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‘I Abject!’: Reclaiming Visions of the Posthumanized Monster in Nieto’s “Imago”

Since before Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein,” the figure of the monster has been prominent both in the media we consume and in our cultural imaginary. Violating normative ideas of the ‘self’ and the ‘human,’ monsters both prompt reflection on conventions of the self and, in more modern interpretations, mandate conversation on the wider social structures that render certain identities monstrous to begin with. But how might these ideas of normativity and marginalization be changed in a technologized vision of the future? In her short story “Imago,” Tristan Alice Nieto addresses this question in her illustration of the journey of Tabitha, a young transgender woman who has been revived from the dead to help the police catch her own murderer. Entering a conversation at the complex crossroads of future technology, identity, and monstrosity, “Imago” exposes the threat of tech-enabled biopower to erode, objectify, and abjectify marginalized figures and explores the promise of feminist conceptions of the posthuman to empower and liberate those who are ‘monstered’ under this framework. Nieto’s exploration of ‘technologized biopower’ and its disruptive implications reveals and problematizes the ‘monstering’ of marginalized identity, while her subsequent reframing of biotechnology and abjection proposes a new vision of the posthuman in order to ultimately stress the importance of embodied experience in allowing the other to reclaim agency and freedom.

At the start of the story, Revivranol’s resurrection of Tabitha questions the implications of biopower’s regulation of women’s bodies in the technological age. Biopower, as defined by Michel Foucault, is “a technology of power centered on life” that aims to “subjugat[e] bodies” and “control... populations” (qtd. in San Miguel 31). An emblem of oppressive social hierarchies

such as patriarchy, biopower becomes especially interesting in “Imago,” when this “technology of power” becomes literally equipped with technological tools: an association that could quickly prove problematic as Kaye Mitchell notes that “technology may be working to perpetuate and extend the complex network of power relations” of the status quo (110). In “Imago,” Revivranol signifies a manifestation of this ‘technologized biopower’; it operates on and appropriates Tabitha’s body as if it were a machine, “shift[ing] its repair mechanisms into warp speed (Nieto 248). Nieto’s language immediately communicates Revivranol’s technologizing effects; inducing “warp speed” healing, the drug distances the body from the natural and human, even surpassing the limits of what real-world machines can accomplish. Moreover, used only on the dead, Revivranol casts aside questions of agency and consent, invading Tabitha’s body without permission and transforming its natural processes into “mechanisms” moving at unimaginable speeds. In its usurpation and transformation of the female body, Revivranol becomes a powerful tool through which biopower is technologized and in turn used to further marginalize the feminine.

As a tool of technologized biopower, Revivranol in turn opens the door to broader considerations of what may be lost of the ‘self’ when the body is manipulated and appropriated by patriarchy and other dominating power structures; the language of death, decay, and dissociation tied to Revivranol highlights the subtle yet sinister corruption of the self that can result from biopower’s omnipresence in women’s lives. Almost immediately after Tabitha has been revived, Nieto reveals her serious physical and mental deterioration. Like many other victims of Revivranol, Tabitha experiences “fracturing,” a disorder typified by total loss of large sections of the patient’s “memory, abilities, or even identity” (50). As she “sift[s] through the broken shards of Tabitha that rattle around inside me,” readers recognize that her

technologization has rendered her totally disconnected from the ‘self’ she had once been. Moreover, the image of “broken shards” invokes sharp, cutting visions of destruction, reminding readers of the violence Tabitha has experienced at the hands of technologized systems of biopower. As she returns home from the morgue, Tabitha feels like “a testament to the ultimate human need to ruin and destroy everything” (351). Applying ideas of ruination and destruction to her own body in tandem with the hyperbolic language of “ultimate” and “everything,” Tabitha demonstrates the severity of her utter physical deterioration and inescapable emotional distress. In the same passage, Tabitha’s admission that “I feel like an abomination” shows readers that she has even begun to internalize her decaying physical form as evidence of corruption within. Nieto here communicates that the appropriation and stigmatization of women’s bodies by institutions of biopower has implications far beyond the physical; indeed, embodied experiences, influenced by patriarchy and other powers, profoundly shape more abstract conceptions of the value of the self. As she recounts Tabitha’s own struggle to reconcile body and mind, Nieto unmask the struggles of women in the real world to retain their identities when subjected to the corruptive corporeal influence of biopower.

