

POETICS OF THE
FLESH



MAYRA RIVERA

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INTRODUCTION

Both Flesh and Not

Flesh carries memories of theological passions. In Christianity, flesh evokes a creative touch, divine love, and suffering. More prominently, it alludes to sin, lust, and death. To be described as living “according to the flesh”—as Jews, women, and sexual minorities have been—is to be considered trapped in sinfulness.¹ Outside Christian circles, in everyday uses of the term “flesh,” those memories might be barely recognizable; but they are not inconsequential. Desire and instincts are said to inhabit flesh, or even to be indistinguishable from carnality. These associations have earned flesh a bad reputation—but also the admiration of many followers of Eros.

Ironically, it is the religious aura of flesh that most troubles postmodern philosophers, not its bad reputation. For them, flesh functions as an essence, the self-identity of the body. As a subjective interiority, it fosters the illusion of unmediated sensibility and thus of absolute truth. They also consider flesh to be irremediably Christian, always haunted by the incarnation. Those associations lead some thinkers to denounce flesh and proclaim the end of the passions that “flesh” once named. These philosophers’ gestures may be hasty, betraying irritability toward the persistence of Christian ideas in Western thought, but their critiques cannot be taken lightly. Flesh is a concept prone to metaphysical excess, used not only to demonize corporeality but also to spiritualize it—in both cases losing touch with ordinary bodies.

Flesh is an ambivalent term that names a rather slippery materiality. Its propensity to change distinguishes “flesh” from “body.” Body commonly denotes an entity complete in itself and visible to those around it. In contrast, flesh is conceived as formless and impermanent, crossing the boundaries between the individual body and the world.

Flesh is always becoming. Air, water, food, sunlight, and even societies of microorganisms enter our bodies to weave the delicate tissue of our flesh. Imperceptibly to the naked eye, cell by cell, day after day, the world constitutes your body and mine. And our bodies enter into the constitution of the world. They are intimately our own, singular and irreplaceable, and yet formed by and given to the world. “I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation,” writes Hélène Cixous.²

Words also become flesh. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. Social discourses divide the world and mark bodies differently. Some bodies are made to bear the weight of race. Gender norms “surface as . . . styles of flesh.”³ Laws prohibit or authorize practices that infect bodies and produce illness and death. Literally. Social hierarchies become flesh. We speak casually about a touching account, biting comments, or deadly policies. The term “sarcasm” comes from the Greek *sarkasmos*, “to tear flesh.” These intuitions concern the corporeal effects of common words, yet they resonate with what preachers and poets have for centuries recited: “And the word became flesh.” Enigmatically, enticingly, this statement has traveled widely, crossing the boundaries of the properly Christian, being adapted and transformed by those who repeat it.

Poetic Affinities

Thought . . . spaces itself out in the world.

It informs the imaginaries of peoples, their varied poetics,
which it then transforms, meaning,
in them its risks become realized.

—Édouard Glissant, “Imaginary,” *Poetics of Relation*

Poetics of the Flesh is inspired by the practice of Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, and more indirectly by its contents.⁴ For Glissant, poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world. The poetic approach is indispensable for addressing histories

marked by disruption, displacement, and irrecoverable loss—such as those of Caribbean peoples, whose very existence emerged from the obliteration of African and indigenous cultures, religions, and languages. An intellectual practice attentive to such events shuns totalizing forms of thought and writing. It questions the search for legitimacy in genealogies and the drive to produce ontological systems, theories of the nature of being itself. Instead of privileging the genres of stable, ordered unity, Glissant is inspired by Caribbean poetics, which Derek Walcott describes as a “gathering of broken pieces.” “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole,” Walcott writes. “This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles.” The pieces might be disparate and ill-fitting; they contain more pain than the icons and sacred vessels from which they originated. “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary.”⁵ For Glissant, poetics is an approach to knowledge that values processes of creation from “shattered histories” and “shards of vocabularies” and acknowledges their discontinuities.

