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Out of the Literary Comfort Zone: Adaptation, Embodiment, and Assimilation*

'You'll hit with him! You'll run with him! You'll slide with him!'

The Jackie Robinson Story, poster tagline

'You know the flesh is hers; and given the way she inhabits it in the early scenes, you can't help wondering whether she also might own the glare, the scowl, the rolling gait, and the purposeful mumble'

Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*

This essay pursues a deliberately unusual approach to teaching adaptation. It is motivated by an investment in understanding its stakes when the very idea of adaptation comes under pressure, that is, when its very occurrence appears to be effaced. Focusing on these situations offers the possibility for adaptation studies to illuminate something that the very process of adaptation might be elaborating *vis-à-vis* its larger cultural and social context, for example, in the case studies under consideration here, the process of racial assimilation. I came to this conclusion studying the reception of two films centered on African-American characters: rather than referring back to the film's literary sources, film commentators would discuss

the actors' bodies as if they were both the source and the destination of the adaptation process, and the ultimate guarantee of its 'fidelity.' The first film is *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Alfred Green, 1950), an adaptation of the first Robinson biography in which the baseball player plays himself. The second is the Oscar nominated Lee Daniels's film *Precious. Based on the novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (2009).¹

The particularity of *The Jackie Robinson Story* is not so much that it was based on a biographic text instead of a fictional source – think, for example, of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* – but rather the unprecedented fact that Robinson plays himself. An analysis of the discourses surrounding the film's production and reception reveals a sense of necessity of this casting choice, both for the success of the project, given the belief that nobody would have been able to reproduce Robinson's unique playing style, and for its concrete realization, since no other African American personality was as beloved as he was at that time. In both cases Robinson's body held an authenticating role that was crucial in bringing the Integration Story to the big screen.

The protagonist body's performs an authenticating function in *Precious* as well, in this case as the byproduct of consolidated practices (and politics) of reading authenticity *onto* the black body. Despite adapting a highly lyrical and formally audacious novel by African American poet Sapphire, where the character of *Precious* is very deliberately a textual figure that channels a number of students Sapphire encountered in her years working as a New York City schoolteacher, the connection between the excessive corporeality of the main character and her social circumstances has made it challenging for critics to respond to the film as a

poetically driven work of fiction, even less as an example of art cinema, and to perceive the actress as clearly distinct from the role. Thus, regardless of how different actress Gabourey Sidibe is from the character she portrays, how spirited and vivacious rather than oppressed and stifled, how self-confident rather than hopeless, how much her diction sounds like that of a Valley girl² rather than a hardly comprehensible mumbling she skillfully conveys in the film, because of her sheer bodily constitution, her complexion and her size, Gabby shares the same predicament from which her character is also afflicted.³

The pedagogical potential I want to discuss emerges precisely because the critical reception of both films collapses the distance between the actor and the role, the literary character and its cinematic counterpart. Consequently, in both cases the literary sources are effaced and the body itself appears to act as the source text as well as its ideal destination. Hence the challenge (and payoff) of teaching these two adaptations: how can we discuss the process of adaptation in its perceived absence?

To begin with, one would need to address the reasons for this effacement, which has to do with the overdetermination of the black body in the field of vision, the idea that the subject of color is first and foremost captive of her visual appearance. One would turn to Frantz Fanon, as the main theorist of this process and to visual scholars such as Nicole Fleetwood, who have explored the black body's ability to 'trouble' a visual field that already constructs it as 'troubling'.⁴ Thus, in the context of the traditional iconophobic tendency of adaptation studies, racial overdetermination compounds matters even more.⁵ Visual representation appears to outweigh and foreclose the capacity for expression, development, and realization

of the body conjured up in the written page, beyond already familiar and predictable narrative and aesthetic possibilities. It is in this sense that both adaptations appear to deny their own process, because they are always already overdetermined by their visual outcome.

As I have argued elsewhere, a strategic analysis of the films' reception would quickly identify the understanding of body as the adaptation's source text.⁶ Yet this very designation is still inadequate to the understanding of the role of the body *over* that of the literary source. More flexible tools are needed to address the different auspices under which different subjects might inhabit the field of vision, as well as the way some bodies more than others might be affected by the very process of adaptation. It was my initial work on *The Jackie Robinson Story* that brought me to this conclusion, as I realized that what was really being adapted through that film's casting was the process of *visual assimilation* of Robinson's body image in post World War II American visual culture. Where, therefore, can we find a theoretical framework that can bring the role of the body into proper focus?

