibilities of permanent revolution" (James 61). As a cyborg, whose very existence as such implies revolution, Stone becomes a rebel intellectual, that is, an outlaw (literally outside the Law, i.e. impositions of fixed sovereignty) *thinking* technology. The rebel intellectual, at base, is cyborg; the rebel intellectual is, by its nature, "individual and collective, in overt and covert rebellion, alive because everyone has now become mechanized in its rebellion, with the spiritual force of freedom driving it—biological, mechanical, divine" (James 61). It is this last descriptor, divinity, that works again paradoxically. Contrary to a god that seeks to impose order onto mortal subjects, Cyborg is paradoxically divine, both a divine *blessing* ("Authoritative declaration of divine favour and countenance, by God or one speaking in his [*sic*] name") and a spiritual *curse* ("An utterance consigning…(a person or thing) to spiritual and temporal evil, the vengeance of the deity, the blasting of malignant fate, etc.") ("Blessing, N."). There is something deeply divine about Cyborg, his transtemporality and transhumanness, his para-ontology via his Blackness, his cognitive and physical superiority (one might say omniscience and omnipotence). And even in this divinity Cyborg is still fundamentally tied to humanity, god and mortal. Perhaps it is no coincidence that David F. Walker, comic book writer for the solo series of *Cyborg*, says, "superheroes are the modern equivalent to the gods of ancient mythology" (Barksdale). Cyborg is deeply god-like, his temporal multiplicity echoing

the Christian god's declaration in Revelation 1:8: "'I am the Alpha [beginning] and the Omega [end],' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"

29   In this transtemporality, Stone becomes messianic, his limbs severed and replaced with mechanical parts in order for him to save (his) humanity. Stone's father, Silas, uses him as an experiment. Silas is propositioned by the government to sell his research, which he initially refuses but ultimately agrees to after Stone is nearly killed in the explosion. One of the governmental lab technicians then tells Silas "with your research, and our resources, you'll be helping your country…and saving your son." Silas's cybernetics, when imbued into his son's body, not only save his son from death but also, by virtue of the syntactic construction of the sentence, save the country as well. Helping—saving—his country is contingent upon saving his son, which necessitates making Stone a cyborg, a thinking technology, trans(non)human. And again, in another scene with Mr. Orr and Vic Stone, Stone's mechanical parts are touted as salvific steel. "Your father sold the hardware to *us* [the military], Stone," Orr says. "It was part of the price he paid for *saving your life*" (Walker n.p.). Stone's cybernetic hardware is what *saved* him. Or more, it saved *his life*, implying that Stone's life is separate and distinct from his cyborg identity. But that Stone *becomes* a cyborg makes him the site of salvation, thus making Vic "Cyborg" Stone a savior of himself and those he protects. He is surrounded by a team of Titans who act as disciples of sorts, and he must wrestle with his nega-self, an anti-Christ-like villain in Cyborg 2.0, and a close friend, Ron, who ultimately rejects him in Judas-like fashion.

30   Cyborg's divine relationship with time also stems from his Blackness. When Cyborg 2.0, Stone's ten-years-in-the-future self, comes back in time with evil versions of the Teen Titans to "beat your present self within an inch of your life" and erase his memory so as not to stop the incipient cyborg army from rising, the connection between the past, memory, and Blackness is made apparent. Mr. Orr, cutthroat commander of a black-ops government organization that specializes in military intelligence and combat enhancements, makes a racially specific comment to Cyborg 2.0 after Cyborg 2.0 wonders how he still exists in the past. Orr says, "Like Martin Luther King Jr.—you're a fan of his, right?—I have a dream. No, not that all men are created equal. If anything, Vic, you were created to be *more* than equal. No, my dream is to take wounded soldiers and use your cybernetics to make them walk again." Cyborg 2.0 replies, "More like *march*. In the future you create an *army* of men like me" (Walker n.p.). Cyborg's time travel is not only ten years into the future/past but back to the mid-20th century Civil Rights era with

King. The cybernetic army that marches in the future is made akin to the marching of King's civil rights followers, a moment saturated with Blackness asserting and fighting for its humanity. But Orr repeats this historical moment with a difference: he wants Vic, and thus his Blackness and cyborg-ness, to be *more* than equal, and only then can he save, not humans, but cyborg *trans*humans. Cyborg 2.0 is also salvific, but his role is to save superhumans, cyborgs, rather than mere humans, and in this sense he—his Blackness and his cyborg-ness—must be more than equal. In being superhuman (divine, one could say) he must also be superBlack.

31   S.T.A.R. Lab, the lab that conducted the cybernetic research to turn Victor Stone into Cyborg, is where 'Cyborg' was born. But it is also where Victor Stone *died* (Sable et al. n.p.). The death of the man gave way to the (re)birth of a more divine entity. Stone was resurrected—or, the 'Stone' was moved aside to make way for the new divine messianic being—and became Cyborg.

32   *Cyborg* adds to the contemporary fervor over superheroes. Anything relating to superheroes is considered big money these days, and Cyborg joins the cast of heroes satiating the public's superhuman appetite. Indeed, "From *Ant-Man* taking home the number one box office slot to the recent destruction of Marvel Comics' multiverse, millions of people are watching, reading, downloading and subscribing to anything related to comic books," and it all points to profound racial, gender, and human instabilities present in contemporary culture, for which the superhero world serves as a testing ground (Clark n.p.). Victor Stone, Cyborg, raises fundamental questions about the racialized connotations of humanity, gendered implications of male transhumans, the monstrosity of (trans)humanity, and the implicit divinity and futurity of cybernetic superheroes. With the cultural obsession with superheroes, then, these questions make an indelible impact on readers and viewers because, as exaggerated but nonetheless images of us all, superheroes and what they do, stand for, and look like say much more about us than we often think.

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