Poetics aims at expressing in style this stance toward knowledge by being attentive to loss and opacity, interruption and silence. While poetry is the literary genre defined by this sensibility, some of these traits may also influence other forms of writing. Prose can be poetic—learning from poetry, adopting its attentiveness to the creative potential of words, and adapting some of its strategies.

In addition to relating poetics to modes of knowing and ways of writing, Glissant links it more broadly to being in the world. “The world’s poetic force,” he writes, “kept alive within us, fastens itself by feeling, delicate shivers, onto the rambling presence of poetry in the depths of our being.”⁶ A poetic force emerges from the world itself and links human expression to it. “The expression of this force and its way of being is what we call Relation: what the world makes and expresses of itself.”⁷ The world’s poetic force creates and expresses itself as Relation.

“Relation” is the most encompassing category in Glissant’s work, but it is decidedly not (simply) one. It is manifold and dynamic, elusive and opaque. These traits are at the heart of the imaginative elements of poetics, which is contiguous with *poiesis*—“creative making.” He explains that because Relation is indeterminate, it cannot be fully known. Not knowing Relation is thus not a weakness, Glissant assures us. But “not wanting to know it certainly is.”

For our inability to grasp Relation is no excuse for indifference. To the contrary, one shall seek to sense the “entanglements” of worldwide relations. We cannot fully know Relation, but “we imagine it through a poetics.”⁸ Poetics is a practice of engaging the world, in which one risks being transformed.⁹

I use poetics in this book in all the senses that Glissant gives to the term: a stance toward knowledge, a style of writing, and the creative dimensions of thought. I share Glissant’s interest in poetics as sensing, joining, and contributing to broader worldly relations. Writing and reading about flesh this way help me convey the complex qualities of sensation: the silences, disruptions, and opacity that characterize the body’s relation to the world. They help me be attentive to how flesh shifts between empirical description and imaginative affirmation, which envision alternative modes of being and seek to foster their materialization. A poetic orientation guides my readings, as I attend not only to the conceptual logic of the texts I analyze, but also to their literary dimensions and affective charge. I observe the peculiar tonalities of their words and the distinctive contours of their images; I trace the movements, transformations, intertwinings of the images they use. This is particularly fruitful for registering the marks of Christian imaginaries in widely different contexts. For as Virginia Burrus explains, “drawn and lured by scripture, Christian writing emerges in late antiquity as a crazy quilt of biblical fragments, each piece placed in a new relation to the others, yet still haunted with the ever-multiplying memories of prior contexts of meaning.”¹⁰ In engaging ancient theological texts I do not seek to uncover their meaning in a unifying origin. This is not a genealogy of Christian flesh. Instead, I explore evolving relations between different interpretations.

Attention to the poetic dimensions of theological notions sheds light on elements of body-words that tend to be occluded by other modes of philosophical inquiry. The Christian texts that I engage describe experiences in which the most mundane touches upon the inexpressible. They tell stories of divinity becoming flesh and flesh striving to become divine, of flesh that sings and shines, as much as it rots and dies. Instead of assuming a simple opposition between theology and literature or between metaphysics and critical thought, I follow the poetic longings and creativity in all these modes of thought. I approach them as part of ongoing, sometimes painful processes of remaking visions of corporeality—out of pieces of shattered histories and shards of vocabulary.

Poetics of the Flesh explores the intersections between bodies, material elements, and discourses through the concepts of “body” and “flesh.” The definitions for each term and the relationship between them unfold throughout the chapters of the book, connecting Christian theology, continental philosophy, and political theories of corporeality, particularly those theories concerned with the corporeal dimensions of gender and race. Much needs to be said to justify bringing together, for instance, the ancient poetics of the Gospel of John, the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the analytics of the social of Frantz Fanon. I will explain. But before sketching the structure of the book in the last section of this introduction, I present theological and theoretical discussions that precede and inform my work. A quick glance at Christian theologies of the body of the past three decades shows where they may—and I think should—meet theoretical debates about the social-material dimensions of corporeality.