I find a promising lead in the incipient 'biocultural' paradigm in adaptation studies,⁷ whose seeds can be seen in the critical response to Spike Jonze's 2003 film *Adaptation*, which explicitly embraces the evolutionary sense of the term. In an early assessment of the film Robert Stam saw it as championing concepts of species hybridity and the idea of adaptation as a 'mutation.'⁸ Similarly, for Linda Hutcheon the film develops an idea of adaptation as 'the biological process by which something is fitted to a given environment.'⁹ The film we see is the script that the diegetic Charlie Kaufman (an alter-ego of the real Charlie Kaufman who scripted the

film) ends up writing partly about his failure to write the adaptation of the non-fiction book *The Orchid Thief* by *New Yorker* writer Susan Orlean. Thus biological mutation and evolution are not only part of the content of the film but inform both its structure and its understanding of the creative process, within a highly accomplished feedback loop that confounds the possibility to find a clear and unequivocal source text. Without a sense of a definitive ending point to the adaptation process, the film slowly fashions itself as an organism that, it is safe to assume, will continue to evolve beyond its arbitrary ending.

The shift the film champions away from myths of origin and toward a greater attention to transformations, evolution, and mutation aligns more closely with a growing 'vital' imagination in media theory.¹⁰ I find this framework promising: within it, adaptation appears more a matter of affect, than text, more of an issue of modulation than intertextuality, and a question of life forms rather than authorship.¹¹ Or, as John Hodgkins proposes, adaptation can be seen as an exchange of 'intensities' at work between two 'affective economies,' an exchange that is by definition bidirectional: '[a]ffects drifts both ways,' he claims, thus somehow rendering the stability of the 'source' theoretically irrelevant.¹²

The idea of the bidirectionality of affect is crucial to explain the reception of the two films under consideration. Consider Robinson: as the man who broke the color line in Major League Baseball, he enjoyed an unprecedented media visibility and scrutiny, both on and off the field, functioning both as a symbol of the realization of America's democratic ideals but also, should the discrimination he suffered come to light, as a potential magnifying lens for America's profoundly

rooted racial hatred and still unaccomplished social equality.¹³ In casting Robinson as himself, *The Jackie Robinson Story* was able to diffuse this possibility. Instead, in both the film and the book the narration unfolds with a quasi-Hegelian sense of pre-determination, in which Robinson's fitness for the massive task of integration, as well as its successful outcome, are already guaranteed by his very presence on the silver screen. In both, people and places who vehemently resisted Robinson's entrance in Organized Baseball are omitted or fictionally renamed; episodes of systemic racism are virtually ignored or reframed for dramatic effect, and select individuals, who initially opposed the Integrationist Experiment, are shown developing admiration and affection for him, thus illustrating, as his wife Rachel eloquently put it, that 'Jack made it possible for America to love a black man.'¹⁴

Within this self-fulfilling structure, so tightly wrapped around Robinson's body, where would we find traces of the adaptation process we might effectively be able to teach? Again, I suggest that those traces are to be sought in the body itself. With this in mind, one would notice something theoretically important occurring in conjunction with Robinson's acting performance in the film: his coveted body is conspicuously heavier than at the time of the events portrayed, a fact that the press reads as the condemnable byproduct of his newly achieved celebrity status and an indication of impending corruption of his moral integrity.¹⁵ Yet, we can regard this visual discrepancy instead as signifier of dislocation and crisis of the tautological logic of the film: as much as Robinson's performance of the fictionalized version of himself constructs a highly sutured and suturing text that offered only one point of identification for the spectator ('You'll hit with him! You'll run with him! You'll slide

with him!' claimed the poster tagline), his body in the film bears the signs of the very process of 'adaptation,' *he* was subjected to in order to fit within the terms of the post-World War II 'assimilationist imagination'. The carefully concealed process of assimilation he underwent – having to fit in, as well as hold back, deflect, metabolize the racist abuse to which he was subjected - finally becomes visible in his body. More importantly, it is remarked upon and recorded in the reception of the film, despite the expectation of sameness, immutability, and fixity, of Robinson's living body, supposed to always remain equal to the image of itself.