While Tabitha’s own sense of self is collapsing, institutions of biopower continue to objectify her to advance their own agendas; framing Tabitha’s body as a battleground upon which struggles for power are played out, Nieto further highlights the importance of gendered experience in a world ruled by technologized social hierarchy. A woman’s body, Mitchell claims, takes on the role both of “the locus of female identity” and “the ‘battleground’ where struggles against patriarchy are fought” (113); in other words, a woman’s experiences of the world and of her ‘self’ are inextricable from her embodiment of gender and from the oppressions she experiences as a result of it. Nieto references and reshapes these ideas “Imago” as she

constructs Tabitha's body as a locus of conflict between good and evil. First, the Red Witch's cohort plunders Tabitha's body for her biotech eyes to further their quest for black-market prestige and profit. Then, after she had been killed, the police who revive Tabitha treat her as a pawn in their quest to bring her murderer to justice. The reality of Tabitha's objectification is demonstrated when she asks herself "have I been in Formaldehyde all this time?" (361). Just as animals preserved in formaldehyde are experimented upon to advance knowledge of the natural world, Tabitha herself is forced into the passive role of test subject, dissected for information and profit by the agents of biopower pulling her apart. Highlighting and problematizing Tabitha's objectification, Nieto's narrative becomes not only an example of but also a challenge to the appropriation and use of women's bodies to advance external agendas.

Within this context of violence and appropriation via technologized biopower, Nieto delves in to the 'monstering' Tabitha experiences post-revival, engaging with the interrelated ideas of the posthuman and the abject to construct a new vision of the monstrous in conjunction with marginalized identity. Summarizing the thoughts of several scholars, Luna Dolezal explains that the posthuman condition "entails surpassing the physical body" and "transcends the limits of the flesh" (62). In doing so, it "undermines the conception of the sovereign human as a singular, self-contained consciousness... with universal rationality and unquestioned dominion" (60). Although far more complex than this essay's analysis can express, posthumanism at its core questions what might happen to consciousness and the 'self' if one surpassed the traditionally-defined limitations of the body. Similar ideas of breaking boundaries are commonly expressed in representations of 'the monster,' who Mitchell describes as a figure that "represent[s] the breakdown of conventional ways of being in the world" (120). Often a representative of the marginalized other, the monster in turn is tied to the concept of the abject body, which is defined

by Julia Kristeva as a profound “source of horror” that does not “respect borders, positions, [or] rules” and which “disturbs identity, system, [and] order” (qtd. in Creed 68). In “Imago,” Nieto draws from ideas of the posthuman in conjunction with the abject to formulate a unique interpretation of the monstrous as it interacts with the gendered body. Tabitha’s monstrosity at the hands of institutions of biopower questions dominant ideas of the other’s role in society and forces readers to confront the literal horror that emerges from their oppression.

Indeed, through her depiction of Tabitha’s monstrosity, Nieto highlights the dangerous devaluation of othered bodies in a technologized, hierarchical society and, in doing so, interrogates conceptions of marginalized identity and ‘self’hood. As Kristeva claims, “[t]he ultimate in abjection is the corpse”: a figure who has been emptied of identity and for whom “it is no longer I who expel[, but] ‘I’ is expelled” (qtd. in Creed 70). When Tabitha first examines herself post-mortem, her response exemplifies this idea, as she states “the dead body looks back at me”; through her use of third person pronouns and her reference to “the dead body,” Tabitha “expel[s]” the self from her physical body (352). Further emphasizing this dissociation, Tabitha continues to refer to “her” body and “her” injuries throughout the passage rather than claiming these emblems of trauma as her own (352). The presence of gruesome language in this passage, ranging from the simple reference to her “dead body” to more graphic descriptions of her wounds, is inseparable from the disconnect between Tabitha’s body and mind; through these monstrous images, Nieto again returns to the traumatic dissociation between body and self that one experiences when rendered abject (‘abjectified’) by oppressive systems of biopower such as patriarchy. Further, Nieto interrogates the value ascribed to the monstered female body when Tabitha explains that she “feel[s] like someone pulled a bag of greasy chicken bones out of the rubbish and called it a person” (361). Self-identifying with the repulsive image of “greasy

chicken bones” further renders Tabitha abject both in her own eyes and those of the reader.

