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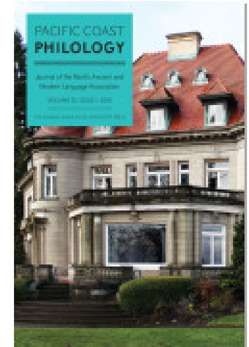

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Reading Against the Absent Referent

Bare Life, Gender, and *The Cow*

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Abstract: Ariana Reines's 2011 publication from Fence Books, *The Cow,* shocked readers with graphic depictions of brutal sexual and animal violence. The poems harness the violent language of the slaughterhouse to work through the violence enacted against women, while Reines incorporates her own, more lyrical voice. By juxtaposing institutional, instructional language with "new sentences" reminiscent of Gertrude Stein, *The Cow* brutally rips the poem free from glossy or romanticized perceptions of violence and selfhood. While Reines explicitly compares gendered violence to cows as "pieces of meat" in a commodity culture, this article asks how such a reading intersects with theories on "the" animal, ecofeminism, and bare life. The article examines poetry as a site for resisting hegemonic anthropocentrism. By focusing on language as the often-used rationale for the intersections of species and gender dualisms, this article asks after ways that language can illuminate moments for disrupting gendered and species violence. This includes approaching Reines's book through the lens that problematizes bare life through feminist animal theorists, such as Greta Gaard and Carol J. Adams, and Anat Pick's concept of "creaturely poetics."

Keywords: ecofeminism, ecopoetics, critical animal theory, poetry, vulnerable bodies, bare life, biopolitics

For what does it mean when the aspiration of human freedom, extended to all, regardless of race or class or gender, has as its material condition of possibility absolute control over the lives of nonhuman others?

—Cary Wolfe

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I have to get to the other side of the animal.
—Ariana Reines

Introduction

The Cow, a book of poems by Ariana Reines that was published by *Fence Books* in 2006, opens with an epigraph from Gertrude Stein's poetic essay on grammar, *Sentences and Paragraphs*: "Sucking is dangerous. The danger of sucking." Reines introduces her work by quoting a poet who uses grammar to defamiliarize, setting expectations for her own book's techniques. The quote, with its repetition of "sucking" and its evocation of the book's title and theme, references the species in Reines's title—the cow—to metaphorically conflate the human and cow through a shared trope of sexually exploited female bodies. Yet *The Cow* does not work through an explicit comparison to Steinian poetry, but rather, borrows the metaphor of the woman as cow, relying on decentered grammar's rhetorical power to construct a female human experience resistant to dominant modes of more linear and hierarchical ideologies. The poems also lift text from slaughterhouse instructions and juxtapose it with lyrical text about human female bodies exposed to sexualized violence. The poems veer away from narration, a singular and identifiable speaker, and even regular stanzaic form. Through these techniques, Reines's work both reveals and problematizes the biopolitics[1] of gendered life in a post-9/11 landscape.

Central to this theme of human female suffering, then, are both the symbolic and real lives of animals and their own experiences of suffering. Whereas "wild" animals approach global extinction, domestic "pets," cartoons, stuffed animals, and the "live stock" of abattoirs proliferate. Beings that used to distinguish and identify the human disappear even as replicas, metaphors, and human-modified and consumed nonhuman animals increasingly populate spaces and narratives. This calls attention to a species-based identity boundary between "us" and "them," humans and non-humans, even as the "real" counterparts disappear. By examining the roles of metaphors in reproducing biopolitical projects that "make live" certain populations and "let die" others, this paper will interrogate the potential possibilities and limitations in Reines's use of "the cow" and her poems' focus on European trauma, such as the Holocaust. *The Cow* seems to foreground the experience of human females as it insists upon keeping other species in the realm of metaphor. I will argue that this is a humanist project, asking where Reines's focus on shared, physical vulnerability reaches outside or remains tied to the same power paradigms it critiques. Toni Morrison's practice of reader-based racial formations is helpful in these questions for deploying a method of how species and gender formations intersect in the human and nonhuman animals of Reines's *The Cow*.

In her book-length essay, "Playing in the Dark," Toni Morrison argues that racial formation happens in literature, but more actively in how a population reads literature. Morrison does not look to texts as representative of "white" or "black" experience, but rather, as texts that can be read by an audience to produce an understanding of race. For Morrison, this happens regardless of how accurately the work represents the time or intent of the author. Morrison's methodology for looking at how the act of reading itself constructs social identities requires examining how different readings of *The Cow* might uphold humanism's organizing tenants while formally disavowing them. Simply diagnosing a text as racist, species-ist, or sexist denies the active role of reading itself. Can moments in *The Cow* be read as resisting this violence without foreclosing the reality of how actual beings are exposed to death and violence? In particular, this methodology of asking what a text does now, or how to read, illuminates how literature can foster resistance through the practice of reading. As I will argue, Reines's intervention in humanism takes place through the ways her text can be read. The absent referent[2] in *The Cow* for bare life, the nonhuman life of the cow, marks its presence when readers can examine how metaphor, necessary to poetry, engages with a gendered concept of "bare life." As Carol J. Adams points out in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, many feminists "appropriate the metaphor of butchering without acknowledging *the originating oppression of animals that generates the power of the metaphor*." The result translates "the material reality of violence constantly into controlled and controllable metaphors" (763; emphasis added). Reines's work complicates this logic, and can be read as an instance of what Anat Pick terms "creaturely poetics": it "exceeds [language's] communicative function" to reach "the site of its antithesis, the ontology of animals" (162) at the root of humanist identity hierarchies. This raises the "question of human and animal being . . . implicated in the encounter with animality and the figure of the animal" (163). I will ask how the possibilities of poetry's participation in a more expansive ecopoetics can reinforce the reader's role in challenging hierarchies of human and nonhuman suffering. I will also argue that *The Cow* remains tied to humanist structures by relegating the mortality of nonhuman animals to the realm of the figurative. One point of intervention in *The Cow,* and the organizing element to these questions and arguments, is how Reines produces a "halt" throughout her poems, creating a temporal space that invites the reader to fill the space left marked by the absent referent.

