

## Gendered Mattering: *The Bridge of Beyond* and the Nonhuman Turn

IN THEIR INTRODUCTION TO A 2015 special issue of *GLQ*, Dana Luciano and Mel Chen acknowledge the sometimes uneasy intersection between studies of race and gender and theories of the non- or posthuman. They argue that if these latter theories do not dispel their universalist foundations, we “may well foreclose in advance some of the new formations that the nonhuman turn hopes to uncover.”<sup>1</sup> Even when studies in the nonhuman turn evince various critiques of anthropocentric discourse, these same critiques sometimes tacitly universalize our working definition of the human, leaving little room for treatments of race and gender.<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault’s claim that what we mean when we say “humanism” has always been dependent on “certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics” emphasizes Luciano and Chen’s point, underscoring the deeply normative nature of the humanist subject.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Sylvia Wynter’s work on the “genres of man” reveals how the human is effectively at the mercy of developments in European sciences and theology. Since the humanist subject is historically contingent (and thus necessarily imbricated in histories of settler-colonialism), Wynter argues that every definition of the human, however they may shift over time, is “made possible only on the basis of the dynamics of a colonizer/colonized relation that the West was to discursively constitute and empirically institutionalize on the islands of the Caribbean and, later, on the mainlands of the Americas.”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I am invested in a critique of the human subject that begins with—rather than comes to include—the subaltern subject. Following Wynter, I also suggest that the particularities of Caribbean colonial modernity are invaluable for grounding this critique.

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**ABSTRACT** This essay reads Guadeloupean novelist Simone Schwartz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Têlémée miracle* (*The Bridge of Beyond*), positioning the novel as a vital archive for decolonizing the so-called ontological turn. In addition to narrativizing the stakes of disavowing the human, the novel situates gendered embodiment at the heart of these concerns, asking whether a movement toward the nonanthropocentric subject is always a movement away from how gender *matters*, and, significantly, how gender matters alongside race. **REPRESENTATIONS** 161. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 70–93. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.161.4.70>.

This essay turns to Simone Schwartz-Bart's novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée miracle* (1972; English title: *The Bridge of Beyond*), which sets its protagonist's tense relationship with her own humanity in rural Guadeloupe. As a child, Télumée Lougandor is certain that she and her grandmother, Toussine, are "not merely two living beings" (*pas seulement deux vivantes*) but "something different, something much more, though [she] did not know what."<sup>5</sup> Following the death of her grandmother, Télumée is raised by the shaman Ma Cia, who "flew about every night over the hills and valleys and cabins" of rural Guadeloupe, "her ordinary human form insufficient for her" (48; 57).<sup>6</sup> Although Télumée quickly becomes enthralled with Ma Cia's teachings, she refuses to learn, as Ma Cia has, the power to transcend her "ordinary human form" (*son enveloppe humaine*). Télumée's refusal is represented as a wariness of exchanging her "woman's shape and two breasts for that of a beast or flying succubus" (*ma forme de femme à deux siens contre celle de bête ou de soucougnant volant*) (186; 194). Despite her insistence on being "much more" than human, Télumée's attachment to her embodied gender ties her to her human form and prevents her from learning the "secrets of metamorphosis" (*le secret des métamorphoses*). Read alongside contemporary theories of the so-called "ontological turn"—the recent effort to center nonhuman agents in critical theory—Schwartz-Bart's novel asks us to consider how gendered materiality figures in recent efforts to move away from anthropocentric notions of subjectivity. *The Bridge of Beyond* asks whether a movement toward the nonanthropocentric subject is necessarily a movement away from how gender *matters* and, significantly, how gender matters alongside race.<sup>7</sup> Because Télumée's existence is marked by both colonial and patriarchal violence, leaving her human form signifies a way to escape her oppressive conditions, even as it entails a loss of her Black womanhood. *The Bridge of Beyond* thus theorizes the stakes of liberatory gain (that is, a freedom from gendered violence and white supremacy) against a potential loss of affirmative subjecthood (that is, woman). In addition to exploring how both Blackness and womanhood are culturally produced as foils for the hegemonic model of the human, the novel imagines a dialectic of refusal that sheds light on the role of Black(-ened) gender in the nonhuman turn. Because Ma Cia's metamorphosis, which signifies a wholesale rejection of the human, also entails living outside the boundaries of race and gender, Télumée's choice between abandoning and staying with the human stages the tension between recent calls to decenter the human and feminist considerations of gendered materiality. I read Télumée's ambivalence, which ultimately prompts her to search for an alternative way of inhabiting her world, as an injunction to work against the implicit universalism that often underpins studies of the nonhuman turn.

This is not to say that considerations of universality are entirely absent from scholarship on the nonhuman turn. To be sure, critiques of anthropocentric and humanist notions of subjectivity feature prominently in the varied forms of “new materialisms.” Of particular relevance here is the work of feminist new materialists, who take issue with the association between the realms of the “feminine” and the “natural” in Western thought. Calling this association “longstanding” as well as “pernicious,” Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo argue that it has made “nature” a “treacherous terrain” for feminism: feminist philosophy that aligns itself with capital-N Nature risks confirming this problematic conflation, just as distancing feminism from nature risks relinquishing potentially rich ground for feminist inquiry.<sup>8</sup> Yet the common refrain among (feminist) new materialists that their theorization of materiality is itself *new*—or, at least, *renewed*—has come to feel increasingly calcified. As Sara Ahmed argues, this discursive trope of newness has the potential to turn matter into a “fetish object,” one that originates in the “desire for a pure theoretical object.” Ahmed’s argument stems from a frustration with a certain kind of presentist discursive tic that erroneously claims that past feminist scholarship has staunchly refused to engage with matter, pivoting instead to the realm of culture. For Ahmed, this narrative is less an oversimplification than a wholesale misreading of the work of foundational scholars like Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sandra Harding. The feminist new materialists therefore risk “establishing new terrain by clearing the ground of what has come before us.”<sup>9</sup>

The purported newness of the feminist new materialisms and the nonhuman turn more generally also implies that these concepts emerge out of the Euro-American academy. As Zoe Todd has argued, the ontological turn—as a “trendy and dominant” Western academic narrative—“spin[s] itself on the backs of non-European thinkers.”<sup>10</sup> Todd’s essay, which opens with an anecdote describing a trip to Edinburgh to watch Bruno Latour give the lectures that would ultimately be published as the collection *Facing Gaia* (2017), recounts her transition from anticipation to frustration as Latour continually failed to “credit Indigenous thinkers for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and all relations.”<sup>11</sup> Rosemary Jolly and Alexander Fyfe, citing Todd, propose that, in order to accurately assess the impact of the so-called “ontological turn,” we must reflect on the turn’s working “conceptual apparatus” and “the debts that this might owe to formerly (and presently) colonized peoples.”<sup>12</sup> In short, the self-styled “newness” of the nonhuman turn more generally—and here I refer not only to feminist new materialisms but also to object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and some strains of posthumanism—obscures the extent to which these “turns” are indebted to non-Western epistemologies.