Moreover, as Tabitha associates herself with “rubbish,” Nieto illustrates her protagonist’s lack of self-worth and challenges the common attitude that the abject body, though exploited for the gain of those in power, is also a disposable entity.

The abjection and devaluation of Tabitha’s monstered body is in turn deeply connected to her experience of womanhood and marginality. Ideas of the feminine have long been tied to conceptions of the monstrous; as Jane Donawerth finds, this association has historic origins in the Aristotelian idea of “the female as a deformed or unfinished male” (477). Moreover, Rosi Braidotti affirms that “[w]oman, as a sign of difference, is monstrous... bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror” (qtd. in Gear 322). The female body as ‘abject’ further links womanhood to monstrosity, distorting normative ideas of the woman-human in its “separati[on of] the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (Creed 68). Drawing from these theoretical frameworks, Nieto emphasizes the importance of Tabitha’s gender in constructing her monstered and marginalized identity. Examining herself in her own vision camera, Tabitha observes “a line of crude Frankenstein stitching run[ning] across her throat like a necklace” and “a cascading pattern of narrow slashes... down her rib cage” (352). In these descriptions, icons of the feminine become markers of the monstrous; her “stitching” recalls “Frankenstein” and other tales of manmade monstrosity, yet this gruesome mark is also her “necklace”. Moreover, the cuts along her torso “cascad[e],” invoking ideas of grace and elegance despite the violence implied by the “slashes” themselves. In these stark juxtapositions of the feminine and monstrous, Nieto affirms that Tabitha’s body is abjectified in ways that are deeply influenced by her embodiment and experience of gender.

Even as she ties Tabitha's monstrosity to her gender, Nieto warps traditional ideas of the feminine in order to challenge the conventionally-reductive monstrosity of the other in the status quo. Upon leaving her house, Tabitha describes "the blood running along my body... dripping from the hem of my dress and making little red stars beside my footprints" (362). The "little red stars" and the reference to her "dress" invoke ideas of delicacy and femininity, but the additional image of "blood" quickly warps Nieto's description into a far more gruesome portrait. Moreover, her "blood-drenched... tatter[ed]" dress and "white hair like shreds of straw, stained red at the tips" similarly call to mind and immediately challenge the restrictive ideals of beauty and fashion to which women are held. Clearly, despite its gendered attributes, Tabitha's manifestation of monstrosity is in no way beautiful; instead, it unites the feminine and the grotesque, literally ripping apart and befouling the "dress" and "hair" that serve as icons of normative femininity. Although gruesome, Nieto's unashamed, uncensored portrait provides a somewhat hopeful message on the monstrosity of the gendered, othered body; breaking free from conventions of the monstrous-feminine, Nieto instead embraces a more truthful portrayal of marginalization through monstrosity and questions what it could teach us about the reality of the other.

These undercurrents of resistance to convention continue to emerge as Tabitha re-engages with biotechnology later in the story; affirming that biotech has a powerful capacity to empower and uplift the marginalized even as it also monsters and abjectifies, Nieto's illustration of Tabitha's biotech vision sensors demonstrates the importance of women taking control over their own bodies in order to shift the conversation surrounding them. Before her death, Tabitha was blind but had highly advanced vision sensors with "LIDAR and 3D telemetry" that allowed her to see highly effectively (355). Her praise of these eyes reveals the benefits of biotechnology, which here helps her to take ownership over her body and disability. At the same time, however,

as Tabitha was ultimately murdered in a ploy to steal and sell her advanced eyes, Nieto demonstrates that the same thing that empowered Tabitha during her life also made her a target. Nieto's analysis of the complex positioning of biotech warns readers against its power being placed in the wrong hands. At the same time, however, she asserts that the harmful potential of these technologies does not warrant their abandonment or condemnation.