In an effort to illuminate this potential intervention in Reines's work, I will first examine how Reines uses Steinian grammar to perform the experience of physical vulnerability through language. In order to resist humanist imperatives to transcend the body, the poems insist upon the exploited body's trauma. Such bodily vulnerability can formulate an identity that destabilizes

Descartes's "thinking" and Levinas's "other," blurring dualistic concepts of "thought" and "body" often used to elevate an essentialized human. Yet, discarding Cartesian dualisms raises questions about how nonhuman animals fit into the biopolitical, gendered paradigm: do they, too, experience "bare life"?[3] This then opens to questions around what groups of people—human and nonhuman species alike—are made to experience intersecting bare life through species-ist logics. By closely reading Reines's engagement with language, I will also attend to ways that Reines seems, initially, to resist a complete engagement with what her poetics implies for nonhuman animal life. What is at stake in her project of reducing it to "the cow," or to a singularized metaphor? In stabilizing female identity as human to protect it from being deemed solely animal, what structural violence is permitted against human and nonhuman bodies alike? This reading, though, still does not account for the spaces Reines intentionally leaves open to the reader, which can be filled with how readers choose to read the absent referent. In friction with these questions, then, is the question of what alternative forms of embodiment and politics arise in these empty spaces of the poem, in the "halts." In asking how poems depend upon representing and making beings through metaphor, questions about how to resist metaphor's role in reducing a being to the figurative will surface. This opens up a reading of Reines's text that might gesture toward new avenues for ethical engagements on the page between the human, the nonhuman, and their intersecting experiences of exposure to violence.

Bare Life: Biopolitics in Absent Referents

Reines's use of a cow as metaphor for the human female's vulnerable body opens an avenue that could expand beyond species-ist limits, re-negotiating the mind/body binary's role in forming the basis for much of identity-based politics. This is illuminated when Reines's speaker says, "Eat me" (6), describes being dumped into troughs (5), and gestures toward the biological necessity of "holes" and "excrement" (14–15). In such moments, Reines's speaker inhabits the body as a gendered "bare life." Andrew Asibong takes the concept of bare life one step further with *mulier sacra*, "marked as feminine, able to be raped, *and* irredeemably illegal." *Mulier sacra* "exists to be eradicated, yes, but first violated in ever more extreme ways" (175). Reines goes one more step still, recognizing the human female body and its relationship to the cow's nonhuman body in a meat industry as this *mulier sacra*. By drawing a parallel with the cow in an abattoir, she recalls the *mulier sacra* body as "more and more as something inhuman" (Asibong 175), gendered as both female and consumable. Reines engages "not in a politics but rather a *poetics* of material (bare) life" (Pick 1769), a linguistic embodiment of the *mulier sacra*. The weakness in

this term, however, is the prevailing, reductive logic in both Asibong's model and, as I will show, Reines's insistence on the Holocaust and its coextensive camp as the exemplar of bare life. These reductions erase the different experiences of specific and uniquely racialized and historicized people in relation to their plural and material existences. Such a generalization illuminates a species-based ethics that is articulated through race, gender, disease, immunity, and so on; the metaphor for the nonhuman animal makes one species "impure," inscribing a hierarchy of essentialized species, such as the reduction of "human" and "animal." In a poem entitled "A Cleaner, Safer World," Reines demonstrates such biopolitical violence that makes life by coextensively exposing others to death. She does this by juxtaposing slaughterhouse instructions with dissection-based learning (55). Her depiction of the female body as diseased, whether human or cow, becomes essential to how her poems depict a biopolitics that seeks constant purification by reducing and exploiting permeable bodies; a life, human or non, is laid bare in part through forced reproduction, as well as exposure to violence and death. This illuminates how biopolitics depends upon species-based logics.

Reines's poems use the concepts of "*mulier sacra*" and "mad cow" disease to portray and explicate the implicitly nihilistic consumption of selecting which bodies, human and non-human, are exposed to violence and death. Such nihilism becomes possible when biopolitics takes purification to its extreme. By referencing "mad cow" disease in her poems alongside the "disease" of female bodies in society, Reines illuminates how biopolitical exploitation marks different beings as diseased or even as the disease. When she says, "The poisoned nuance that started everything. It was from eating ourselves. It had to be" (46), she alludes to her other poems, where she describes the origin of mad cow disease as cows eating remnants of other cows from the meat packing plant.[4] Cows, thus, contaminate each other after being "made" to live in their own excrement in order to "die" for mass consumption, in turn contaminating those who consume them. Cows create the pure consumer as distinct from themselves by contaminating and being made contaminants; they also reveal how the consumer, by eating the contaminated, is never truly "pure." The slaughterhouse cow stands tenuously, then, as a potential symbol of the construct of both the pure and contaminant as precisely that — a social construct and false binary.

Such a precarious space invites the reader to resist dominant ideologies of bodies read as being more or less valuable based on the construct of purity. Reines's speaker relies on the purity construct to depict how the human female likewise occupies such a space, relating how disease is read as originating from female bodies by conflating her speaker's experience with the cow's own: "Disease is not the only derivative of her" (33–34). This line

implies that disease comes from both the cow's body and the human female body through an ambiguous "she," and by saying it is not the only derivative, the poem implies that disease is still "a" derivative—one result among others. In biopolitics, what is "impure" is an immunological threat to be eliminated through exposure to death. What complicates this elimination of the pure is the side-by-side consumption of those bodies made vulnerable and purity as a negotiable construct that creates a paradox: those deemed diseased are exposed to death or made to live in order to die, but they are also repurposed utilitarian style for consumption, illuminating how the "pure" and consuming population is always vulnerable to becoming contaminated, consumed, and, in turn, contaminants. Reines's enmeshed cow and human females expose the nihilistic trajectory of biopolitical violence, gesturing toward a new space that I will later argue produces alternative models for an ethical engagement.