Christian Bodies

The body appeared in religious studies in the second half of the twentieth century. Defiantly. At least that is how we, scholars of religion, like to tell the story of the turn to the body. We know it is hardly the first time that Christian thinkers have been puzzled and challenged by corporeal phenomena. Miraculous feedings and healings, the power of relics, the transformations produced by ascetic practices, and many other such phenomena have been the subject of formative debates throughout the history of Christian thought. But the conversations to which I am referring here are about the body in “our” times. In this context, we associate the body with eroticism and sexuality. The large and growing corpus of literature on Christianity and the body includes a substantial number of works on the role of Christianity in occluding, forbidding, and/or inciting such desires.¹¹

Still, there are other stories that have also shaped postmodern visions of the body—accounts of multitudes bearing wounds inflicted in the name of the people, the nation, the economy. In our times, images of human bodies all but destroyed by concentration camps, the atomic bomb, or hunger represent the shattering of myths of human progress. If these bodies reveal anything, it is the likelihood of corporeal destruction.

Recognition of human vulnerability led early liberation thinkers to the Christian body as they sought to bring attention to its material needs—basic

necessities such as food, health, and protection against violence. For Latin American liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel, this orientation required an ethics grounded in corporeality.¹² Thus Dussel turned to Hebrew Scriptures, Greek literature, and the New Testament in search of models for a corporeal anthropology that avoided the separation between body and soul.¹³ As long as the essence of human life was assumed to reside in an eternal substance such as the soul, he argued, material necessities would be deemed to be secondary or derivative, merely supporting something more lasting and true.

It was clear that theologies concerned with poverty and violence could not ignore the body; neither could those confronting sexism. But these problems required different strategies. The bodies of the poor were mostly absent from modern theological discussions of salvation, liberationists argued. Thus they sought to bring attention to the cry of pain of those suffering from hunger. In contrast, the bodies of women were written into the texts that subordinated them. Discourses about gender and sexuality—like those about race—deployed the body as a foundation of knowledge and a source of unquestionable truth. In order to unsettle that logic, feminists tried to liberate themselves from the body-as-foundation—from biology as destiny. If genders are culturally constructed, then we can transform them. But would that mean abandoning the body to its destiny?

Clearly not. Part of the theoretical task of these theologies has been questioning the idea of “nature” and “body” as passive or immutable and the dualisms on which the opposition between materiality and transcendence rests. The body/spirit dualism was one of the main targets of these projects, which would reach the heart of Christian doctrine. For, as Grace Jantzen argued, the immateriality of God was the linchpin of the Western masculinist symbolic.¹⁴ Feminist theologians have tracked biological essentialisms and spirit/matter dualisms, in all their versions, to deconstruct them. They have also sought to provide alternative visions of the relationship between divinity and materiality, such as the influential metaphor of the universe as the body of God, as well as other models that assert the “relational” (instead of dualistic) structure of the cosmos.¹⁵ Reclaiming the value of bodies further entailed attending to elements of human experience that had been dismissed as irrelevant for theological reflections because they were deemed carnal rather than spiritual. Sexuality has been the preferred site for such reappraisals of corporeal experiences; and there are similar aims and sensi-

bilities in recent theologies of food, dance, and the like.¹⁶ These theologies reenvision the body affirmatively. Drawing inspiration from Christian poetics, they represent the body as created and embraced by the divine, its pains and desires inseparable from its spiritual longings.

So why turn to the body again? Because countering the opposition between spirit and the body has revealed additional challenges pertaining to the relationship between the body and the socio-material world. “The body” remains a highly contested category. “The body” names the physicality of human existence. It is invoked as a solution to the devaluation of flesh and materiality and yet “the body” is also described as an *effect* of arrangements of power, an artifact produced for social control. It is described as “natural” yet shaped by social practices and representations—biological and ideological. Both flesh and not.