This reading depends on the possibility to account for the organic and physiological life of the body that is both the trigger and the destination of the adaptation process. What is needed, then, is a way to push adaptation's biocultural metaphors to the edge of physiology. I find this move in filmmaker Claire Denis' idea of adaptations as *grafts*, which coalesced around Denis's reading of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's essay *L'Intrus*, an account of his heart transplant, as the experience of a never fully resolved process of assimilation, always threatened by the possibility of rejection. Consistently, Denis conceives of her films – and particularly *The Intruder*, directly inspired by Nancy's essay – as both the graft and the host organism, both the 'outside' and the 'inside' of their 'sources,' so that the relationship between the two is not one of derivation but rather more akin to the negotiation between two competing immune systems.¹⁶

I am inclined to assess Robinson's casting as the perfect *graft* for the Integration Story in this sense as well, since he represented at all times its core, its outcome, its expression, and the evidence of its value. In teaching *The Jackie*

Robinson Story from this perspective, therefore, one would encourage the identification of the 'immune systems' that have to be reconciled, both at a figurative and literal level: on the one hand, one would seek evidence of how American visual culture had to accommodate for a black presence in otherwise lily white media environments¹⁷ and, on the other hand, how Robinson's living body had to sustain and absorb the price of this assimilation.

In some respects, Gabourey Sidibe, the actress who plays Precious, finds herself in different circumstances. Her body never becomes the coveted object, a symbol of success and beloved mirror for everything that is supposedly great about American democracy. Hers is not the body that fits all frames, all genres, all social circumstances, in fact re-framing how public life is understood and experienced at a certain point in time. Sidibe's body is affected by the opposite problem: it indexes the difficulty to fit, both within the camera's frame, as well as within the generic and aesthetic understandings of the film. Sidibe's is a 'densely configured black female body,' profoundly overdetermined by a condemning blackness compounded by a damning size.¹⁸ The critical reception of the film does not fail to remark this point and, with constant slippages, repeatedly grafts the actress and the role onto one another: '[Precious's] head is a balloon on the body of a zeppelin,' writes journalist David Edelstein, 'her cheeks so inflated they squash her eyes into slits. That's part of the movie's XXXtreme social realism, no doubt.'¹⁹

This 'pornotroping' of the black body -- the idea that its very visual presence is intrinsically obscene or that the viewer needs to be *aroused* into empathy²⁰ -- flattens and erases any discussion of form, style, art, and obviously, adaptation (its

obscenity is already there, implacable and undeniable), as well as any possibility that Sidibe might ever be anything other than Precious. And in compounding one onto the other, the pornographic discourse of a social realism described with a triple X continues to graft an 'excess flesh' onto the character, the actress, and the film itself, a conflation that elsewhere I have rendered typographically, as PRECIOUS.²¹

In previous discussions of the film I have argued that this 'excess flesh' is the result of a rhetorical and phenomenological act of catachresis, a way of grafting literal and figural elements as well as a specific cross-referencing of vision and touch triggered by the sight of blackness.²² Racial catachresis is an affectively charged trope as well as a phenomenological structure that has the ability to trigger the impression of a corporeal growth, as if blackness had the capacity to fill, and overflow from, the very space between literality and figurality, vision and tactility. Racial catachresis is the outcome of an affect that is specific to the perception of the black body as excessive – an affect that from the body itself appears to extend to the terms of its representation.

This is the *graft* at work in *Precious*. We can see it in the flashback scene that reveals Precious's father abuse. The flashback is triggered by a concussion caused by the remote control Precious's mother throws at her head, whereby the girl's forward fall onto the kitchen floor is cut in mid-air to transition into a backward fall into the bed where the rape occurs. The image of the father mounting her is seen across rapid cuts accompanied by sounds of bed-springs giving in under pressure, frying eggs, a cat meowing, and eventually the silhouette of the mother in the background – cuts that create a multisensorial experience where

food/sex/semen/animality/complicity are all grafted together. Then, through a forward movement of the camera which breaks through the bedroom's ceiling, the same scene becomes also catachrestically grafted onto Precious's fantasy, where she appears as movie star who is exiting the premiere of her latest film surrounded by a crowd of paparazzi and adoring fans.