Later, Reines's speaker makes the relationship between meatpacking plants, forms of patriarchal violence, and biopolitics clearer through explicit references to Nazism: "Siemens was a major consumer of concentration camp labor" (56). Siemens is a meatpacking plant, which makes a gendered, ironic implication through the sexual homophone of the meatpacking plant's name itself. The homophone is an allusion to male ejaculation, sonically linking the potential for male sexual violence to "consumers" of concentration camp labor. Connections between the meat industry and biopolitical warfare similarly become apparent in the poem, as the meatpacking plant produces a bare life labor in the cows alongside the bare life concentration camps. I do not point to this to compare abattoir bare life to human historicized bare life, but rather to point out the need for avoiding generalizations about bare life through historicization: Reines takes the Siemens references to sexual violence, genocide, and species violence further, describing how "humans got brutalized by being packed into cattle cars and dying in them or by them," followed by a scoff from a new voice: "HOLOCAUST FLUFF she says." The scoff is twofold: the often-critiqued analogy of any exploitation to the Holocaust, as well as her implication that the dehumanization metaphor of humans in cattle cars can go both ways. This pause, created by the interjecting scoff, opens the entire text up to a radical questioning of how and for whom the reader creates an absent referent. Can the reader even resist this form of ideological violence, or must the reader halt with Reines's two speakers? How can poetry resist metaphors' capacity to generalize bare life and center, instead, on specific, embodied experiences? The voice in this poem also, after all, scoffs at the act of analogizing, too, which violently compresses the differences in human and nonhuman "camps."

The prevalence of Nazism in these poems, and the term *Holocaust*—a term Jewish populations themselves resist—oversimplifies Nazism's own racial

politics. It also suggests that the Jewish population was not perceived as white enough prior to its reading as a site of inter-white biopolitics. Reines sees both the problem and power of calling upon the event in *The Cow* as hinging upon an absent referent through the Holocaust analogy. For Reines, this reinforces the potential of metaphor to reduce literal lives to the realm of abstraction. The way any potential comparison to mass slaughter becomes either "fluff" to be scoffed at as a reduction of experience to one unspeakable horror, or horror categorically beyond language or articulation can produce the reader's and writer's ability to navigate paradigmatic power relationships. She does this by insisting that the structure of the absent referent can go both ways: it can also make the referent undeniably present, as explored later in this paper. To create a space here for the reader to push against an absent referent logic, Reines halts at analogizing to ask, "Then what" (100). While this could act as a door to the larger implications of her analog—the period instead of the question mark and the context itself—it suggests that the question is rhetorical, or that it is simply a statement beyond which the speaker cannot move. Reines recognizes the problem of absent referent for the Jewish population and opens up a space to recognize it for "the cow" as her own absent referent; she is caught in a form of structural violence, but instead of closing this space, she backs away from it, opening it to the reader and herself. Reines, throughout *The Cow*, sees how suffering dehumanizes humans but also humanizes nonhuman animals suffering through the "process of backward etymology in sociobiological theory," where "human social institutions are laid on animals, metaphorically, and then the human behavior is rederived from the animals as if it were a special case" (Lewotin et al. 250). Reines, for instance, proclaims that such brutalization of transporting humans in cattle cars "in turn humanizes, necessarily, the suffering of the beasts for which cattle cars were made" (100). This, in turn, demonstrates how violence is not dehumanizing, but in fact humanizing: although excessive violence is called "animal" and "animalizing," a description is an example of both backward etymology and acknowledgment of suffering that is only recognized as happening to humans.[5] Reines stops at the "then what" because such a realization often implies that "human suffering" is "demeaned by comparison with animal suffering" (Garber 82). The confusion of what humanizes or dehumanizes, and to what end, makes her project's analogy ambiguous. When the cow's own vulnerability becomes apparent, she suddenly resists full acknowledgment of nonhuman suffering that structurally intersects with human suffering.

Up to this point, Reines has depended upon the demeaning element of any analogy between the human female body and the nonhuman female body to critique the demand that human females transcend beyond embodiment; yet, to critique and question *how* this premise itself is demeaning challenges

the metaphorical use of "cows" for defining the female's specifically human body. "Speaking about the Holocaust," Anat Pick writes, "is not therefore a matter of making language express a special content that categorically defies language—for there is no such content—but of making language open to the excessive reality of the event" (507). Reines invokes this excessive reality through lyricized brutality alongside instructional slaughterhouse text, and it leads her to ask after biopolitical warfare, at which point she halts, uncertain: "Then what." What Reines backs away from in this poem, or circles around, so close to the end of *The Cow* is "a creaturely fellowship grounded in the vulnerability of living bodies that the Holocaust laid bare" (Pick 984). Reines's project, then, seems to initially resist *fellowship* rooted in the very embodiment that she uses to complicate Cartesian and gendered dualisms. That the project halts, here, implies that there is a possibility for a fellowship that more fully resists violent gender binaries that intersect with species-ist assumptions for permitting or protecting against violence. Perhaps the reader, in this space, can determine what such a fellowship looks like. When Reines addresses women, for instance, it is to say, "I know that you are not cattle" (41), and it follows her "then what." While one reading could say this backs away from the implications of a fellowship by asking obliquely what could even come next, another, which gives more agency to the reader and malleability to the text's ideological implications, could say that it produces a temporality capable of expanding toward alternative models of ethical entanglement.

That Reines's comparisons have been mere metaphors is obvious, but this moment reassures human women that mere "animal cattle" are still further excluded; yet switching to the term "cattle" reminds the reader that the cow is a gendered form of "livestock," living stock, or living commodity. Such a shift is bi-directional, making it clear to the reader that the cow itself has not been reduced to the exchangeable living stock implied through the name of "cattle." This creates a space wherein both woman and cow are elevated above the status of not only exchangeable, but even interchangeable commodities. This space can be read as one of creaturely fellowship, where the human and nonhuman female alike share the experience of gendered suffering and inhabit a nonlinear space resistant to the implications of capitalist appellations, such as "cattle." Nonhuman animals in *The Cow*, from "snail" (2) and "gull" (17), to "puppy" (47) and "moth" (45) are only symbolic. They remain stabilizing agents for the overgeneralized *mulier sacra*. They remain absent referents to remove the female human from absent referent status. Despite this, a creaturely fellowship can occur in the spaces Reines leaves open, which are rooted in the psychosomatic reality of the body and mind becoming enmeshed and resistant to exploitation, even if the reality of suffering is not granted solely on species similitude or recognition.

