Hysteria as Survival: Community Within the Feminine

“There is nothing outside of the text,” Jacques Derrida warns in *Of Grammatology*—a call to arms we may not have recognized in 1967. The inescapability of language, that the “writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic” of a governing system to which we all submit, makes language, itself, a tool of Capitalist Empire (Derrida 158). Derrida tells us what Empire already knows: language cannot be isolated from the superstructure or repurposed to serve anything beyond the sphere of capital, a sphere encompassing everything we can name. The prospect of revolution is a commodity itself, a sanitized promise recuperated by Empire and sold back to us as Communist propaganda prints on Etsy. Nomenclature is a war machine—any form of resistance we can qualify has been curated for us, carefully selected to satisfy some primordial yearning for otherness, for community in otherness. What’s a girl to do?

Guy Debord tells us the spectacle pseudoworld of late-stage capitalism makes commodification the precursor to visibility. To exist outside of the sphere of capital, outside spectacle, is to be invisible and subsequently unnamed. Nomenclature does not extend to otherness, hence its otherness. To exist in the lacunae of language is the truest freedom under Empire. The microcosms of othered identity are forced into these gaps but in these gaps, are able to survive. Trans poet Ava Hoffman understands the negative spaces of language for trans creators as the “potential to imagine and create new futures, new possibilities” in her self-proclaimed “bad art theory” of “trap poetics.” Lacunae range from the hyphenated misnomer to vacuous descriptors, creating negative spaces with endless potential, like the ever-changing archetype of the Hysterical Woman.

Hysteria—the gendered ailment that was a valid clinical diagnosis until 1980—“was thoroughly described in ancient Egyptian and Greek societies” as “affecting only those of us with a uterus” (McVean). It was believed the uterus could detach and migrate to different parts of the body, “placing pressure on other organs and causing any number of ill effects.” French neurologist Jean-Martin Chacot was the first to develop a psychoanalytical framework on hysteria to account for any and all discrepancies in the female body and mind. These discrepancies, of course, were “defined with respect … to the masculine” and “described in terms of deficiency”—to be female, then, is to be a cavity (Irigaray 69). Herein lies a lacuna. The existence of the Hysterical Woman is one that continues to resist understanding. Freud, a student of Chacot, understood hysteria as the failure to overcome penis envy. Theorist Luce Irigaray critiques Freud’s anatomical essentialism for its failure to consider “[w]hat happens when the sexual function can be separated from the reproductive function”—a kind of deconstruction (71). The experience of female pleasure, then, falls under the umbrella term “hysteria,” a lexical gap.

Hélène Cixous defines hysteria as female jouissance. In the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis, jouissance builds on Freud’s pleasure principle—i.e., another primordial yearning, for gratification. Jouissance is the enjoyment of rights, property, and sexual climax beyond pleasure: what compels us to challenge the limits of pleasure until that pleasure produces pain. Female jouissance, argues Cixous, is recuperated under Empire as hysteria, but is, fundamentally, the same limitlessness in communion between the body and mind. Cixous’ definition notably overlaps with writer Ntozake Shange’s definition of her invented form, the choreopoem. Shange likens the choreopoem to “expressive nuance,” by which she means the “body and voice [are] inextricable components of creative expression” (Sullivan). Jouissance is survival in that it exists outside the vernacular of Empire. Pleasure connotes fulfillment, eliminates the yearning for more and the reliance on consumption, and is thus an act of resistance. But it’s beyond that pleasure principle—beyond, even, jouissance, female or otherwise, since these terms use a vernacular upholding the rigid patriarchal structures commodifying thought—where survival and resistance intersect. Hysteria—the expressive nuance of *going batshit*—makes one invisible to Empire with obsolete terminology that offers a limitlessness in their obsoletion.

In the paradigm I am seeking to unfold, I am presuming the following praxes to explain the ostensibly gendered language my exploration will use: everyone is female; therefore, hysteria is not a gendered phenomenon. Gender, like commodity, exists only according to “quantitative equivalence” (Debord 1967, 18). Gender identity “would simply exist, in mute abstraction” without an audience—i.e., without objectification (Chu 2019, 38). As a process of objectification, gender is a process of performance, of ritual repetition of continually changing norms, rather than an innate condition. Judith Butler (1993) argues this makes binary gender identity inherently unstable and thus its own lacunae, never “fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized” (18). Performance is survival, regardless of gender, and the subservience we associate with “female” applies to all. Even Freud acknowledged that men are susceptible to hysteria! Going forward, every mention of female, woman, or girl should be interpreted as an inclusive term for the extent to which we are all taking it up the ass under Empire (thank you, Valerie Solanas). Similarly, while “hysteria” may be the closest to a label the phenomenon can get without undoing the work of its radicalization, I will post a final praxis for my undertaking: Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem is a cohesive framework for reflecting and understanding the lived experience and community of the Hysterical Woman.