I contend that *The Bridge of Beyond* serves as literary evidence of this debt and, moreover, that Schwartz-Bart's novel forces us to reckon with how and when gendered embodiment complicates how we understand the post- or nonhuman turn. Rather than claim that no scholar affiliated with the nonhuman turn sufficiently includes studies of colonized persons in their work, I want to suggest that inclusion *as such* is insufficient to the problem at hand. Wynter, whose work extensively documents how the Western subject was produced against—and thus simultaneously with—the subaltern, has claimed that, from the “ultimate mode of otherness based on ‘race,’ other subtypes of otherness are generated,” in which she includes both “the non-heterosexual as the lack of *heterosexuality*” and “women as the lack of the normal sex, *the male*” (emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> It therefore seems vital that coloniality figure prominently in these theories of materiality, both as a corrective to their supposed “newness” and as a tactic to better understand how ontology has been—and continues to be—influenced by hegemonic thought.

Although a number of scholars working in Indigenous, postcolonial, and Black studies have long contested the varied strictures that the (white, Western, male) humanist subject has imposed on racialized subjects, many new materialist thinkers do not emphasize the force that coloniality has exerted on our working conceptions of gender and human life. This absence is worth noting, since, as Alexander Weheliye has argued, “the banning of black subjects from the domain of the human occur[s] in and through gender and sexuality.”<sup>14</sup> Zakkiyah Jackson makes a related argument when she outlines how, historically, scientific and philosophical knowledge “articulate black female abjection as a prerequisite of ‘the human,’” since this form of abjection helps to facilitate hierarchical order.<sup>15</sup> Because *The Bridge of Beyond* figures Télumée's relationship to the human as a kind of *pharmakon*, the novel thematizes these observations: Télumée's human body, positioned as both the guarantor of her gender and the conduit of her subjection, demonstrates the collusion between gender and antiblackness, particularly given the multiple forms of gendered and sexual violence that Télumée experiences over the course of the novel. Taken together, these abuses signal the tendency of gender to function as a kind of border between the “genres” of man; Télumée's body is frequently the vehicle through which she is “banned” from the domain of the human, yet it is also the tether that binds her to the possibility of a redemptive humanity.

In this way, Télumée's relationship to the human is in flux throughout the novel, a dynamic that speaks to larger theoretical concerns about the paradigm of “dehumanization” in African diasporic literature. Jackson has suggested that it is more apt to figure the status of the subaltern in Enlightenment thought as subject to a “plasticized” rather than a “denied”

humanity. Plasticity, in Jackson's analysis, describes the usage of the Black(ened) body as "infinitely mutable" in the logic of antiblackness: in this logic, Black flesh's essence is made malleable, ever in the service of clarifying the borders of the nonmarginalized. Furthermore, Jackson argues that the tendency to rewrite Enlightenment thought by expanding the liberal humanist subject enables scholars to overlook "alternative conceptions of being and the nonhuman that have been produced by blackened people."<sup>16</sup> Jackson's project explores a number of these alternatives in African diasporic literary production, calling attention to the ways that these texts exhibit "unruly conceptions of being" that expose the violence and contradictions at the heart of our demarcation of the human. Because Jackson's analysis focuses on animality as a particularly paradigmatic form of Black abjection—and, by the same token, of transgression against the hegemonic human—her theory of human plasticity is crucial to my understanding of Télumée as well as her mentor, Ma Cia. Presented with the opportunity to learn Ma Cia's methods of transgression, Télumée chooses otherwise. In short, *The Bridge of Beyond* does not culminate in Télumée's abandonment of the human and is not, therefore, a tale of transcendence. In the analysis that follows, I will linger in the space of Télumée's ambivalence, reading it as a demurral of what David Scott might call a "story of resistance" that "operates by constructing a normative expectation of resistance or overcoming."<sup>17</sup> Although Scott's attention to narrative in *Conscripts of Modernity* is couched within his study of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, his criticism is significant here. Scott urges us to imagine different historical and ideological tensions "less as generators of new propositions than as generators of new questions and new demands."<sup>18</sup> My object here is not to propose a reading of *The Bridge of Beyond* that laments Télumée's reluctance to overcome the conditions of her humanity, a reading that would risk reifying a new form of being instead of critically reassessing the production of the human's plasticity.

The production of this onto-epistemological plasticity has deep roots in the project of Caribbean colonial modernity. Wynter has argued that the perpetuation of various human genres was engendered by a large-scale project of theocentric, scientific, and economic discourse that found its first major institutionalization in the Caribbean plantation. For this reason, the plantation and its neocolonial afterlives might well be the most apposite site from which to theorize alternative understandings of the human. My hope is that by figuring Télumée's raced and gendered subjectivity at the core of what it means to be human—and what it means to be otherwise—we might more adequately destabilize the undercurrent of universalism in the non-human turn. Scott has referred to the Caribbean as "the paradigmatic instance of the colonial encounter," claiming that, in addition to being the first non-European instance of settler-colonialism, the region has been

“shaped almost entirely by that founding experience.”<sup>19</sup> The singularity of Caribbean imperialism is also the basis of Édouard Glissant’s famous rejection of *négritude* and subsequent focus on *antillanité*, the fundamental importance of Caribbean epistemologies and cultural production. According to Glissant, “becom[ing] Caribbean” occurs when a Caribbean subject—the product of this paradigmatic colonial encounter—can see that this alienation “first and foremost resides in the impossibility of choice, in the arbitrary imposition of values, and, perhaps, in the concept of value itself.”<sup>20</sup> The alienation at the heart of *The Bridge of Beyond* is substantively different from the one Glissant names in *Caribbean Discourse*, yet I still read Télumée’s ambivalence as a recognition of the impossible demands of her choice. To return once more to Scott, she instructs us that the embrace of a new proposition (abandon the human) is less generative than the series of questions that this alienation provokes.

In Schwartz-Bart’s novel, both Ma Cia and Télumée seek out alternative modes of being-in-the-world, albeit to different effects. While Ma Cia’s eventual abandonment of her human body epitomizes a wholesale rejection of humanist ontologies, Télumée seeks an alternative. Caught between her knowledge of human oppression and the promise of inhuman freedom, Télumée seeks neither an affirmation of “the human” as it has been ideologically constructed nor a total disavowal. The novel thus plots a dialectical process that toggles between adherence and rejection and, in this way, assesses not only the violent plasticization of the human but also the stakes of seeking out other modes of being. I argue that *The Bridge of Beyond* can be read as a narration of dynamic tensions between a call to decenter the human, on the one hand, and the problematic universalizing tendencies of these moves away from the human, on the other. In addition to its thematization of these critical concerns, Schwartz-Bart’s novel repudiates the idea that decentering or abandoning the human works as a cohesive, catch-all solution to the liberal humanist “Man.” Instead, *The Bridge of Beyond* dwells in what might be taken for the *opacité* (opacity) of Télumée’s impossible choice, the “giving-on-and-with” (*le geste du donner-avec*) of Glissant’s vision of Relation, a point I will take up in more detail later.<sup>21</sup> In order to track how this novel enriches our understanding of the intersection between posthumanism and embodied gender in the context of global imperialism, I begin by analyzing the role that gender plays in the novel, paying particular attention to how Télumée’s gendered body mediates her interaction with (and subjectification by) other characters in the novel. Following this, I consider how Schwartz-Bart’s representation of Télumée’s gendered identification foregrounds how the Black female body is integral to current theorizations of the ontological turn. Finally, I reflect on the consequences of Télumée’s decision to stay with the human, even as she comes to understand the possibilities generated by its disavowal.