Reines's moments with nonhuman animals are not explicitly "moments of communion with other lives" (Pick 1364); rather, Reines initially seems to "[experience] her lapsed humanity as trauma" in addition to "loss" (Pick 1770). This can be reshaped in the "halt," where the lapse becomes less clearly that of the explicitly human. This allows Reines's poems to use the trauma to reshape or undermine hierarchizing divisions between nonhuman and human. Even as Reines revels in embodiment, demonstrating a shared physicality of living, and even as her "then what" momentarily opens *The Cow* to her analogy's implication for nonhuman lives, she seems to close the analogy by making the cow mere metaphor. This reading would not account for the agency of the reader in her more halting moments, which can create a space for acknowledging the actual cow's role in producing and sharing in the experience of physical vulnerability. Lippit terms such moments, or halts, as the "magnetic animal . . . on the verge of uttering words," where it emits "cries, affects, spirits, and magnetic fluids" that brush against language but do not "enter" it. Reines's cow does not speak, but rather is described through Reines's speaker, including its "affects, spirits, and magnetic fluids" that come out of it through the process of factory farming. Lippit and Agamben define this as "magnetic" because it draws the world-forming subject "toward an impossible convergence with the limits of world." This temporal space for the reader, then, is the most crucial to Reines's ecopoetic ethics. Reines creates a magnetic animal, "the cow," and undermines the distinction of world-forming and being captivated by the world, refusing to deny the cow its own, individual mortality by incorporating a space and time beyond what is immediately recognized as strictly human language. Reines also mitigates this species anxiety within the biopolitical paradigm for the human female through the circling asp, a transformative metaphor explored in the following section: the grammar of riveting, and the halt on the path to species transcendence.

Vulnerable Bodies: A Grammar

To produce this halt, *The Cow* insists on the body as necessary, vulnerable, and as both equally valuable as and enmeshed with the mind. Reines makes this insistence both thematically and syntactically; thematically, she insists on the body in lines such as, "Are you so intelligent that body doesn't have you in it" (93), "puncture me so I can resemble being alive" (14), and descriptions of defecating "with the door open" and the speaker tasting her own "shit" as revelry (15). These moments, among others, emphasize physical experiences of life, including those deemed "impure," such as the "holes" associated with women as needing to be "plugged" and excrement itself. Exploring physical existence that resists Cartesian hierarchies of what counts as human reinforces

moments in her text where she depicts the body as both holding her back from transcendence and granting her existence. She starts a poem saying, "No body means you are finally free" and ends it with the complication of "My whole body writes" (38), removing the mind as locus for human creative potential and insisting on the body, which remains vulnerable to permeability. By focusing on an experience of vulnerability through permeability, which is a shared, physical experience of existence between species, *The Cow* performs important work for reevaluating points of structural violence against human bodies as intersecting with non-human bodies. Reines's stress on physical bodies' value also pushes against biopolitics at a syntactic level that can then challenge linear notions of time and the body's bounds of perception. An initial investigation of Reines's Steinian grammar can then work through syntax's implicit logics, where she creates a poetics of vulnerability at species boundaries.

Reines begins such defamiliarization by demonstrating the constructed nature of linear time. The first occurrence appears in the first line of *The Cow*, "The day is a fume" (1). From the poem called "MILK DEBT," this line sets up a declarative statement before it foils expectations of factual declarations by shifting into sense-based metaphor. The sentence begins with a clear, seemingly concrete subject, "the day," that then expresses a type of being, "is," which implies that what follows will be a literal statement. Instead, a metaphor completes the statement. The day does not become something literal; rather, it becomes figurative, a metaphor that is tangible but difficult to physically grasp, a "fume." The metaphor calls attention to the performance in saying a day is anything concrete by making the day something transparent and temporary, ungraspable as a metaphor. This move calls attention to the figurative nature of any statement about a day, which is a constructed unit of time. This foils expectations about the subject of the sentence, decentering the power of a linear sentence construction: it begins with the concept of a day seeming a literal subject of the sentence, and continues to the evaporation of a day through the metaphor of a "fume." This syntactic defamiliarization is central to Reines's work in creating a poetics that focuses on bodily experiences of the world as opposed to what is perceived as traditionally logical, thought-oriented experiences. Like Derrida's work in *Of Grammatology*, which argues that language shapes reality instead of language reflecting outside ideas or reality (157–64), Reines's poems use language and its limits to create differing experiences of time and reality at the sentence level, including through concepts of "day." Linear time may be seemingly concrete, but in this line it exposes itself as abstract, a construct that corresponds to measurable units of time and who or what gets to be a "subject" of a sentence.

If language can shape new realities that resist thought as distinct from and then privileged over the body, Reines uses it not only to describe nonhuman

animals and experiences, but also to partially create them through the grammar itself. If the day is a construct of linear, definitively bound time, and the sentence unfolds in a linear logic, defamiliarizing this linear structure can put in question human language as sole constructor of time. Such syntax is essential to how Reines elevates vulnerable bodies that complicate the "I think" imperative, denying a simple binary of the mind and body. This, in turn, complicates a species binary predicated on such a divide. Such defamiliarizing techniques create embodiment at the syntactic level—a "creaturely" poetics rooted in the physical performance of language. Questioning what counts as language, and therefore human language, also questions language as specific to the human species or as strict abstraction, if such a thing exists. When Reines says, for instance, "The light an asp rivets it" (2), she creates new perceptions of the world through syntax itself, playing the potential perception of a snake. Here, the expectation of "in" is turned into "it"; the sentence starts with the grammatical object instead of the subject and then returns to its object. The sentence circles around on itself like an "asp" eating its tail: "the light" initially appears as subject, but then the subject is the asp who "rivets" an object. To rivet something is to transfix it, much like a snake moves around the stationary as it circles. Instead of ending on "rivet" or adding a modifier after the verb, Reines ends on a simple "it." The pronoun seems to reference "the light," making what was the subject into, also, the object. The reference is ambiguous, however, because of the defamiliarized syntax. The syntax thereby circles around the asp, mimicking a snake that circles around an object. The sentence performs the hinge upon the actual word for stasis, hinging, a "rivet," and creates an alternative perception. This imaginative occupation of nonhuman perception through language play also decenters presumed subject-making in classic humanism's "I think" making an "I am."