A close textual analysis of the sequence shows this very clearly; yet for the pedagogical purposes I am pursuing here one would have to press this point even further, and ask: given this care to frame, re-frame, and emphasize the artistic act that grafts these *opposite* movements together (a forward fall which becomes a backward fall, a forward camera movement which transitions to Precious's body moving from the background to the foreground of the frame), given this complex editing structure that keeps the character's body at the center of the 'figure-ground relation' between viewer and viewed; given all this, what really triggers the perception of the triple-X realism? What, other than the conviction that some raw quality of the character/actress's body is already the beginning and the end of anything that can be said about it?

Going back to the film's reception, one would notice how Daniels' aesthetic strategy of *mise-en-abyme* in reality backfired: the obscenity of her father's act was effectively grafted onto Precious's body itself, and yet seen as if spilling over to the victim's abject body, absorbed by it, or, even more troubling, stemming from it.

Pressing this point further one could suggest that the visual presence of Precious overdetermines the process of adaptation because, unlike Robinson's, her body 'looks like pain'²³ and therefore cannot index any form of adaptability. It is

also a body silenced by its own size, fact that explain the novel's focus on Precious's acquisition of literacy – a resistant move, that Margo Crawford describes more properly as *counterliteracy*, because it is developed, just like in the slave narratives, in reaction to expectations of muteness and inanimacy.²⁴ Yet, as she also argues, 'the novel does not (perhaps cannot) make the fact (the visual sign of traumatic excess) signify as much as it does in the film. The film does not (perhaps cannot) make Precious's writing practices matter as much as they do in the novel.'²⁵ Yet, what threatens the possibility to perceive the process of adaptation, the possibility to see a distinction between the black body and its representation, is the fact that if literacy is an overdetermined question for the disenfranchised black subject, it is even more so for the hypervisible black body.

Ultimately Sidibie's/Precious's body does not offer the possibility to imagine its assimilation within the larger context of American visual culture. This is made clear from the film's opening, when we hear Precious's voice narrating over scenes of a typical morning at school. We see the inner city school environment and immediately hear her state her name and express her fantasies: 'My name is Claireece 'Precious' Jones. I wish I had a light-skinned boyfriend with really nice hair. But first I want to be in one of those BET videos.' Immediately, however, this fantasy is shut down by Precious's recollection of her mother's comments: 'Mama says I can't dance. She says who would want to see your big ass dancing anyhow?' The issue to emphasize is this: given the number of fantasy sequences that do show her dancing, while showered with attention and fame, who/what is this question really for? The question is rhetorical, within the film's diegetic world, but it does

extend outside the text connecting to a larger issue of the possibility for, and the circumstances within which, Sidibe's body could be accommodated in mainstream American visual culture. Is that a body which can/could index success, freedom, joy... pleasure?

Through this question, the film anticipates its strategic and relentless embracing of the excess of Sidibe's body-as-Precious to bust through the limits of the (generic, aesthetic, cultural etc.) frame, to spill over onto the space of the viewer and generate an almost unbearable affect.²⁶ In fact, the camera movements that graft most fantasy sequences to Precious's reality leverage the phenomenological structure of catachresis, as the reversible relationship between the spectator's body and the film's body. Yet, by placing Precious's body at the site of the chiasm, between the viewer's sensorial movement toward the screen and the film's sensible movement toward the viewer, the film also reverses the direction and the investment in this reversible relationship with the screen, leading the viewer to retract from, rather than invest in, the film's sensible figuration.²⁷ Eventually, it places the viewer at the site of a more troubling chiasm, which connects, in a reversible relation, pleasure and abuse. It is this dynamic of investment and retraction that provides the tool to generate a process of visual counterliteracy in the viewer, a process that parallels the one Precious is undergoing as well. It is the viewer, the film argues, who needs to *adapt*.²⁸

In other words, Daniels frames the elements that might lead to the perceived pornorealism of the film within the conventions of art cinema as a means to display Precious's complex affective and psychological world, and to introduce mechanisms

of cinematic reflexivity that counteract the flattening of a subject that the XXXtreme realist reading insists on approaching as a specimen. These sequences, that is, function as alternative modes of visualization of what Gabby's 'body can do,'²⁹ for the benefit of the character, but more so for the audience. By visualizing Precious's fantasies the film allows her to graft herself within entirely new frames, situations and genres, and therefore *test*, rather than *fall within*, the limitations of the audience's assimilationist imagination.