## (Un)gendering Télumée

In her introduction to the English translation of *The Bridge of Beyond*, Jamaica Kincaid calls the novel “an unforgettable hymn to the resilience and power of women,” noting that the narrator and “characters with heart and courage” are mostly women. Kincaid is primarily referring to the matrilineal line of Lougandor women, of which Télumée is the youngest member. Télumée’s mother disappears from the narrative early in Schwartz-Bart’s novel, and as a result Télumée is sent to live with her grandmother, Toussine. Also called “Queen Without a Name,” Toussine lives on the edge of a rural Guadeloupean community called Fond-Zombi. Upon arrival, Télumée describes Toussine’s cabin as “mark[ing] the end of the world of human beings” (*terminait le monde des humains*), referencing not only the spatial distance between Toussine and the rest of Fond-Zombi but also her conviction that she and Toussine are something “much more” than human (40; 48). Prior to this moment, Schwartz-Bart characterizes the Lougandor women as magnetic, cunning, and resourceful—hence Kincaid’s assertion that the novel is an homage to feminine power. Under the guardianship of Toussine, however, Télumée begins to sense that it is not only possible to be an exceptional woman but also an exception *to* women, or even to humanity in general. As Télumée ages, her relationship to gender becomes increasingly vexed, since gender comes to index her experience of violence at the same time as it tethers Télumée to her female ancestors. Questions of female empowerment slip in and out of focus throughout the novel, serving less as a measure of what Kincaid or other readers might identify as Télumée’s “resilience” than as an index of the force that patriarchal knowledge exerts on her community. I agree with Nadège Veldwachter’s reluctance to read resistance or resilience as the Caribbean canon’s narrative structure *par excellence*. The danger here, according to Veldwachter, is one of “transposing European inherited myths of heroism” onto the Caribbean subject, which risks placing Télumée’s recourse to resistance “in a context where death is believed to be the only heroic solution.”<sup>22</sup> As Télumée narrates her entrance into adulthood, she also narrates how her sexualization is inflected by anthropocentric modes of knowing. Thus, although *The Bridge of Beyond* is, in many ways, exemplary of both feminism’s and postcolonialism’s disidentifications with the dominant humanist subject, the novel demonstrates that womanhood remains governed by anthropocentrism: there is no way to become-woman outside the “genre of man.”

I contend that, in addition to its role as a source of partial empowerment, gender is the site of Télumée’s trouble with humanity. It is both through and because of her gendered materiality that Télumée must reassess her relationship to human subjectivity. The tension between gender

and anthropocentrism that drives the novel resonates with Jackson's assertion that Black womanhood frequently functions as the "limit case" of the human, in large part because of the importance placed on reproduction in colonial science and philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, the events that mark Télumée's ascension into womanhood also mark her lack of adherence to a regulatory biological order. Her childhood romance, which blooms into an adult partnership, deteriorates quickly when she fails to produce a child. In the words of her lover, Télumée, despite her "full breasts" and "deep womb," does not "know yet what it is to be a woman" (*tes seins sont lourds et ton ventre est profond, mais tu ne sais pas encore ce que ça signifie d'être une femme*) (150; 159). As a consequence, Télumée's lover, Elie, subjects her to merciless domestic violence before his ultimate departure from their home. Télumée, in contrast, directly correlates the beginning of her domestic life with her entrance into womanhood. Thus, each character's assertions track two different narratives of how—and when—gender matters: Télumée, at this juncture, subscribes to the belief that her gender identity is a direct cause of her entrance into a legible, heteropatriarchal structure, whereas Elie renders her not as subject but as reproductive flesh. This process of "ungendering" Télumée, to use Hortense Spillers's analytic, demonstrates how Télumée's trouble with gender places her "out of the traditional symbolics of female gender," because it marks her continued exposure to the structural antagonism of the "discovery" of the New World. As Spillers writes, "under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific."<sup>24</sup>

Ma Cia's powers of healing and transformation enter the narrative during the height of Télumée's ungendering. Although Ma Cia, due to her friendship with Toussine, meets Télumée when the latter is quite young, they do not develop a significant relationship until after Télumée undergoes several traumatic experiences of gendered violence. Ma Cia's basic narrative function is to heal Télumée in the aftermath of these events, a role she undertakes for many residents of Fond-Zombi. Although many of her neighbors rely on her for treating their illnesses and injuries, she is still to some extent feared and distrusted by others. One such person is a character named Old Abel, who recounts to the young Télumée an episode in which an evening encounter with a large bird turned into a confrontation with Ma Cia. Seeing that one of the "two huge birds" that was "hovering over his head . . . had breasts instead of wings," Old Abel recognized Ma Cia by these breasts and her "transparent eyes" and fled, at which point Ma Cia metamorphoses again, turning into a "horse the size of three horses one on top of the other," lashes Old Abel with her hooves, and finally retreats (48–49; 57).<sup>25</sup> In her reading of this



incident, Megan Musgrave argues that Abel “implies that because [Ma Cia] willingly transgresses gender and human norms by abandoning her female form for that of a bird and then a horse, she must be inherently evil.”<sup>26</sup> I would like to stress Musgrave’s observation that Ma Cia’s fearsome qualities are wrapped up in her abandonment of her *female form*, an image that disturbs Télumée to such an extent that she demands that Toussine account for her friendship with “such a creature” (d’une telle créature). Télumée’s grandmother shrugs her off, explaining that Abel’s fear is simply a response to Ma Cia’s extraordinary powers and alluding to the irony that this fear does not prevent him and others from seeking Ma Cia’s help when they are in need (50; 58). While this explanation appears to placate Télumée, it does not undo the association between transformation and leaving her “female form” that comes to influence her actions later in the novel. Rather, Abel’s tale further entrenches the notion that gender limns the boundaries of the human.

Brinda Mehta argues that, through her extraordinary powers, Ma Cia furnishes a space of confrontation between the physical realities of life in the postcolony and the potential for spiritual transcendence for the novel’s female characters, particularly Toussine and Télumée. Mehta claims that, in particular, the female shaman “use[s] her superior powers of transcendence” to “decenter the epicentre of conceptual organization” and reinstate “female space” within the community.<sup>27</sup> Mehta also argues that Ma Cia invokes a kind of Afro-syncretic spirituality specific to Antillean society, in which “plants, animal, humans, inanimate objects constitute a harmonious ensemble gravitating toward a centrifugal feminine force responsible for maintaining levels of connection between various species.”<sup>28</sup> Although she doesn’t name it as such, Mehta here describes the presence of a particular West Indian kind of animism in *The Bridge of Beyond*, one that centers female subjectivity in its attention to interspecies connectivity.<sup>29</sup> While the final chapter of the novel is arguably the clearest picture of this kind of nonhierarchical enmeshment between human and more-than-human life, Télumée first endures a great deal of harm, as I have described above. Thus, Télumée’s gender acts as both a “centrifugal feminine force” and the embodied index of her dispossession. An intense period of sorrow follows Télumée’s abuse—a period unbroken even by news of Toussine’s impending death. It is only when the ailing Queen Without a Name approaches her, pokes her arm with a needle, and proclaims, “You see, you’re not a spirit—you bleed,” that Télumée abandons her grief (163; 171).<sup>30</sup> Here, the return to the flesh—to material embodiment—is a necessary prerequisite for Télumée’s reentrance into her community and the communal “female space” that Ma Cia has manifested. Rather than “dissolve” (dissoudre) her flesh and continue to attempt to disappear, Télumée is prompted to reassess her

relationship to gendered embodiment, to situate her self-knowledge outside of the conventional narratives of feminine empowerment (148; 157).