Theologian Sharon Betcher analyzes the limitations of the theological turn to the body for questioning the social objectification and standardization of bodies. She observes that feminist accounts of the body at times reflect dominant cultural values and have not always disrupted “disability abjection.”¹⁷ “The body” itself might be part of the problem, she argues. As a theoretical category “the body” fosters an illusion of completeness and wholeness easily naturalized, normalized, and deployed as part of cultural systems of representation. Indeed, the body tends to function just as nature does, as “a transcendental term in a material mask.” Even “loosed from any conscious religious scaling,” the body “might likewise hide its transcendental demeanor in a corporeal overcoat.” It represents the unattainable stability that social norms demand but that corporeality cannot mirror. “Whereas ‘body’ can invite the hallucinatory delusion of wholeness, and thus the temptation to believe in agential mastery and control, flesh . . . admits our exposure, our vulnerability one to another, if also to bios.”¹⁸ Betcher counsels us to “learn to think flesh without ‘the body.’”¹⁹ For the flourishing of diverse forms and capacities of human embodiment requires communities that recognize their interdependence, shared vulnerability, and the social obligation to provide the conditions to sustain carnal vitality.²⁰

This book seeks to unsettle the reifying tendencies of “the body” by evoking carnal interdependence, vulnerability, and exposure. And yet I do not replace the body with flesh but focus on how they constitute each other. Carnal flourishing requires interactions where social standards are always already at play. I do not encounter flesh without a body. Racialized people,

like those living with disabilities, are seldom allowed to forget the critical effects of their visible identities in social interactions. I examine social hierarchies that depend on reifications of the body; I describe social identities, particularly race and gender, as markers that influence how social norms affect particular bodies. I explore how those hierarchies affect even the most intimate elements of life and shape the materiality of flesh.²¹ Part of the critical task of this book is thus to unsettle the assumed separation between social ideals and materiality, between social constructs and carnal vitality. The distinctions between cultural and material dimensions of corporeality are established discursively and they have material consequences. Between body and flesh there are always words.

The Matter of Flesh

Recent developments in science and technology are troubling and transforming received assumptions about the relationship between the sociocultural and material dimensions of corporeal life. Even though biological essentialisms have hardly disappeared, we are believers in the transformability of the body—in the power of fitness regimes or meditation practices, drug enhancement or genetic modification. We are more intentionally involved in reshaping our bodies—for good or ill.²² We are also more capable of affecting the bodies of others and the material conditions of the earth. And thus we face new ethical and religious challenges that require more robust understandings of the material effects of social relations. As Judith Butler argues, “if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a *new bodily ontology*.”²³ This “implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence and desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging.”²⁴

Broadly speaking, the demands for more materialist approaches in a variety of fields across the humanities reflect a sense of dissatisfaction with predominant methodologies of the past few decades. Scholars advocating a return to materiality often describe their task as overcoming the problems caused by the focus on language and the prominence of constructive models.²⁵ The study of corporeality has focused mainly on how discursive practices define and position people in society. Important as this project has been for understanding mechanisms of power, its emphasis on discourse has come at the expense of engagements with other dimensions of corporeality. The efforts to

denaturalize gender have at times led to an “allergy of ‘the real,’” or even an incipient “somatophobia,” Vicki Kirby contends.²⁶ Too often allusions to materiality are dismissed as foundationalism—as betraying a desire for an unquestionable source of truth. Whether the aim is to relate the body to the broader worldly processes in which it participates or to reach out for a lost aspect of “the real,” new materialisms consider postmodern approaches limiting.²⁷ Addressing ethical challenges of the twenty-first century, such as climate change, biotechnology, and genetics, among others, requires theories that go beyond the critique of discourses toward better understandings of the material conditions and effects of human practices.

Materialist approaches seek deeper understanding of the relationship between bodies and social and scientific practices. Therefore, they build on the insights of postmodern theories about the relationship between bodies and language. They presuppose the analyses of how representations are used to naturalize and thus justify hierarchies of power, linking social categories such as taxonomies of gender and race to visible bodily traits. Words do not simply mirror what is, or express the thoughts and desires of a person, but rather shape reality and subjectivity. Discursive practices incite passions, create and negate identities, enticing even our interest in theorizing the body. The efficacy of words is intricately connected to the experiences of bodies. As Butler has argued, even the claims that bodies exceed language must be understood as assertions—and thus as discursive.²⁸ To assume otherwise would imply claiming an extra-cultural, universal, absolute foundation for a particular view of reality—a type of argument that scholars have challenged in their efforts to denaturalize gender and race assumptions. However, human practices, including discursive ones, are also shaped by material creativity.