To conclude, as an adaptation *Precious* is affected by multiple grafts: grafts related to the character's and actress's overembodiment, to the generic constraints of social realism, to the expectation that this subject-matter can only be served by that genre, and to the fact that, even though the adaptation chronicles Precious's acquisition of independence from her abusive mother as well as literacy and subjective agency, she remains visually unchanged. Unlike Mariah Carey, who underwent a process of uglification to acquire a certain measure of 'invisibility' and 'plainliness' to play the part of the compassionate social worker in the film, Gabby, as Daniels pointed out, would not 'take off her [fat] suit' after the end of the shoot. Unlike Mariah Carey, who had to be de-glammed to 'belong' in the film's grim world, the sequences of Precious's glamorous fantasies continue to strike, disturb, and upset a viewing public that cannot *assimilate* what it perceives as incongruous: the sight of *that* liberated body.

By challenging some of the main tenets of an adaptation discourse that has already *evolved* toward a biocultural understanding of its own premises – in this case, that the body can/should be at times seen as the source of the adaptation

process and of the affective economies that it produces – these two case studies compel us to think about the moment, circumstances, and repercussions of embodiment not as an after-thought within a more serious and rigorous engagement with different textualities, but, especially for some subjects, as an element that overdetermines the adaptation process from the beginning. Seen within a biocultural framework, in the broad sense outlined here, and more specifically within the physiological connotations made available by the notion of the ‘graft,’ they urge us to understand adaptation as an evolving relationship with the environment, one that, in the cases discussed, ultimately sheds light onto the very limitations of the assimilationist imagination that coalesces around these bodies. Within this attention to the affective economies triggered by various stages/components/elements of adaptation, ‘adaptation’ itself emerges as a profoundly melancholic process. It is melancholic, in the Freudian sense Anne Anlin Cheng has mobilized to think about the place of the Other’s body in American literature and visual culture, as a body that is both expelled and desired, coveted and rejected, retained and lost, without possibility of substitution or resolution.³⁰ From this point of view the study of adaptation can really showcase its ability to reach beyond its own disciplinary boundaries and bring to focus important features of the circumstances in which it takes place, that is, the melancholic nature of American literature, cinema and visual culture’s relationship to race. And possibly, the melancholic nature of adaptation studies as well.

* The author wishes to thank Charles Fox, whose insightful comments have greatly strengthened the pedagogical dimension of this chapter.

¹ For the above-mentioned analysis of the film's reception see Alessandra Raengo, "A Necessary Signifier: The Body as Author and Text in *The Jackie Robinson Story*," *Adaptation* 1, no. 2 (2008).

² Lee Daniels, "A Precious Ensemble," in *Featurette* on the DVD for the film *Precious*. Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire (US, Lionsgate, 2009).

³ For an analysis of the film's reception see Alessandra Raengo, "Shadowboxing: Lee Daniel's Non-Representational Cinema," in *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012) and *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hannover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), Ch. 2. See also the insightful special issue of *Black Camera*, 4, no. 1 (2012), devoted to the film, which has greatly consolidated my thoughts in relation to the pedagogical potential of this adaptation. See also Sika A Dagbovie-Mullins,

"From Living to Eat to Writing to Live: Metaphors of Consumption and Production in Sapphire's *Push*," *African American Review* 44, no. 3 (2010).

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, Grove Press, 2008) and Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁵ Robert Stam describes iconophobia as the distrust towards embodiment, that is, toward the way a literary character is actualized in the concrete body, gesture, and voice, of a film actor. See "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation," in *Literature and Film. A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

⁶ See my essay "A Necessary Signifier" mentioned above.

⁷ See at least Kamilla Elliott, "The Adaptation of Adaptation: A Dialogue between the Arts and Sciences," in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Pascal and Oliver Lindner Nicklas (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), where she identifies a 'genetic turn' in adaptation studies already in Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, N.Y., 1978).

⁸ Stam, "The Theory and Practice of Adaptation," 3.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 31.

¹⁰ See, as an example among many, the Deleuzian and biosemiotically inflected idea of the vitality of media in Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹¹ This is not to say that these issues no longer matter (see Jack Boozer, ed. *Authorship in Film Adaptation* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 2008), but that they have to be placed alongside other considerations developed under what I have described as a biocultural framework. I have found to be extremely helpful the chapter by Frank P. Tomasulo, "Adaptation as Adaptation. From Susan Orlean's *the Orchid Thief* to Charlie (and "Donald") Kaufman's Screenplay to Spke Jonze's Film," in this same collection.