Up until this point in the novel, it is rare for Télumée to express any sense of liberty or identity without framing it in terms of her gendered embodiment; take, for example, her declaration upon leaving her job in a former plantation that she was “libre de mes deux seins” (free of her two breasts) (108; 117).<sup>31</sup> Her exit from this neocolonial mode of employment—in which she was subject to harassment based on both her race and her gender—gives way to a fantasy about the loss of her gendered body. At other points in the novel, Télumée inverts this logic, imagining her gendered body as the only possible evidence of her freedom. In either case, self-possession is figured in an explicitly material fashion—control and agency are articulated almost exclusively through citations of gendered body parts, most often breasts. In other words, what these statements have in common is their conviction that embodied gender polices the boundaries of a humanist idea of self-determination. This is in line with Télumée’s veneration of the human, which functions as a source of tension between her and Ma Cia. After meeting Ma Cia for the first time as a young girl, Télumée, troubled by Ma Cia’s powers of metamorphosis, asks why anyone should turn into “a bird or a crab or an ant,” since “isn’t it really for the animals to turn into men?” (49; 58).<sup>32</sup> Télumée’s query demonstrates that her attachment to human corporeality does not derive solely from her ideas about self-possession but also from an explicit valuation of human over nonhuman life. Anthropocentrism, then, emerges in tandem with an attachment to gendered corporeality, resulting in a fear or mistrust of Ma Cia’s abilities. I argue that the novel attempts to disentangle these strands from each other; in other words, the novel imagines attachment to gendered materiality *outside* of anthropocentric thought. In so doing, we might arrive at something akin to Joshua Bennett’s imagination of a “fundamentally *black ecology*,” which he defines as an “explosion of the limits imposed by a disciplinary or otherwise aversion to thinking with nonhuman forms of life at the level of the psychic, the literary, and the sociopolitical.”<sup>33</sup>

Télumée’s attachment to her gendered body, as well as her status as the novel’s narrator, is partially a product of the feminist movement from which the novel emerged. *The Bridge of Beyond* is often associated with a body of work by Caribbean women writers who, in the last decades of the twentieth century, worked to center stories by and about women in the Caribbean literary canon.<sup>34</sup> More than simply depicting one female character’s coming-of-age in the global South, however, Schwartz-Bart’s novel mobilizes the gendered body as a “volatile” concept. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued, the gendered body is “a pivotal term in negotiating the intersections of feminism and modern European philosophy and in locating the body as

a central term in this negotiation.”<sup>35</sup> Schwartz-Bart positions Télumée’s gendered body as the nexus of her understanding of empowerment and subjection and, in so doing, routes her exploration of the coloniality of being away from the masculine universal. Rather than uphold an essentialist valorization of the (white or Western) feminine body, Schwartz-Bart makes Télumée’s body the key term of her subjectivity, negotiating the place of the body not only vis-à-vis a European philosophical tradition but also as a counter to a legacy of racial exclusion and environmental extraction that emerged as a direct result of imperial expansion. I wish, then, to locate Télumée’s embodied ways of knowing among the critiques of Cartesian dualism proposed (in different ways) by feminist, postcolonialist, and post-humanist theorists. As the episode with Toussine demonstrates, it is Télumée’s physical presence that ushers her back into the world. Although Télumée had previously remained a passive recipient of the knowledge Elie displays in regard to her body—whether or not it is sufficiently “woman,” which is to say, able to reproduce on his terms—her bleeding at the hand of Toussine suggests that flesh carries the capacity to signify outside the boundaries imposed by patriarchal thought. I do not mean to suggest that Elie occupies the same structural position as the novel’s white planter class, but he nevertheless mobilizes an ideology that exacerbates Télumée’s dispossession, doing so *through* and *because of* her gender.

Schwartz-Bart splits Télumée’s coming-of-age along two axes of power, both of which she must navigate before reaching adulthood. The first, described by Télumée as the “balance” between adult men and women, foreshadows the domestic violence she will eventually suffer in her relationship with Elie. She observes that “the balance was in favor of the men, and that even in their fall there was still something of victory. They broke bones and wombs, then they left their own flesh and blood in misery as a crab leaves his pincers between your fingers.” Elie’s troubling response is to declare that “man has strength, woman has cunning, but however cunning she may be her womb is there to betray her. It is her ruin” (64; 74).<sup>36</sup> Of course, the “betrayal” of which Elie speaks is Télumée’s “ruin” only when seen through the lens of an external reproductive order; Télumée herself never articulates a feeling of bodily betrayal. Moreover, Elie’s statement wedges a distinction between the intellectual capacity of female persons—their “cunning”—and the physical capacity of their wombs, thereby engaging a brand of dualism that will come to haunt Télumée as an adult. Her cunning and her womb, her body and her mind, may only work toward each other’s destruction.

Télumée’s second revelation concerns Guadeloupe’s history of enslavement, which she describes in terms of the island’s landscape. One evening, following a conversation with Toussine and Ma Cia, Télumée walks out into

her grandmother's yard and takes refuge in a low bamboo grove. Once there, she claims that, "for the first time" in her life, she realizes that "slavery was not some foreign country, some distant region from which a few very old people came, like the two or three who still survived in Fond-Zombi. It had all happened here, in our hills and valleys, perhaps near this clump of bamboo, perhaps in the air that I was breathing" (56; 65).<sup>37</sup> Here, although Télumée works from a spatialized understanding of slavery to an institutional one, she still understands its legacy in terms of her material surroundings. The capacity for racial dispossession, she suggests, continues to linger in the air that she breathes. Her understanding of her environment, as well as her position in it, emerges simultaneously with her apprehension of racialized violence just as her knowledge of gendered embodiment tears at the fabric of Cartesian dualism. It is therefore critical that we take a closer look at the relationship between gender and the non- or posthuman turn in order to understand what Schwartz-Bart's representation of Télumée's gendered humanity signals about the coloniality of this knowledge.

### Inhuman Genders

If Télumée's refusal to leave her gendered body marks an identification—however vexed—with the co-constitution of sexualization and subjectification, Ma Cia's occupation of multiple inhuman forms of being signals a mirrored *disidentification*. This tension provides a critical point of contact for feminist theories of the nonhuman turn for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the stress it places on our current understanding of how theories of gender get caught up in anthropocentric ways of knowing, even as they push against key humanist tenets. I suggest that *The Bridge of Beyond* enumerates certain key concepts in feminist discussions of the non- or posthuman, but that it also provides a way into questions we have not yet had the opportunity to ask. In what follows, I outline the most pressing of these concepts in order to better inform my reading of the text, namely, how have feminist theorists recuperated materiality as a rich site for contesting structural violence? In what ways does this recuperation also contend with the epistemological limits imposed by Western humanism? And, finally, how can we understand gender as potentially excessive of the structures that attempt to hem it in?