Indeed, Nieto insists upon the liberating, posthumanizing potential of biotechnology through Tabitha's tech-enabled journey to reconciliation and reclamation of her abjectified body. After being revived, Tabitha only begins to take steps towards rediscovering her sense of self when she gains new biotechnological vision sensors. With her newly-augmented vision, Tabitha can see an "incredible spectrum of light," noting the "vibrant indigo lustre of the ultra-violet" unlike anything she has ever seen (356). At this point, Nieto begins to reconceptualize Tabitha's physical self as she moves towards reclamation of her body and identity. Tabitha's description starkly contrasts the earlier language of disgust she used to describe her body, invoking ideas of beauty and freedom associated with her new technology. Moreover, as she looks through the drone-mounted cameras, she sees herself "standing in the middle [of the room] like a fish that ha[s] suddenly learned how to climb a tree" (355-356). As she observes her own body, she claims it as "me" rather than describing it in the third-person terms found earlier in the story. Moreover, while the image of a "fish... learn[ing] how to climb a tree" emphasizes her existence's defiance of norms of the self and the human, its invocation of wonder and delight as a fish accomplishes the impossible renders Tabitha's abnormalities empowering rather than restrictive. Significantly, it is her monsterring that allows her to access this liberation; the "rush of information" she receives from her new sensors would be enough to quickly "overload" a normal human mind, yet because she is undead, she can ignore this long-term consequence and continue

to experience the world in breathtaking detail (356). As Tabitha once again surpasses the boundaries of the ‘human,’ Nieto revisits earlier descriptions of Revivranol, which also pushed Tabitha’s body beyond the ‘possible’; now, however, our protagonist takes ownership of biotechnology and uses it to extend the limits of her ‘self’ on her own terms. This highlights the importance of reclamation in the journey of marginalized individuals to regain the sense of identity and ‘self’hood that has been stripped from them by oppressive institutions of biopower.

Through her depictions of Tabitha’s reconnection to her body through technological disembodiment, Nieto illustrates a new, feminist vision of posthumanism. As she looks down at herself through her new vision sensors, Tabitha transcends the physical reality of her body; however, the reason this is so meaningful in the first place is because it enables reconnection with Tabitha’s physical ‘self’. Because of the data stream from her cameras, she is “never in danger of losing myself in the maze” (357); in contrast to her previous feelings of displacement, Tabitha finally feels grounded once again in who she is. Further, experiencing an “unnatural... shift in perspective” due to her new vision, Tabitha grapples with the challenge of “understanding and connecting to my own body in the space” (357). While Tabitha’s reference to the “unnatural” further ties her technologized body to the monstrous, her subsequent statement highlights the empowering implications that this distancing from the conventionally human may provide. As Tabitha begins to literally “understan[d]” and “connec[t]” to her own body, she reclaims first person pronouns and once again grounds herself in her physical reality. Thus, rather than surpassing the importance of the body, Nieto asserts the importance of embodiment in allowing Tabitha to regain her identity. In a critique of rigid, reductive interpretations of posthumanism that seem to praise total liberation from the flesh, Dolezal points out that “augmentations and transformations through engagements with technology” may instead be the

best way to understand a more intersectional vision of posthumanism (62). Building off this idea as Tabitha regains ownership over herself through biotechnology, Nieto explores new conceptions of the feminist posthuman that interrogate the limitations of the physical self while remaining grounded in the importance of gendered embodiment.