This interest in materiality as a dynamic element in our environment and in our bodies is much more than the result of our having exhausted the prevalent methodologies. Rather, that interest responds to broader cultural changes prompted by developments in science and technology. As models based on postmodern physics replace Newtonian mechanics in science, theoretical discussions in the humanities and other fields are also transformed. Instead of passive matter characterized by inertia, materiality is described in terms of forces and energies in complex networks of relations. We are interested in *processes* of materialization—not just in *matter*.

Not only do we understand materiality differently, we are experiencing new material phenomena as technological advances become part of our everyday

engagements with the world. Organ transplants and stem cell experiments have captured the imagination of writers, producers, and philosophers who wrestle with the significance of such exchanges of bodily matter, where part of one body becomes part of another. But new technologies force us to think beyond the exchange between humans to include the participation of the nonhuman—animals, bacteria, and inorganic matter—in the production and reproduction of corporeal matter. The boundaries between human and nonhuman flesh are porous and provisional. So are the divisions between socioeconomic and biological processes. The use of new reproductive technologies, the proliferation of genetic testing and treatments, the debates about cloning, and the like are foregrounding not only the productivity and malleability of materiality, but also how the potentialities opened by these technologies are enmeshed in social and economic relations. Social factors influence what technologies are developed and who has access to them; technological practices and discourses reshape understandings of subjectivity and communal relations.²⁹ The processes of material transformation and becoming are deeply, if ambiguously, relational. The emerging vision is one where bodies are not simply *located* in society—as suggested by the commonly used phrase “social location”—but *constituted* in relation to the world.

Flow of the Argument

Poetics of the Flesh elaborates a view of corporeality woven by its carnal relations to the world—spiritual, organic, social—describing the folds of body and flesh, flesh and world, body and word.

The book is organized in three parts, which engage in turn theological, philosophical, and sociopolitical texts, while pointing to the relations between them. It follows “flesh” as it unfolds from a Christian poetics of incarnation. It also traces its significance in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as well as its constructive potential in dialogue with Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-Luc Nancy—all of whom have critically engaged Merleau-Ponty.

The work begins by laying out the Christian categories around which it coheres—body (*soma*, *corpus*) and flesh (*sarx*, *caro*). The difference between body and flesh reveals their distinct semantic histories and affective charges. Of the two terms, it is “flesh” that carries the most ambiguous connotations: of lust, instinct, sinfulness, and death. Tellingly, flesh is also feminized. These associations derive from Christian views of “flesh,” but

Christian traditions are more ambivalent about carnality than the well-known attributes suggest.

The first part examines ancient texts—the Gospel of John, the letters of Paul, and works by Tertullian—that have had formative roles in Christianity and are also invoked in relevant philosophical allusions to “the Christian body,” especially by the thinkers that I engage in this book. The choice of texts and the orientation of the readings respond to contemporary provocations. *Poetics of Flesh* engages scholarly discussions about the meaning of those ancient texts, but its approach is literary. Its readings foreground the semantic associations of these notions and illuminate the poetic resonances that have led so many scholars, poets, and preachers to turn to these particular texts. I trace two distinct Christian visions of the flesh. Simply stated, the Pauline narrative contrasts “spiritual bodies” with “carnal bodies,” treating flesh as a negative metaphysical principle, whereas the Gospel of John envisions salvation through the “flesh,” rather than “body.” “Carnal” views—exemplified here by the Gospel of John and Tertullian—tend to emphasize metaphors of flesh, carnal exchanges, and transformation. “Somatic” views, inspired by Paul, tend to imagine bodies as less firmly attached to their flesh.