The entanglement of sexuality and the constitution of life is, of course, a sticking point for many key poststructuralist theorists, including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz. As Butler has argued, sex is that which "qualifies the body for life," and, accordingly, materiality is "power's most productive effect."<sup>38</sup> Gender and gender relations neither

precede nor follow the emergence of the subject; rather, they necessarily constitute subject-formation. Importantly, “subject” here refers only to the human, since the human is produced “over and against the inhuman” via a “set of foreclosures [and] radical erasures that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation.”<sup>39</sup> Grosz, in a similar vein, argues that sexual difference is “an ineliminable characteristic of life,” rather than a feature or detail.<sup>40</sup> Grosz, whose more recent work is often aligned with the feminist new materialist school, now draws on Darwinian notions of a dynamic natural world in order to develop a “more politicized, radical, and far-reaching feminist understanding of matter, nature, biology, time and becoming.”<sup>41</sup> Feminist new materialists, as a general rule, take issue with what they see as the turn away from materiality in poststructuralist theory: in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, the time for the “primacy of the cultural” has passed.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the turn to matter best exemplified by Stacy Alaimo’s work on “trans-corporeality,” Karen Barad’s theorization of “intra-action,” and Hasana Sharp’s “philanthropic posthumanism” pivots away from the discursive interests of scholars like Butler.<sup>43</sup> Lynn Huffer, by contrast, is wary of the transhistorical nature of these feminist new materialists—whom she calls “renaturalizers,” juxtaposing their work with the “denaturalizing” tendencies of Butler—arguing that their recourse to the irreducible notion of “life itself” goes against the grain of Foucault’s historically contingent study of life. Following Huffer, it is imperative that we also historicize the confluence of sexuality and life in the context of global imperialism.

If we understand the difference between poststructuralist feminist philosophy and these new materialist theories as a difference between epistemological and ontological concerns, how can we put the latter theories to work in answering the ontological questions raised by Schwartz-Bart’s novel? Once again, I want to insist that many of the chief concerns of feminist new materialism are prefigured by non-Western epistemologies, and, for this reason, we need to attend to the role that global imperialism has played in both the calcification of liberal humanist ideas of the subject and the systematic erasure of non-Western theories of materiality in academic discourse. Responding to recent work from scholars like Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and others associated with “new materialisms,” many Indigenous scholars have ironized the supposed novelty of the ontological turn, noting that several forms of Indigenous Place-Thought have long insisted on a way of conceptualizing life and agency that European thinkers have overlooked or outright refused. As Gregory Cajete explains, “in Native science, there is an inclusive definition of ‘being alive.’ Everything is viewed as having energy and its own unique intelligence and creative process, not only obviously animate entities such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, but also rocks, mountains, rivers, and places large and small.”<sup>44</sup> I therefore

wish to acknowledge the significant debt that the ontological turn owes to various Indigenous epistemologies, which are still largely unacknowledged despite the growing body of scholarship that enumerates the West's theoretical hegemony in this regard. Indeed, the West's hegemonic theories of matter and materiality do more than obscure the kinds of Indigenous cosmoepistemologies referred to by writers like Cajete, Vine Deloria Jr., and Linda Hogan. That is, the many new materialist theories, in addition to neglecting Indigenous thought in their studies, typically do not weigh the significance of Blackness—or of race in general—in their considerations of the meaning of the human. Feminist new materialists have opened up an arena for a gendered version of this type of critique but have largely overlooked the critical role of coloniality. If, as Zakkiyah Jackson has argued, the Black female body functions as a “trope of disorder” that both marks and ushers the universal into being, how can we understand race as foundational to our understanding of gendered materiality and mattering?<sup>45</sup>

In Jackson's work on matter/*mater* in Black feminist poetics, she identifies the foundational “anti-black, sexuated economies of exchange and assignments of meaning, value and significance” that subtend feminist new materialist theory.<sup>46</sup> Although Jackson's argument is more concerned with questions of representation *of*, rather than physical or phenomenological attachment *to*, Black genders, her reading of the unintelligibility of Black femaleness in Western philosophy is of acute importance to the problems posed by *The Bridge of Beyond*. The entanglement of Black womanhood with nothingness, opacity, or unintelligibility is woven throughout the novel. While the most extended example is Télumée's effort to “dissolve” her flesh, other casual, fleeting examples occur as well, such as Fond-Zombi's consensus that Toussine is “not a woman, for what is woman? Nothing at all” (*pas une femme, car qu'est-ce que une femme? un néant*), declaring that Toussine is rather “a bit of the world, a whole country, a plume of a Negress, the ship, sail, and wind” (*un morceau de monde, un pays tout entier, un panache de négresse, la barque, la voile et le vent*) (21; 29). That Toussine reflects the notion of woman as a kind of “nothing”—or, perhaps, nothing *known*, nothing discrete—reflects Denise Ferreira da Silva's assessment that, according to the modern Western imagination, “blackness has no value; it is nothing.”<sup>47</sup> Although Schwartz-Bart's narration implies that, because a woman is “nothing at all,” Toussine is able to be something more capacious (“a bit of the world”), it is significant that she still eludes classification. Her being, splintered into geographic and oceanic signifiers (ship/sail/wind/country), is abstracted to such an extent that she defies gender. In her extension of Ferreira da Silva's analysis, Jackson argues that the West produces Black femaleness as doubly nullified, since it is the sublime and abjected entity that Man is produced over and against. This reading finds

traction in Toussine's characterization by the people of Fond-Zombi, who render her sublime at the expense of her own subjectivity.

I want to suggest that Télumée's attachment to her gendered subjectivity is a partial refusal of this nullification, albeit a paradoxical one. As I demonstrated previously, Télumée's connection to her gendered body persists in spite of her exposure to the violence that its very existence incites. As a young Télumée herself states upon regarding her reflection in a mirror, "I thought how God had put me on earth without asking me if I wanted to be a woman or what color I'd like to be." And yet, Télumée asserts, "I was quite content; and, perhaps, if I was given the choice, now, at this moment, I'd choose the same bluish skin, that same face not overflowing with beauty" (110; 119).<sup>48</sup> Télumée's embrace of her Black female flesh signals the vital role that materiality (here represented via her "bluish skin" and "face not overflowing with beauty") plays in her expression of agency and will. Imagining that she might be able to choose to be otherwise, Télumée once again selects Black womanhood, countering the logic that this might be a choice to be "nothing at all." However, the paradox that this inner dialogue implies—that there can be *choice* in the arena of socially imposed constructions of difference—means that Télumée's relationship to her race and gender is hardly resolved in this moment of self-acceptance. In addition to these moments of self-reflection typical of a coming-of-age narrative, the novel includes several attempts by Télumée to describe her circumstances and, in so doing, outlines the difficulty of thinking through her gendered embodiment within the boundaries of colonial humanist thought. Here, again, Schwartz-Bart's novel sidesteps a conventional narrative of triumph or resilience, turning instead to the social and historical circumstances that produce a world in which said triumph is always already hamstrung. In one noteworthy example, Télumée calls attention to the role that her formal colonial education plays in the production of this paradigm:

We were safe [in school], learning to read and sign our names, to respect the flag of France our mother, to revere her greatness and majesty and the glory that went back to the beginning of time, when we were still monkeys with their tails cut off. And while school was leading us toward the light, up there on the hills of Fond-Zombi, the waters were intersecting, jostling, foaming, the rivers were changing their courses, overflowing, drying up, going down as best they could to be drowned in the sea. But however much care it took of us, and our frizzy little pigtailed heads, school could not stop our waters from gathering, and the time came when it opened its sluices and left us to the current. I was fourteen, with my two breasts, and beneath my calico dress I was a woman. How often had Queen Without a Name told me that all rivers go down to and are drowned in the sea, how often had she told me? I pondered, I watched life wax and wane before my eyes, all the women lost before their time, broken, destroyed—and at their wakes the mourners tried, in vain, to think of the name, the true name they had deserved to bear. (75)