Shange’s original choreopoem, *for colored girls* *who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,* is concerned with the bodies of women of color but as a form, investigates more generally “the meaning of a contradiction in anybody’s body” (qtd. in Sullivan). To interpret the body and voice as inseparable challenges Empire’s imperative to disembody. The body may not be able to wholly shake its commodification, but it can transgress as a performance platform, “continuously performing, so that … [it] become[s] the ultimate product of [its] own actions” (Mahurin 330). The choreopoem as dramatic expression blends nonverbal and verbal, resisting singular understanding, resisting, as Butler explains, the separation of the materiality of the body and “the ‘I’ who claims” it (qtd. in Mahurin 329). The archetypal Hysterical Woman can be understood as choreopoetic as both are a form of resistance to Empire’s nomenclature. We unearth a pattern of lacunae-seeking, of female hysteria as wish-fulfillment and survival, in dissecting the choreopoetic elements of Shange’s *for colored girls* and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar.* As creators, Shange and Aster transcended the constraints of culture industry to create a performance text that pushes the limits of the audience’s sympathetic imagination. Aster builds on Shange’s framework for the choreopoem in a new medium, so both texts can be read as blueprints of community formation.

To approach *for colored girls* as an exemplary model of hysterical survival requires a more Marxist probing of what I mean when I say “community in otherness.” In Karl Marx’s early writings regarding his Jewish identity, he sets himself apart from his contemporaries by making the distinction between a political and a human emancipation. Political emancipation is a “freedom from interference,” a recuperated freedom that maintains the base-superstructure and therefore is predicated on the continuation of structural violence upheld by Empire (Wolff). Marx instead calls for a human emancipation—i.e., revolution in the form of positive relations and community. Empire prevents this community, encouraging isolation and false consciousness in the interests of self-maintenance. An overthrow would reconfigure the basis of human relations, ceasing their transactional motivations. For Marx, community occurs in tandem with human emancipation—a collective voice merging body and mind that both unites and validates individual identities. Describing community in this way is difficult under the constraints of Empire’s available language, but it might look similar to the kinship shared between the characters in *for colored girls*.

*for colored girls* is now a 22-poem work that evolved with Shange as an artist. When it first premiered in December 1974, the 20 poems/monologues it contained had originally been written as separate, stand-alone pieces. That first performance was carried out by Shange and four others at a women’s bar outside Berkeley, California. After Shange moved to New York, her celebrity would explode. In 1976, *for colored girls* would become the second play to be written by a Black woman to reach Broadway. Invented forms challenge Empire. To write outside of the bounds of culture industry and outside genre implies the following: (1) culture industry serves only the dominant narrative, (2) to express marginalized narrative within the bounds of culture industry is a form of (self-)recuperation, of performance for the dominant gaze, and (3) the invented form rejects recuperated expression. As a form whose label proceeded its creation, the choreopoem also rejects Empire’s clause that essence precedes existence.

Even as the seminal text in this invented form, *for colored girls* does not fit neatly into any one interpretation of “choreopoem,” transcending Shange’s own nomenclature. Later versions of the performance include poems referencing HIV/AIDS, the Iraq War, and PTSD, effectively transforming *for colored girls* into a personal and communal archive. Shange writes of the “remarkable experience, exposure, and opportunity theater has given” her: “[M]y roots remain firmly grounded in the fertile hallowed ground of poetry, random poems dictating their own course” (Shange 15). The evolution of the text/performance is as much a reflection of the time as it is of Shange’s artistry and her battle with mental illness and suicidality. Blending her experience as woman within the quasi-fictionalized realm of story, we are inclined to ask what we do with a text *like this*, our ignorance a result of Empire’s insistence that we are confused in the face of what we do not have language to interpret.

Why I described Shange’s choreopoem earlier as a communal archive rather than historical segues into my second point. The 2010 version of *for colored girls* I will be referencing contains all 22 poems and evolutions of content to be performed by seven nameless women who are only identifiable by an assigned color: lady in red, lady in orange, lady in yellow, lady in green, lady in blue, lady in brown, and lady in purple. The cast represents a collective voice: not only do productions assign multiple roles to a performer, but also monologues intentionally bleed into one another, the ladies’ voices echo in shared refrains and chants, and of course, there is a group cry—the quintessential expression of community. As noted by Diana Martha Louis, despite the “implicit discourse about emotional trauma in the work, there remains a popular and scholarly silence around the most salient topic—mental illness” (1). Not surprisingly, the absence of Black experience in the dominant discourse on mental health is not limited only to the literary world—Louis laments that suicidality in the Black community “remains a major issue” and the stats do not consider the “full impact of Black suicidal behaviors,” namely, the logistics behind why Black women are more likely to attempt than Black men (2). Herein lies another lexical gap under Empire.