Foregrounding the differences between these views allows me to move beyond generalizing critiques of Christian flesh and identify elements in those traditions that can nourish contemporary ideas about corporeality. In their most poetic, imaginative versions, Christian allusions to flesh unsettle stasis and elude claims to absolute corporeal knowledge. Rather than trying to conceive corporeality without recourse to the notion of flesh or seeking to free flesh from its implication in Christian discourses, I engage the concept critically. I suggest, moreover, that conceptualizing bodies entails risking ontological gestures and that a simple rejection of flesh may lose sight of a crucial aspect of corporeality—its material vitality.

In the second part of the book we witness the reappearance of flesh in the twentieth century in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He acknowledges the Christian provenance of his metaphors, which I read as reinterpreting the “carnal” strand of Christian corporeal imaginaries. But rather than representing it as relating divinity and humanity, Merleau-Ponty conceives of flesh as the intertwining of bodies and the “flesh of the world.” Chapter 4 explicates his philosophy, in which bodies are constituted by their material relationships.

Merleau-Ponty’s appeals to flesh have been controversial. Prominent continental thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy

have strongly criticized “flesh,” not because it is too mundane (as some theologians might assume), but because it is too religious. Nancy declares: “The ‘passion’ of the ‘flesh’ is finished and this is why the word body ought to succeed the word flesh.”³⁰ Nancy’s assertion is part of two related aims: assessing the influence of Christian theology on Western philosophy, on the one hand, and deconstructing ontotheology, on the other. For Michel Foucault, in contrast, “flesh” is a product of Christian discourses about sin. The contrast between these critiques of flesh—as too spiritual or too sinful—correlates with the carnal and somatic strands of corporeal imaginaries I identify in part I. A third critique of “flesh,” articulated by Luce Irigaray, addresses its associations with the maternal and femininity.

The tendency to separate bodies from flesh, in the somatic strand, arises from constructions of flesh as the underlying principle and cause of sinfulness. Rather than rejecting flesh on the basis of its association with sin, I seek to revalue the disavowed traits as integral to corporeality—including its links to the material elements, its vulnerability, and changeability. A view of bodies as materially constituted in relation to the world nurtures a richer and more dynamic view of corporeality. “Flesh” accents the complex textures of those relations—their inherent multiplicity; the sedimentation of past events; the constant flow of elements in and out of bodies.

The third part of the book focuses on what I characterize as “ambivalent incarnations”: the becoming flesh of social relations. All bodies are constituted in relation to the world, but they do not encounter it in the same ways. Frantz Fanon’s “The Lived Experience of the Black,” which I engage in chapter 6, represents the embodied effects of colonial politics. He adopts Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “corporeal schema” and shows how it breaks down under the weight of racism. Fanon also wrestles with poetic attempts to reimagine flesh in the works of Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire. Fanon finds both approaches insufficient. While I challenge Fanon’s appraisal of Césaire’s poetics, I rely on Fanon’s descriptions of the corporeal dimensions of the experience of race for the analyses of the social-material constitution of the world, developed in chapter 7.

Fanon’s powerful representations of being assaulted by racialization—wounded from without and transformed from within—point to the constitutive relationship between the materiality of flesh and social constructions of identity. Visible traits impact a body’s engagement with the world. But visibility is always already shaped by the sedimentation of social arrange-

ments. I engage Linda Martín Alcoff's philosophical work to explain the significance of social relations on perception, and thus in the constitution of corporeality.

The process of becoming that characterizes flesh entails encounters with the things in the world, described by Merleau-Ponty, as well as the materialization of social norms and practices, described in Judith Butler's work. My reading of Butler focuses on developing this argument, accentuating the consequences of her allusions to "materialization." Yet I also draw attention to the fact that social norms materialize not only in human bodies, but also in human-made physical structures and in the material elements of the world. Social arrangements enter into the constitution of the flesh of the world.

Emphasizing the social dimensions of the flesh of the world, this final part ponders the possibility of affirmative models of performativity. Butler has effectively warned against assuming that resistance to norms means being free from them. Yet the claims to shape flesh through intentional practices cannot be dismissed. And consenting to being flesh implies accepting the social obligations that emerge from our coexistence in the flesh of the world. Bodies and words are called upon to shape different capacities and other poetics of the flesh.