[Nous étions à l’abri, apprenant à lire, à signer notre nom, à respecter les couleurs de la France, notre mère, à vénérer sa grandeur et sa majesté, sa noblesse, sa gloire qui remontaient au commencement des temps, lorsque nous n’étions encore que des singes à queue coupée. Et tandis que l’école nous amenait à la lumière, là-haut, sur les mornes de Fond-Zombi, les eaux se croisaient, se bouscuaient, bouillonnaient, les rivières changeaient de lit, débordaient, s’asséchaient, descendaient comme elles pouvaient se noyer dans la mer. Mais quelque soin qu’elle prît de nous, de nos petites têtes nattées, crépues, l’école ne pouvait empêcher nos eaux de grossir et le moment vint où elle ouvrit ses vannes, nous abandonnant au courant. J’avais quatorze ans sur mes deux seins et sous ma robe d’indienne à fleurs, j’étais une femme. Me l’avait-elle assez répété, Reine Sans Nom, que toutes les rivières descendent et se noient dans la mer, me l’avait-elle assez répété? . . . Je réfléchissais, je voyais la vie se faire, se défaire devant mes yeux, toutes ces femmes qui se perdaient avant l’heure, se désarticulaient, s’anéantissaient—et lors de leurs veillées mortuaires, on cherchait en vain le nom, le vrai nom qu’elles avaient mérité de porter, sur la terre. (83–84)]

Schwartz-Bart, citing the epistemological violence of colonial education—in which France’s “greatness” and “majesty” is static across time, preceding even nationhood itself—critiques the extent to which the colonial system is capable of leading Télumée and her peers “toward the light.” In this passage, the force of the “intersecting, jostling, foaming” rivers of Fond-Zombi counters the aims of the educational institution, which is eventually unable to prevent the girls’ “waters from gathering.” The threat of the current that forces “all rivers” to become “drowned in the sea” emerges in the chasm left by the colonial production of knowledge, causing Télumée to mourn “all the women lost before their time.” The chaos of the aquatic imagery, disrupting and throwing into doubt Télumée’s apparatus for apprehending her world—her place in the colonial structure, her womanhood “beneath her calico dress”—opens out onto a plane of hope for an elusive “true name” that may lend her a new understanding of the world. This gap or missing link, gestured to by the Bridge of Beyond (a physical structure linking Fond-Zombi to the metropole), dictates Télumée’s struggles with knowing and being in her world throughout the novel, reaching a climax during her disagreement with Ma Cia about the stakes of staying with the human.

### Staying with the Human

As I demonstrated earlier, Télumée’s expression of bodily autonomy hinges on her attachment to a certain kind of gendered experience, namely one that affirms the value of a “woman’s shape” even against the continued threat of violence. Because this violence so often occurs within the context of culturally enforced gendered hierarchies, *The Bridge of Beyond* posits that gender’s capacity to *matter* disrupts dualistic understandings of



the body's subordination to the mind. To use Judith Butler's formulation, both Télumée's and Ma Cia's bodies indicate a world beyond themselves.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, to understand each woman's gendered mattering as evidence of the novel's ontological experimentation suggests that Butler's "movement of boundary itself" is central to critiquing the intersection between human and nonhuman.

The collision between Télumée's and Ma Cia's differential understandings of the human occurs shortly after Télumée takes up her post as the latter's apprentice. Télumée vehemently refuses Ma Cia's offer to teach her the "secret of metamorphosis" because Télumée cannot fathom "exchang[ing]" her "woman's shape" for something decidedly inhuman. Although the unsaid "something" that prevents Télumée from receiving this knowledge is expressed as a binding anxiety about the loss of a specific type of gendered corporeality (here: the woman's shape and "two breasts"), I want to emphasize that Télumée's refusal operates on a logic of exchange. Because the novel provides ample evidence that Ma Cia is able to modify her form frequently and according to her own will, Télumée's attachment to her human body (and human gender) is a chain that she is unable to break, however briefly. To do so would be to trade the human for the inhuman, gender for the absence thereof—an act that, at least as far as Old Abel apprehends it, is a monstrous and sinister kind of deviation. Télumée's fear of Ma Cia's fantastic forms of embodiment runs against her childhood conviction that she is "something much more" than human. She understands her mentor's powers of transcendence as a specific kind of loss rather than as an unruly form of transgression.

To be sure, Télumée does not only mourn the imagined loss of her own gendered body; when Télumée learns that Ma Cia is preparing to permanently metamorphose into a dog before her impending death, Télumée grieves the loss of Ma Cia's gendered body as well. Her reaction betrays her intense disapproval of this turn away from human embodiment. She cries out: "Why have you turned yourself into a dog—they can't speak! Why have you put an end to our little talks? See, see how you frighten me, lying there as if you weren't human, born of a human womb" (188; 197).<sup>50</sup> Mehta reads Ma Cia's shamanistic transformation at the end of the novel as emblematic of African spiritual traditions in which the shaman's "secret understanding of certain metaphysical phenomena and truths" enables the shaman to transcend their human form without waiting for death. Mehta writes that, as a result, "the shamanic act manifests a certain victory over death or, in other words, a coming to terms with death which is not finite."<sup>51</sup> Thus, her reading of Ma Cia's metamorphosis into a dog ("a funerary symbol marking the passage to the underworld") is not the permanent transition from human into animal that Télumée understands it to be. Instead, Télumée is confronted with the image

of her mentor leaving the world of the living entrapped in an animal form. Furthermore, Télumée's fear marshals the image of a "human womb" to decry Ma Cia's unruly form of being—once again, the human polices its boundaries with essentialized theories of gender. In uttering these thoughts aloud, however, Télumée realizes the absurdity of clinging to this ontologically intractable sense of personhood—particularly one that reduces women to the (in)capacity of their wombs. Immediately following her cry of protest, Télumée eases from grief into contentment at the sight of Ma Cia's new form, and it is in this moment that Télumée begins to unravel a series of anthropocentric sentiments that have mediated her perception of the beyond-human world. In other words, gender becomes the avenue through which Télumée's anthropocentrism begins to fissure, even as it had previously overdetermined her ability to understand Ma Cia's actions. At the conclusion of the novel, gender is not represented as a passive surface that reflects social inscriptions of power but as a capacious, elastic tool that enables Télumée's apprehension of her world.

Accepting Ma Cia's new form also requires Télumée to understand the stakes of the former's disavowal: to parse, for example, what underlies Ma Cia's insistence that men are merely a "nest of ants that bite" and that have "peopled the earth" (*un nid de fourmis mordantes avait peuplé la terre*).<sup>52</sup> This response to a young Télumée's question—"Ma Cia, dear, what *is* a slave, what *is* a master?" (*à quoi peut bien ressembler un esclave, et à quoi peut ressembler un maître?*)—betrays Ma Cia's belief that there is no recuperative version of Man that does not necessarily refer back to the global violence of the imperial project and, in particular, chattel slavery. I therefore read Ma Cia's turn away from the human as a refusal of the radical potential inherent in Wynter's formulation of "being human as praxis"<sup>53</sup> Instead, she disavows both the human and Man, divorcing herself from the world of anthropocentric subjectivity. Ma Cia's dissatisfaction with her "ordinary human form" cannot be separated from her capacity to disorganize the patriarchal colonial episteme—Ma Cia thus exemplifies the notion that nonanthropocentric thought precedes the "discovery" of the rupture between subject and object often aligned with contemporary materialist theory. Significantly, nonanthropocentric thought emerges in *The Bridge of Beyond* in lockstep with *feminine* knowledge. In this way, I read Télumée's exposure to alternative ways of being-in-the-world as an explicit challenge to Télumée's understanding of gender, as both an abstract set of social norms and as an embodied identity.