The "light" in this poem potentially refers to primordial experience, as the poem in which it appears, "BOOK FORGIVE EVERYTHING," narrates a variation on origin mythology: it begins with "wind" and then light from a "star." The star is then compared to blonde "hair," invoking the presence of biological life, then "muds" and the "asp" itself. This initial point of light is also called a "navel" and "the world's nipple," making the universe both a creation of and part of a mammal. The poem moves through this process to the point of a "snail" eventually beginning the process of evolving to "mammalian." This implicit origin story is not a linear occurrence of nonhuman matter becoming nonhuman animal and then human animal, but rather jumps among these states before engaging with biological evolution: the move from snail to "mammalian." The confusion over nonhuman or human animals coming first, along with the similarly nonlinear experience of the asp's circling, challenges humans as the primary subjects on a thematic level in addition to

syntactic. Such moments also gesture toward the potential in Reines's poems for ambiguous moments of alternative temporalities, providing the space for readers to reevaluate how the human and nonhuman species intersect. This sentence by Reines about creation, for instance, enacts its own circling and provides a physical experience of the asp circling around itself, presenting a form of life potentially before human animal life, but also potentially after; linear "progress" is decentered. The nominalizing of "rivet" resembles the "halt" in Reines's "then what," and this halt creates a sudden renegotiation of how movement occurs outside linear time as linked to distinct spaces, such as the pinpoint where an asp rivets.

Writing Against a (Gendered) Cartesian-Based Humanism

While moments such as the "asp" exemplify defamiliarized syntax to shift readers' perceptions of subject and object relationships, alternate perceptions are also present in seemingly more straightforward, grammatically "correct" sentences, such as, "Are you so intelligent that your body does not have you in it" (93). This line's abnormality is subtle—it exchanges a question mark for a period, despite being interrogative instead of a declarative. This makes the sentence's locution undetermined, performing the rhetorical nature of its question by supplying the answer in a statement. The defamiliarization also happens in part through the line's location within the book; it arrives near the end of almost one hundred pages of poetry that inscribe the pain of a vulnerable body in response to gendered violence and abattoirs: "but bleeding legs" (13), "two troughs into which he dumped me" (5), and "long night of the guts" (8), and entire pages of slaughterhouse instructions alongside graphic depictions of sexual violence. At this point in the book, such a question about the divide between body and mind can be posed as also a declaration because its reality has continuously performed through expressions of a body undeniably in pain. This line also arrives in a poem entitled "SECONDS," which has the double meaning of second helpings at a meal and the second as a unit of time, marking a relationship between concepts of bodies consumed and time's constructed units. The rest of the poem goes on to describe how "everything" is the "factory" in which cows are milked, with the poems describing how a dairy factory marks bodies as both gendered and rendered consumable through reproduction. Throughout the book, for instance, human female bodies correspond to other female species on a dairy farm by being treated as "full of" milk, sexualized, and exploited in part through procreation.

As Reines makes the relationship between female and cow bodies explicit through intersecting forms of violence, she denies both the relevance of physical exploitation and the reality of psychological trauma. More directly, this relationship complicates the mind and body binary by insisting upon the

usefully messy reality of the psychosomatic. This becomes an example of the ambiguous space where a reader can opt into or out of different ethical imperatives. One example is in "Blowhole": "A day exist so I can not think" (4). The plural verb with a singular subject bends the sentence's syntactic logic, resisting a straightforward reading of what and how existence happens. By making "the day" the first subject, the sentence displaces the "I" of consciousness with an abstract concept of time. The echo of this line with the day as a "fume" re-inscribes the concept of time and day as abstract and performed by language itself; day has moved from a measure of time that exists to a figurative construct through "fume," eventually shifting to the abstraction of thinking itself. This nonlinear evolution of a concept in relation to language distorts distinctions between abstract and concrete performances of time, but also of beings as dividable into concrete bodies and abstract minds. The title of the poem itself presents the absurdity of a mind and body binary: "SECONDS" can refer to the construct of a unit for measuring linear time, but it can also represent the all-too concrete result (physical bodies turned to food) of second helpings in a cow-filled meal. Here, a new lens alters temporality: the double meaning of a word describing both a unit of time and violent consumption. Alternative perceptions of time, again, become metaphorically tangible, embodied and distinct from more linear productions of time. Other lines before "SECONDS" reinforce the sarcasm of the rhetorical question about the mind and body binary as an absurdity of Cartesian philosophy's proposal that humans obtain their human essence and self through "thinking": "I am."

The existence of "day" as a figurative product of thought is contradicted by the inability to think at all because of "day's" social construction. The paradox, here, is that if the day exists only in thought, how does it exist for a body that cannot think it into existence, or whose reality is denied because of its inability to think day into an existence that is recognized by dominant social codes of time? The logical cue of "so" implies that because of this paradox, the speaker cannot engage in constructing the recognized unit of a day as the primary, subjective experience. On a sentence level, the line resists the Cartesian project of subjectivity through a thinking "I," using the linear logic's rhetoric to make an illogical, nonlinear argument. Here, the existence of an abstract concept as subject denies existence based on physical experience. The violence of performative language that gives agency to one abstract concept over a physical body in pain becomes clearer in a poem that continuously re-inscribes physical pain. These physical experiences, in turn, have the potential to usurp any ability to think figurative concepts into existence, such as measurable time: "A day exist so I cannot think."