¹² John Hodgkins, *The Drift: Affect, Adaptation, and New Perspectives on Fidelity* (Bloomsbury: New York, 2013), 18.

¹³ Gerald Early, "American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1997).

¹⁴ Ken Burns, *Baseball, 1994*: "6th Inning."

¹⁵ "Pauch May Take Punch out of Robby," *Chicago Defender* 25 February 1950.

¹⁶ The films are *Beau Travail* (1999), inspired by Melville's novel *Billy Budd*, and *The Intruder* (2004), inspired by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "L'intrus," (Paris: Galilée, 2000). See Jean-Philippe Renouard and Lise Wajeman, "The Weight of the Here and Now: Conversation with Claire Denis, 2001;" and James S. Williams, "'O Heave! O Heave Away, Heave! O Heave!': Working through the Author in *Beau Travail*," both in *Journal of European Studies* 34, no. 1-2 (2004).

¹⁷ In my essay on the film I give several examples of this visual accommodation, the most glamorous being the harmonizing aesthetics used in the 1947 *Time* magazine cover, where Robinson's face is swallowed up by a sea of white baseballs.

¹⁸ Jean-Charles Régine Michelle, "'I Think I Was Rape': Black Feminist Readings of Affect and Incest in *Precious*," *Black Camera* 4, no. 1 (2012): 143.

¹⁹ David Edelstein, "When Push Comes to Shove," *New York*, 1 November 2009. Cited in Carol Henderson, "The Abject and the Grotesque: Broken Bodies, Broken Dreams, and the Lost Promise of Harlem," *Black Camera* 4, no. 1 (2012): 210

²⁰ For the idea of 'pornotropes' see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81. For an account of the complicated relationship between empathy, victimization, and desire see also Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ For this argument and a close analysis of the film see Alessandra Raengo, "Shadowboxing," and *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, 60-68. Nicole Fleetwood employs the expression "excess flesh" in her chapter on colorism in *Troubling Visions*, 71-104.

²² Catachresis is the trope we use to attribute a name to something that does not have one, by making metaphorical associations, and then forgetting that we did. For example: the leg of the chair, or the feet of the mountain. Or, for example: black. Catachresis grafts literal and figural elements (it is figurative but it *performs* as if literal) in ways that have profound phenomenological implications as well because they create a cross-referencing between vision and touch. See at least Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978); Lee Edelman, *Transmemberment of Song. Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The

Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

²³ Crawford, "The Counterliteracy of Postmelancholy," 205.

²⁴ Richardson Riché, "Push, Precious, and New Narratives of Slavery in Harlem," *Black Camera* 4, no. 1 (2012) argues that both novel and film share formal traits with slave narratives. On the intermingling of race and inanimacy see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Crawford, "The Counterliteracy of Postmelancholy," 202.

²⁶ Henderson reports Oprah's reaction after seeing the film, which she describes as ecstatic excess she registered in her own body. Carol E. Henderson, "The Abject and the Grotesque: Broken Bodies, Broken Dreams, and the Lost Promise of Harlem," *Black Camera*, 4, no 1: 92.

²⁷ As Sobchack explains, the term *cinesthetic* is meant to comprise the way in which the cinematic experience triggers and relies on both synaesthesia (or intersensoriality) and coenaesthesia (the perception of a person's whole sensorial being). At stake is the possibility to explain how meaning emerges from the conjunction of the spectator's bodies and cinematic representation; see "What My Fingers Knew," 67.

²⁸ "Somewhere a Child Is Desiring You: A Thought Experiment for Those Not in Need/Kid Orientalism: How a Global Future for Child Sexuality Is Now Surfacing," in papers presented at the *Center for 21st Century Studies* (University of Wisconsin-

Milwaukee 2012) Kathryn Bond Stockton emphasizes the stunning moment in *Push* in which Precious discovers to orgasm during her father's abuse. The film has been at times criticized for seemingly shying away from the question of Precious's forms of pleasure but I believe instead that it has made the provocative choice of leveraging the phenomenological structure of catachresis in order to make the viewer face the complexity of these feelings, in-between porno-realism and social protest.

²⁹ This is the Deleuzian question Michele Beverly poses in her PhD dissertation: what can black bodies can do in order to transcend, or live *through*, the visual constraints of blackness? Michele Prettyman Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (Georgia State University, 2012).

³⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.