Télumée's initial dismissal of Ma Cia's choice is due to a misreading of the latter's desire to turn away from the human. In Télumée's eyes, Ma Cia has opted to transcend—and thus leave behind—the violence that accompanies gendered personhood in the (post)colony. As I indicated earlier,

however, this misunderstanding is short-lived, and Télumée is able to quickly resume a relationship with Ma Cia in her new form, an example of what, following Donna Haraway, we might call “making kin.”<sup>54</sup> “Making kin” with Ma Cia also endows Télumée with a nonreproductive and non-patriarchal way of imagining relationships between different forms of life that does not rely on reproductive labor. Indeed, Télumée eventually takes on the role of mother by healing and subsequently adopting a sickly child, a young girl named Sonore. Télumée describes her union with the child as a return to life itself: “I began to ponder, thinking on my own entrails, which had not born fruit, of the leaden sky, and the woman’s distress. And, receiving a child from her hands, I felt something inaudible and long forgotten stirring inside me: it was life” (224; 233).<sup>55</sup> Significantly, the ineffable sense of life that Sonore stirs up within Télumée triangulates Télumée’s “entrails” or womb, the woman’s “distress” at her maternal obligation to eleven children, and the “leaden sky,” which arguably signifies an existential dread that weaves in and out of the novel.<sup>56</sup> Sonore’s presence, which comes after Télumée has lost a series of companions, including Ma Cia, reminds Télumée of the entanglements of reproduction, obligation, and gendered oppression that contribute to our working conceptions of “life itself.” Moreover, Sonore’s kinship with Télumée offers an alternative to the way that a demand to produce life has thus far bound her adoptive mother.

Central to my argument is a distinction between claiming that *The Bridge of Beyond* imagines a transgressive model of being or of the human—one that would necessitate pitting Ma Cia’s and Télumée’s decisions against one another—and claiming that the text interrogates the supposedly stable ground of gendered being. That is, I think it is critical that we read Télumée’s choice as a refusal of the fantasy of *transcending* gender (and its attendant problematics) rather than as a loyalty to the human subject. As Cary Wolfe has argued, idealizations of disembodied personhood—particularly in discourse around the posthuman—is inherited from theories, like Cartesian dualism, that have contributed to our current understanding of the humanist subject.<sup>57</sup> Retaining her human form and human gender, Télumée is able to oscillate between the hegemonic nature of Man and the impossible excess of her Black womanhood, insisting on being “something different, something much more.” In the novel’s final passages, Télumée personifies Glissant’s “right to opacity,” which, he claims, is not an “enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity.” This right, Glissant argues, “would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.”<sup>58</sup> Glissant’s use of the French word *l'autisme* indexes an outmoded definition as a “forme de repli sur soi, avec refus de la réalité et de la communication avec autrui”

(form of withdrawal into oneself, with refusal of reality and communication with others).<sup>59</sup> In *The Bridge of Beyond*'s final pages, Télumée enters into a state of deep enmeshment with human and nonhuman others, abandoning an individualistic kind of being-in-the-world in favor of something more like Haraway's "staying with the trouble," an ecological ethic based in present-oriented entanglements with the nonhuman. Télumée's right to opacity hinges on the trouble with her (human) gender, which eventually mediates her attachment to—rather than alienation from—nonhuman others.

Although she stays with the human, Télumée nevertheless also learns of its instability, problematics, and relation to the coloniality of being. Moreover, Télumée eventually forms an alternative ethic of inhabiting her world, one that moves away from anthropocentrism and its moral consequences (resource extraction, industrialization, and the devastation of human and beyond-human zones of life). At the conclusion of the novel, Télumée, now nearing the end of her life, recounts how the Guadeloupe of her childhood has changed: upon hearing news of the "tarred road, the cars going over the Bridge of Beyond, and the posts with electric cables coming nearer and nearer, already halfway to La Roncière, in place of the wild tamarinds and balatas" (la route goudronnée, les voitures automobiles qui traversent le pont de l'Autre Bord, les poteaux électriques qui se rapprochent, se dressent déjà à mi-chemin de La Roncière, en lieu et place des tamariniers sauvages et des balatas), Télumée is filled with melancholic nostalgia. Although she is reluctant to place explicit judgment on these signs of increasing industrialization—as well as environmental destruction—she claims that they cause her to "forget who [she is]" (ma personne m'échappe) and "become sap in the grass" (devenue sève d'herbe folle). In the final paragraph, Télumée placidly declares that "for a long time yet people will know the same sun and moon; they will look at the same stars, and, like us, see in them the eyes of the dead. . . . I shall die here, where I am, standing in my little garden. What happiness!" (246; 255).<sup>60</sup> These last moments demonstrate Télumée's closing entanglement with both human and nonhuman others—in a thick, determined copresence with her garden, the dead, the sun, and moon. Here, Télumée's embodied womanhood, expressed in her declaration that she is "still a woman standing on my own two legs," serves as a connection to—rather than alienation from—her enmeshment with the nonhuman, a mode of relation informed by her relationship with Ma Cia and in spite of the patriarchal violence and enduring white supremacy of the postcolony.

## Notes

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1. D. Luciano and M. Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?," *GLQ* 21, no. 2/3 (June 2015): 194.
  2. This line of criticism is equally applicable to other kinds of structural dispossession, but this study will focus chiefly on race and gender, as these are the chief concerns of Simone Schwartz-Bart's novel.
  3. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Catherine Porter (New York, 1984), 44.
  4. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 264.
  5. Simone Schwarz-Bart, *The Bridge of Beyond*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1972), 41. The original text's citation reads: "Nous n'étions pas seulement deux vivantes dans une case, au milieu de la nuit, c'était autre chose et bien avantage, me semblait-il, mais je ne savais quoi"; Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle* (Paris, 1972), 49. My use of the English translation is meant only to facilitate readability, not to prioritize the translation over the original. When feasible, I will include full citations in both the original and in the translation in the body of the essay. When this is not possible without overly disrupting the essay's prose, I will include the original French text in the notes. To be sure, there is a larger debate to be had about the place of translation in my interpretation of this novel—especially given that the linguistic and philosophical resonances of both French and English play a role in the colonial and epistemic history that my argument situates itself within. I do not have space for that argument here, but I hope that my including both versions of the passages in question can, at least, speak to concerns about the pitfalls of close-reading in translation. Further citations to Bray's translation and the original will be parenthetical in text.
  6. Original: "la vieille Ma Cia, qui toutes les nuits planait au-dessus des mornes, des vallons et des cases de Fond-Zombi, insatisfaite de son enveloppe humaine."
  7. By "matters," I mean both how gender is embodied and how that embodiment negotiates political and discursive structures such as class, sexuality, and disability. The double entendre is inspired by Karen Barad's work on how "matter comes to matter." See Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 801–31.
  8. Susan J. Hekman and Stacy Alaimo, *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, 2008), 12.
  9. Sara Ahmed, "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the New Materialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 35.
  10. Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (March 2016): 7.
  11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. Rosemary J. Jolly and Alexander Fyfe, "Introduction: Reflections on Postcolonial Animations of the Material," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (September 2018): 299.
13. Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A 'New World' View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington DC, 1995), 42.
14. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC, 2014), 42.
15. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York, 2020), 14.
16. *Ibid.*, 3.
17. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham/London, 2004), 114.
18. *Ibid.*, 7.
19. *Ibid.*, 126. Here, too, Scott is working with C. L. R. James's historiography in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London, 1938), although in this particular passage he is citing an essay from the second edition titled "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," in which James focuses on the genocide of those native to the Caribbean as a pressing question for burgeoning nationalist movements in the 1950s and 60s. James argues that, because the Indigenous population of the Caribbean was all but extinguished with the onset of the region's colonial project, the enslaved African population that would come to labor on its plantations was especially inclined toward "incorporating" the "language, customs, aims, and outlooks of its masters.;" C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963), 405. Scott reads this skewed description of assimilation as somewhat antithetical to the politics of James's work yet also argues that overstating his Eurocentrism obscures the more important point about the Caribbean's singularity in the trajectory of global modernity.
20. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, 1989), 8.
21. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, 1997), 192; originally published as *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris, 1990).
22. Nadège Veldwachter, "Simone Schwarz-Bart, Maryse Condé, and Raphaël Confiant in English Translation: Texts and Margins," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 234.
23. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 4.
24. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, 2003), 206.
25. Original: "[Abel] s'en revenait d'une pêche de nuit, lorsque deux grands oiseaux se mirent à planer au-dessus sur de sa tête. L'un d'eux avait des larges seins qui lui servaient d'ailes et le père Abel reconnut aussitôt man Cia a des yeux transparents. . . Ensuite, un cheval grand comme trois chevaux l'un sur l'autre fit son apparition."
26. Megan Musgrave, "Phenomenal Women: The Shape-Shifter Archetype in Postcolonial Magical Realist Fiction," *Femspec* 6, no. 2 (2005): 71.
27. Brinda Mehta, "The Shaman Woman, Resistance and the Powers of Transformation: A Tribute to Ma Cia in Simone Schwarz-Bart's 'The Bridge of Beyond,'" *Obsidian II* 9, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1994): 41.
28. *Ibid.*, 14.