This rebuttal of only certain existences as valuable and protectable follows a moment of brutal violence in the poem, which highlights vulnerable bodies

undergoing a trauma that alters the psychological reality of those bodies, which means the trauma also insists upon psychosomatic and physiognomic experiences. The speaker, for example, describes a desire to die in the third person: "SHE want him to have murdered her" (4). The altered subject and verb agreement plays with the singular and plural, hinting at a trauma that cannot make the relationship between subject and verb clear. This is heightened by how the line capitalizes "she" as if to reinforce "her" as the desiring subject over the action itself. Is he the murdering subject, or is she the desiring subject? This trauma corresponds to physical violence that depends upon confusing the subject as violator or subject as "asking for it": "So he BROKE her eye and she face brain" (4). Placing the noun of a body part ("face") where a verb goes, and making the singular or plural experience ambiguous, become part of the speaker's physical experience of gendered violence. The capitalized "BROKE," meanwhile, ensures that the violence in the sentence as a verb and as the locus of experience remains at the forefront of the experience. This violence breaks the eye and forces it to face inward, a famous metaphor for abstract self-examination that denies the violence's attempt to eliminate participation in Cartesian subjectivity; however, the broken eye sees not a metaphysical self, but an all-too physical brain, refusing to validate either the participation in or exclusion from such subjectivity. Once again, through defamiliarized syntax, Reines invites readers into alternative space for constructing logic and being outside of dominant modes of subjectivity. Violence, here, is not an abstract product of thinking as existence. Rather, violence is a part of existing prior to the abstract realization of it. The speaker wants to lose consciousness, to escape abstract thought, as it is imbricated within reflections upon her physical exploitation. This opposes any self that would privilege Cartesian logics: "All this I AM is bad writing" (98). By inhabiting bodily vulnerability, Reines's speaker refuses to and cannot exist simply through thinking, or "I am." Instead, Reines's speaker insists on the value of creaturely fellowship, or embodied writing that productively imbricates a mind with a physical experience. As it resists "I am" logic, the poem interrogates an intellectual metaphysics that would grant protection to those deemed human enough for that protection. The body becomes an ethical site for articulating vulnerability and refiguring abstract/concrete dualisms. Reines's critique of how women are "reduced" to cows, however, insists upon a species hierarchy that inscribes the cow's status as the new absent referent, remaining tied to the very forms of violence that she critiques. This concept of the cow as absent referent demonstrates how metaphor is capable of reducing a being to the purely figurative status, even if the referent does not necessarily perform this move, thereby reinstating an abstract/concrete binary. This stages one of poetry's dilemmas, as the mode classically depends upon metaphor and

abstraction. In *The Cow*, this dilemma surfaces in repeated references to the nonhuman cow, which is forced to take on the role of metaphor to remove the human female from that space. The cow becoming an absent referent complicates *The Cow*'s ethics.

While Reines does move away from hierarchizing body and mind, she nevertheless re-inscribes her book's cow as beneath the speaker, a human female, which complicates her insistence upon psychosomatic and physiognomic subjectivities. Using the cow as a metaphor reflects Reines's realization that a woman being strung up and a cow being strung up both happen in part because of reproductive faculties. The imperfect but still analogous relationship could potentially lead toward a new politics for nonhuman and human animal relationships to violence by examining the gendered nuances of being made to "serve or [be] served as food" (Gaard 18). As Gaard notes, "the gender that is associated with other species (women) and the species that are associated with the exploitation of femaleness (domesticated animals) become locked in interconnected oppressions" (123). This logic undermines ethics that would ignore its relationship to other species and reinstate a hierarchized species binary. Centering the violence on physicality intertwined with perceptions could potentially question which bodies are protected, which are exposed, which are "butchered," and why. Thus, when other species in *The Cow* remain figurative metaphors above which Reines's speaker must rise, the book's intervention produces a "halt" in its ethical implications. In this space, opportunities arise for re-examining ethical engagements that occur on the page between species.[6]

Reines recognizes what Birke points out, that "in male-supremacist (patriarchal) cultures, the association of women and animals reinforces their subordinate status" (18), and she uses this to demonstrate the violence against both human and nonhuman female bodies. Whether or not her poetry truly moves the nonhuman animal beyond mere metaphor or even absent referent, though, is difficult to ascertain. Reines creates through her capital letters "a sort of scream to the world, 'What are you doing? And why are you still doing it?'" (Adams 121), but does she do it for nonhuman animal bodies, as well? Or does she "[transmute]" the nonhuman animal's "fate" in service of the human female body's own fate by keeping the nonhuman animal in the realm of metaphor? Does she re-inscribe the binary of human and animal that underlines the binary of male and female? Does the "death experience" of Reines's cow only "act to illustrate the lived [experience]" (Adams 751) of Reines's human female? Moments of pornographic butchery in Reines's poems, for instance, consider biological embodiment as it ambiguously interconnects with abstractions around species. Such moments create an ambiguous interspecies biological similarity, which seems at once to revert to a zoological

similarity between "others" in order to justify protection and to also complicate this logic of similitude. As Carol J. Adams asks, and Reines's poems touch upon, "Do we have to have similarities established in order to stop harming animals" (Tyler 121)? The act of making the human "less than" human to question the constructs of "human" identity at once presents the possibility of ethical responsibility to nonhuman animals and forecloses it. Reines illuminates the plights of both human and nonhuman female animals, even if she seems to rely on cultural metaphors that elevate the human to perform this work. Reines, by using the cow as metaphor, also calls her reader out on how such a reading acknowledges that metaphors can go both ways; by comprehending the implications of the cow to become an absent referent, the reader can insist on acknowledging the cow's experience of suffering, refusing to use it *as* an absent referent: ambiguity in spaces of similitude.