This vision of the posthuman is fully realized in Tabitha's subsequent claim of ownership over her monstrosity, through which Nieto demonstrates that relinquishing the restrictions of the human can open new doors towards empowerment and agency for those who are objectified and abjectified by society. In general, Rachel Gear finds that monstrous images "can be... potentially liberating" even in their horror, as they enable the "monstered" individual to tap into posthuman ideas of "undermining the whole notion of the human body as a fixed, enclosed entity" (324). Moreover, in San Miguel's analysis of "The Girl Who Was Plugged in," she claims that P. Burke exhibits a "posthuman form of agency" as she "embrac[es]... hybridity [and] the trace of the inhuman within the self" (41). Depicting Tabitha's journey to take vengeance against the Red Witch, Nieto engages with Gear and San Miguel's analyses to demonstrate the liberating potential of embracing the fluid boundaries of the body and the self. As she confronts the man who murdered her on the Red Witch's commands, Tabitha proclaims that he "can't hurt me anymore... I am fucking dead!" (366). Here, in contrast to earlier points in the story, being 'dead' does not debilitate Tabitha; instead, this emblem of monstrosity makes her invincible to the threats of her murderer and thereby shifts the power dynamic of their relationship. Evidently, Tabitha's monstrosity has ceased to hold power over her and has instead become a source of her power; in depicting this change, Nieto presents otherness as strength and highlights the empowerment that can be attained through the posthuman conception of agency she presents.

Finally, as she takes action against the Red Witch, Tabitha's monstrosity liberates her to unleash the totality of her rage; this brutal final scene highlights the power of the posthuman and its potential as a mode of vengeance against an oppressive system. As she finally reaches the home of the Witch, one henchman "tries to close the door," but Tabitha's "hand shoots out like an arrow and jams it open" (371). Here, her body is literally weaponized, yet this time, not by an external force attempting to advance its own agenda. As she forces herself in, her "broken fingers worm their way backwards like tentacles and undo the latch" (371). Referencing Tabitha's fingers as "worm[s]," Nieto invokes the posthumanized monstrous and reminds readers that our protagonist has become something distinctly separate from the normative woman-human. Moreover, this "trace of the inhuman" allows her to gain entry into the home of the woman who caused her death; Nieto thus highlights the power of the abject body, when reclaimed, to literally and figuratively open new doors to challenge its oppressors. When she finally reaches the Red Witch, Tabitha "allow[s] the addictive fire of rage to flood my body and drive it on" as she enacts her vengeance (372). Her rage transforms her body into a machine, "driv[ing] it on" just as Revivranol did at the start of the story. At this point, however, Tabitha's technologized, monstered body is no longer inhibitory; it still inspires horror, but this time in its expression of unchecked female power. In allowing Tabitha to relinquish the confinement of the traditional feminine-human, Nieto explores what could occur if women were liberated from societal constraints and armed with the tools to take vengeance on the system that has long abjectified and marginalized their bodies. Tabitha answers this question by unleashing the full fury of her monstrosity, "bludgeon[ing]" the Red Witch with "my own bones," and "rip[ping] and smash[ing] and crush[ing] her with the fury of a hundred stolen lifetimes" (373). Disrupting the limits of the self by assaulting the Witch with Tabitha's "own bones," our protagonist returns

to the concept of appropriating the female body and now transforms herself into a battleground and a weapon on her own terms. Tabitha affirms the power of the monstrous-feminine as she enacts a somewhat disturbing fantasy of female power and reclamation. Rather than attempting to escape from the non-normative 'self' she has become, she is liberated by her abject form and embraces the inhumanity thrust upon her by technologized institutions of biopower to once again become an agent in her own life.

Overall, Nieto exposes the dangers of status quo and near-future institutions of biopower and explores novel remedies to their violence through her feminist, posthuman vision of reclamation of the self. Nieto's narrative challenges reductive, monsterring portrayals of the other and provides a message of optimism and hope for a future in which the abjectified can reclaim their bodies and access their true power. Framing technology both as a tool of biopower and an avenue of empowerment, her narrative constructs an unconventionally 'monstrous' protagonist. In turn, this interrogates the place of the marginalized female figure in modern society and reclaims the abject body to produce a new, feminist vision of posthumanism and agency. The intersectionality and complexity of her text urges readers to more deeply consider conceptions of abjection and the self as we progress towards an increasingly technologized future, and ultimately begs one to question what could be achieved if we too broke free from "the traumatic living conditions that emerge from biopolitical technologies of the self" (San Miguel 40).

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