29. This reading of the text diverges some from other ecological interpretations of the novel, such as Lisa Perfetti's analysis of landscape in "The Postcolonial Land That Needs to Be Loved: Caribbean Nature and the Garden in Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent Sur Têlumée Miracle*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14, no. 1 (January 2007): 89–105. In general, the current state of Caribbean ecocriticism is similarly concerned with landscape, a trend that signals the potential value of turning to other types of ecological representation or knowledge in the region's literature.
30. Original: "Tu vois bien, dit-elle, que tu n'es pas un esprit, puisque tu saignes"
31. I have had to deviate from the published English translation here, since Bray translates this sentiment as "in free possession of myself and my two breasts," which is significantly different from the original version.
32. Original: "Grand-mère, dis-moi, pourquoi devenir oiseau, crabe ou fourmi, ne serait-ce pas plutôt à eux de devenir des hommes . . . ?"
33. Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 8; emphasis original.
34. See Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory, *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, 1990).
35. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, 1994), ix.
36. "Mais la balance penchait, me semblait-il, en faveur des hommes, et dans leur chute même ils conservaient quelque chose de victorieux. Ils rompaient os, brisaient matrices, abandonnaient leur propre sang à la misère, comme un crabe saisi vous lâche sa pince entre les doigts. A ce point de mes réflexions, Élie disait toujours sur un ton grave: 'L'homme a la force, le femme la ruse, mais elle a beau ruser son ventre est là pour la trahir et c'est son précipice.'"
37. Original: "Pour la première fois de ma vie, je sentais que l'esclavage n'était pas un pays étranger, une région lointaine d'où venaient certaines personnes très anciennes, comme il en existait encore deux ou trois, à Fond-Zombi. Tout cela s'était déroulé ici même, dans nos mornes et nos vallons, et peut-être à côté de cette touffe de bambou, peut-être dans l'air que je respirais."
38. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), 2.
39. *Ibid.*, 8.
40. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Sydney, 2005), 31.
41. *Ibid.*, 32.
42. Teresa de Lauretis, "Statement Due," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 368.
43. See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, 2010); Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC, 2007); and Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago, 2011).
44. Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, 2000), 21. For more Indigenous critiques of the ontological turn, see Tony Birch, "'On What Terms Can We Speak?': Refusal, Resurgence and Climate Justice," *Coolabah*, no. 24/25 (2018): 2–16; Vine Deloria Jr., *The World We Used to Live In* (Golden, CO, 2006); Linda Hogan, "We Call It Tradition," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (New York, 2015), 17–26; and Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place: Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.

45. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “‘Theorizing in a Void’: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 619.
46. *Ibid.*, 629.
47. Denise Ferreira da Silva, “1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” *e-flux* 79 (February 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>.
48. Original: “Penchée sur mon image, je songeai que Dieu m’avait donné une peau si noire que bleue, un visage qui ne ruisselait pas de beauté. Et cependant, j’en étais bien contente, et peut-être si l’on me donnait à choisir, maintenant, en cet instant précis, je choisirais cette même peau bleutée, ce même visage sans beauté ruisselante.”
49. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, ix.
50. Original: “Dis-moi que me veux-tu? . . . et pourquoi t’être mise en chien, puisque vous autres n’avez plus la parole? . . . pourquoi laisser nos petits causements? . . . Vois, vois comme tu me fais peur, à tenir là comme si tu n’étais pas une personne humaine, bien issue d’un ventre de femme.”
51. Mehta, “The Shaman Woman,” 25.
52. *Ibid.*, 54.
53. Katherine McKittrick explains the relationship between the problematics of humanism and Wynter’s notion of “being human as praxis”: Wynter’s work puts forward “an alternative, yet no less secular, version of humanness imagined outside liberal monohumanism,” and thus her project is one of “counterhumanism.” Being human as praxis engages with monohumanism as storytelling, thereby opening avenues for thinking through the overrepresentation of Man. See Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC, 2015), 11.
54. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC, 2016).
55. Original: “Je me mis à songer, considérant mes entrailles qui n’avaient pas fructifié, le ciel couleur de plomb, l’affolement de cette femme, et, lui prenant son enfant des mains, je sentis remuer en moi quelque chose d’in audible et d’oublié depuis bien longtemps et c’était la vie.”
56. At discrete moments in the narrative, Schwartz-Bart figures a type of “dread” or “madness” in atmospheric terms: for example, when the “madness of the West Indies” “swirls around in that air above the villages, bluffs, and plateaus, men are seized with dread at the thought of fate hovering over them” (34); and the “cloud” that “seemed to come between sky and earth” when the women of Fond-Zombi were doing the washing by the river, and which caused the women to “hiss with venomous words,” turns “life” to “water and mockery” and metaphorically inundates Fond-Zombi with “dirty water” and “diaphanous foam” (42).
57. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, 2010), xv.
58. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
59. *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, s.v. “Autisme, n.” <http://atilf.atilf.fr/>.
60. Original: “Comme je me suis débattue, d’autres se débattront, et, pour bien longtemps encore, les gens connaîtront même lune et même soleil, et ils regarderont les mêmes étoiles, ils y verront comme nous les yeux des défunts. J’ai déjà lavé et rincé les hardes que je désire sentir sous mon cadavre. Soleil levé, soleil couché, les journées glissent et le sable que soulève la brise enlèvera ma barque, mais je mourrai là, comme je suis, debout, dans mon petit jardin, quelle joie!”