(re)Thinking: The Human/Animal Binary

The Cow continuously reexamines how gendered or racialized groups have bodies that are made vulnerable along lines of profitability through dualistic notions of the mind and body: "It's dangerous to have feelings when you don't have any money" (7). Whether or not Reines conflates suffering with feelings is, in this line, unclear. Her poems in the book leading to this point focus on physical suffering, whereas feeling is associated with more cognitive, supposedly more complex emotions of recognizing how that suffering implicates mortality. However, because the poems consistently interconnect experiences of nonhuman animal suffering with human suffering, and potentially do the same for "feelings" and "suffering," they anthropomorphize[7] what is typically considered a "human" characteristic, which is recognition of pain leading toward mortality. As Akira Mizuta Lippit notes, "Death requires a certain calculation toward finitude, toward 'infallible consequences,' and without such reflective faculties animals remain in the world undying" (35). The very ability to "feel" and comprehend mortality creates the possibility of true mortality. When Reines says, "Wanted too bad to be beyond feeling/In sensation only/And then everything dissolved" (87), she sees how ridding the body of *either* sensation or feeling results in death, that eliminating suffering and the corresponding feeling can only end in dying. Denying that it results in death is part of the philosophical footwork of the suffering/feeling binary, which Lippit points out then allows death itself to seem incorporeal or impossible. The crisis of being "useful" beyond consumption, or protected by the status of "human," appears throughout Reines's articulations of feeling as inseparable from suffering, such as the all-capitalized scream: "MY BRAINS COULD BE USEFUL IF I DIDNT FORCE THEM TO FEEL" (27). To be able to not feel is

at once a privilege of a body that is not vulnerable as well as a choice that goes against the survival imperative: to experience suffering in order to resist death. This quote conflates suffering with feeling, but it also points toward this form of suffering's paradox: when placed in opposition to thinking, bodies that cannot secure distance from physical vulnerability must continue to "feel" their suffering in order to be alive, even as they must desire to "stop" feeling. This must happen in order to handle being alive while in such pain, making feeling and suffering as inseparable as the mind and body.

What is at stake, then, for a poetics of embodiment that leads toward a new ethics? Jeremy Bentham's question for nonhuman animals, "can they suffer," as opposed to "can they talk?" or "can they reason," or can they say 'I AM,'" seems to overturn logics that justify violence against nonhuman animals by admitting to an interconnected experience of human and nonhuman gender formations. Reines takes this question even further by insisting that the dualistic logic behind distinguishing between feeling and sensation—and therefore suffering—justifies even interhuman violence against those who do not have resources for advocacy against or ways to move away from that suffering. Reines reopens Bentham's response to Descartes in *The Cow* by repeatedly articulating "bodily vulnerability—the creatureliness—we share with other animals" (Pick 260), which problematizes "feeling" as distinct from "suffering." Such challenges to the suffering/feeling binary present how the cow in the abattoir and the female body experience interconnected justifications for their exposure to violence. In the poems that follow these questions of the feeling/suffering binary, Reines reveals the way a philosophy distinguishing between the two evades the reality of violence. This happens through the colloquial, "We don't care what the fucker feels" (8). The dramatic shift in tone and voice imitates the language used in violence against nonhuman animals, simultaneously implying that whether or not they feel is not truly a defense against the violence. It points out how the violence is predicated upon inflicting pain, regardless of the philosophical distinctions around feeling or suffering. This sentence moves past making perhaps evasive distinctions in order to get at the premise of the violence. By using "fucker," Reines also connects this philosophy to sexual violence, reducing the object of violence to precisely that—an unnamed recipient paradoxically called what is being done to it. This move also invokes the earlier conflation of who "wants" what; who is the active subject and who is being violently relegated to both a receiving and giving object.

Through the "long night of the guts" of her poems (8), Reines describes the privilege of an existence based solely on consciousness by creating a life that does feel the pain of suffering from physical exploitation as a constant reminder of existence. By adding the voices that do not even "care" what the "absent referent" feels, a line within the poem can at once demonstrate the

problems of a feeling/suffering binary as well as what such binaries do, which is evade the experience of physical exploitation. By demanding to be released from feeling, but then realizing sensation only dissolves living itself, Reines further complicates any logic used to inflict suffering upon those deemed incapable of knowing mortality. Reines's speaker, here, desires a death because it allows the subjugated human and nonhuman animal bodies to move beyond a definition of life, or even humanization that places the experience of physical suffering and sensation below cognitive abstractions. As Reines's speaker points out, feeling is no longer an ideal toward which to strive when the reality of psychosomatic and physiognomic trauma occurs.

By saying that the end of either suffering or feeling—a less clear binary than philosophizing about suffering dictates—does result in death, Reines complicates justifications of violence against nonhuman animals in addition to exploited human females. For Reines, this means questioning the reality of the human female body as being capable of death or replaced symbolically by any other female body. The question of binaries that continue within the paradigm of allowing violence toward one species remains at stake. As Lippit describes: "A paradox surrounds animal death. Since animals are denied the faculties of language, they remain incapable of reflection, which is bound by finitude, and carries with it an awareness of death." Thus, Lippit explains, nonhuman animals culturally cannot die—they "simply expire, transpire, shift their animus to other animal bodies" (187). In Reines's poems, the cow, too, dies again and again, "rubbered, hated, ended, ended" (22), and then brought back to be "a DISH," "branded" and then a "carcass" (27). However, is this a real cow, a real life capable of death, or is Reines appropriating the experience of factory-farmed cows in humanist (and those marked as human) societies to illuminate a similar exploitation and denial of finitude for the human female? Does the "the" act as a homogenization of lives or a specification of a particular life? Do her poems re-enact the violence of denying the cow a finite, individual life and death? Readers can choose an alternative interpretation of "the," though, resisting this move as appropriation to reinforce a perception of the cow as a living being with a unique experience of the world. Without foreclosing the violence of a homogenized set of beings, or potential figurative being made to die again, the "the" of the text can elevate the experience of the singular cow being forced into these experiences repeatedly, only to have those who follow it forced into the same experience again and again.

Conclusion

By reaching toward death after physical obliteration, as well as claiming, "My whole body writes" (38), Reines responds to Lippit's observations. She creates

poems that allow for an ambiguous space where the reader can shift away from body/mind binaries. The body writes—not the mind, the hand, or other faculty considered more human than creaturely. Reines describes the experience of inscribing on and creating experience in the world without faculties dominantly considered human, such as those of reason, speech, or even writing with a hand. This, alongside the desire to die, the complication of the feeling/suffering binary, and the insistence on the reality of physical suffering pushes against a form of humanism in order to expose how such binaries can rationalize violence. Reines's "cow" transforms language to gesture toward the possibilities of a subject that "cries" its shared vulnerability through poetic "language," breaking through the boundaries of metaphor and complicating binary identities. Such a movement outside of human language that is also produced by human language creates the ambiguous space that a reader can enter, the unrecognized, potential models for more dynamic ethical engagements. As Wolfe points out, "The reduction of the complex plurality of animals to a singular generality underwrites the poverty of a humanism that thinks it has grounded itself in a human essence, a stable species identity to be secured by contrast with animality" (xii). For Reines, "the" human is ostensibly secured by both a contrast *and* comparison with "the" cow. Representation through the art form becomes entangled with the non-metaphorical industrial agricultural farming that holds nonhuman animals in a perpetual state of dying—one where another "cow" waits to take the place of the cow that dies—by relying upon the reader's horror at the human female being trapped in such a violence.

In her critique of sexism Reines allows readers to push against "the framework of *speciesism*" (Wolfe 1), as she is at times able to leave space for readers to "integrate the *literal* oppression of animals into [her] analysis of patriarchal culture" (Adams 813), such as when she halts at the metaphor's ability to work both ways.[8] If Reines identifies how "we are potential carcasses" (Lippit 179), and if "only as nonsymbolic does the animal inhabit and reshape the human" (1941), then Reines's Steinian poetic embodiment embarks on a project that opens up a space for resisting the anthropocentric realm and seeking out a poetic fellowship of oppressed beings. It remains in question what a poetic project that considers nonhuman animals themselves in their full—not merely symbolic—plurality would look like. However, Reines's halt at the implications of a full fellowship presents potential arenas for where we might begin.

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intersections of critical race theory, queer and feminist theories, and critical animal theory, and she looks to film, cultural studies, and contemporary poetry for sites of analysis. Her poems have appeared in a variety of small journals, including most recently, *The Portland Review*, *The Gold Man Review*, *SHIFT*, and *Otis Nebula*.

NOTES

The epigraphs are from Wolfe 1 and Reines 263.

1. Biopolitics, here, refers to a use of "make live" and "let die" violence against specific populations that are viewed as either "pure" or "contaminants"—typically groups categorized through a lens of beings "[marked] as animal" (Wolfe 43). Biopolitical formations may make privileged populations live by keeping them "safe" from contaminants, which depends on allowing others to be exposed to or become the contaminants, while also constructing the concepts of purity *as opposed to* contaminated. Biopolitics can then also make certain populations live in order to die, such as the slaughterhouse cow. Taken to its extreme, biopolitics becomes a nihilistic project of purification that blurs the distinction between making a life and ending a life, as demonstrated by the example of a slaughterhouse cow; biopolitics constantly narrows, at the same time, who must be exposed to death or made to die in order to refine which population will be protected.
2. The absent referent is a term used by Carol J. Adams to describe how the mind erases the exploited body through the use of metaphor, which in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, is demonstrated through carnivorous, gendered social structures:

   > Behind every meal of meat is an absence. . . . The "absent referent"is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. . . . Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that "meat," meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women's status as well as animals. Animals . . . become the absent referent in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable. (189–90)

3. This term comes from Giorgio Agamben, who describes how "casting out" one group and reducing it to a "bare life" of survival "excluded" from the protected group "constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power," making that bare life into the "sacred man," or "homo sacer" (89).
4. The disease spreads because the cows live and eat in their own excrement and then splatter the insides of other cows when split open. It also spreads when parts from previously slaughtered cows become mixed in what the still-living cows must eat.

5. This metaphor of the cattle cars can thus recall similar nonhuman animal rights arguments, such as the one made by J. M. Coetzee through Elizabeth Costello. When Costello makes the comparison between treatment of animals and the Holocaust, a colleague refuses to show up for her dinner due to what he claims was an insensitive analogy. However, the Holocaust "is part of oblique and not so oblique analogies every day," including inter-species relationships. For instance, Marjorie Garber describes the film *Babe* through this analogy, closely reading a scene where a pig slaughterhouse has images of and allusions to concentration camps. Garber concludes, "The Holocaust is one profound challenge to the use of analogy" (81–82). Yet, a comparison to the Holocaust has similar complications to blanket terms of *homo sacer* and *mulier sacra*: a focus on the Holocaust generalizes experiences through an example of European biopolitics that in the post-war marks the Jewish population as white, creating a site of inter-white biopolitics. Reducing the biopolitical implications of "the cow" and the "human female" to so-called white experiences ignores racial formation implications for groups racialized as non-white while also diminishing them to a generalized "other."
6. Much of feminist literature, for instance, discusses the body without discussing "biological embodiment," which is rooted in the "disciplinary divide": whereas "biology includes non-human animals, and also bodily functions; sociology (and women's studies) primarily focuses on the cultural and social worlds of humanity."
7. In "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law," Barbara Johnson makes the useful distinction between anthropomorphism and its companion forms of metaphor, such as personification, by pointing out that anthropomorphism assumes an essential knowledge of what is properly human: To use an anthropomorphism is to treat as *known* the properties of the human" (190). This distinction can also be useful in thinking through how Reines's entanglement of the female cow and human experience refuses to re-create a strict, reason-based understanding of what is precisely, properly, the properties of the cow or the human female.
8. This insistence also translates into racialization, which reveals illuminating connections between a species-ist rhetoric and racist rhetoric, whether formally or not.

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