In “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde outlines how rage is both effectual and affectual: “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against … oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being” (8). Lorde says that anger is “loaded with information and energy” and the fear of its expression, namely white women’s, reinforces Empire’s strategies to write off challengers, namely women of color, as hysterical. “Hysteria is the very stuff of revolutions … a passionate single-minded psychological condition” misattributed to a “detachment essential for self-criticism” (Anne Stevenson qtd. in Showalter 334). If we are to understand the default for racialized hysteria as radical, then to address hysteria for its real psychological effects is to address it outside the dominant narrative. This, argues Louis, is exactly what *for colored girls* does: “Shange’s frame is not only critical for effectively addressing mental illness, but it also forces the reader to be sensitive to the actuality that Black women’s everyday experiences are no less varied, complex and oscillatory than any other group” (3).

Louis unpacks this framework through an idiom echoing hysteria: “bitch you must be crazy”—a “response to behavior that deviates” from expectation, demonstrating the gap in Empire’s language to acknowledge an action(s). The otherness of the idiom is immediately investigated in the opening poem, “dark phrases”:

*lady in brown*

i'm outside chicago

*lady in yellow*

i'm outside detroit

*lady in purple*

i'm outside houston

*lady in red*

i'm outside baltimore

*lady in green*

i'm outside san francisco

*lady in blue*

i’m outside manhattan

*lady in orange*

i'm outside st. louis (19)

and then again in “one,” as recited by lady in red:

& she didn’t let on

she knew

from behind her waist waz aching to be held

the pastel ivy drawl on her shoulders

to be brushed with lips & fingers (46).

The refrain in “dark phrases” identifies the women’s positions as metaphorically outside the cities in which they literally live, but as our entry point into the work as a whole, “i’m outside” speaks to their resistance to recuperation (Louis 5). Sure, these characters are depicting themselves with the “imagery of Black women as ‘outsiders within’” (Louis 5) but they are also directly addressing the negative space Empire has carved for their identity, and the yearning “to be held” that negative space leaves them with (Shange 46). So, they do not “allow [their] fear of anger to deflect [them] nor seduce [them] into settling …” into an Empire-approve role (Lorde 8).

Shange’s “decision to choose the word girls to describe women” calls further attention to the dominant culture’s lexical gaps:

“It can … be read as an example of the ways in which black female adulthood is a state of being that can never be fully realized by black females in the US because of the ongoing pressures … that seek to dominate black women and strip them of the agency ascribed to adulthood. Similarly, these same pressures push black girls out of childhood and withhold the innocence, and attendant protections, afforded to girls of the dominant culture” (Keleta-Mae 35).

Shange’s characters traverse this line between girlhood and womanhood as often as they traverse the line between characters, speaking at times like a chorus or a singular voice. This challenges the audience to pay attention to nuance, to the lived experiences expressed by each lady or woman or girl. A communal voice is notable at the end of “dark phrases” when the performers “become girl-like through the playing of children’s games which have them singing, hand-clapping, and dancing” (Keleta-Mae 37). Naila Keleta-Mae notes these “forms of black girl play are a mode of knowledge transfer that occurs between girls … with little instruction or intervention from adults,” transforming this moment of levity to one of survival through shared joy that could be easily be read as absurd, or hysterical, for the white viewer (37).

Throughout *for colored girls*, women share “accumulated upsets and disappointment from past relationships,” offshoot traumas of American white supremacy, inherited and diluted between generations so that Empire’s language fails to capture them (Louis 11). The invisibility of the oppressive institutions that maintain racial hierarchy and in consequence, the base-superstructure of Empire, is designed to eliminate resistance. How can you revolt against that which you cannot name? *for colored girls* answers this with a call for human emancipation. The collective identity of the ladies is a response to the self-isolation and alienation preferred by Empire, especially of marginalized people. The women do not seek to rename their experiences under their own terms—they simply share the weight:

*lady in orange*

i don’t wanna write

in english or spanish

i wanna sing make you dance

like the bata dance scream (28).

That language “has limited healing power” (Louis 19) is not to romanticize the “homicidal effects of silence” (24). Empire values silence above language—hence, the need for expressive nuance, for hysteria, understood by body and voice. Rose Parekh-Gaihede cites Slavoj Žižek’s *The Plague of Fantasies* and writes that the “fundamental distance of representation between a person communicating an experience and receiver can be traumatic … because the recognition, or sharing, of the experience through symbolic representation necessarily fails” and therefore “produces a second trauma” (178). Hysteria is, then, a reconciliatory rhetorical mode and becomes more so as it is shared, as the “ethical dimension of the human being … is linked to the capacity to have a non-possessive [i.e., communal] meeting with the other human being” (Parekh-Gaihede 179).

Often, these poems end with the women coming together to experientially share the weight of whatever information was just presented; for example, at the end of “no more love poems #1,” “each lady/ dances as if catching a disease from/ the lady next to her” (56). The penultimate poem, “a nite with beau willie brown,” is the “most arresting … of the text,” recounting “many horrific instances of domestic violence” between Crystal, Beau Willie Brown, and their children, Naomi and Kwame (Keleta-Mae 39). Brown’s internalized homophobia and self-hate manifest in violence when confronted with his homosexual rendezvous by Crystal, and Naomi bears witness to a lot of the violence against her mother. The poem concludes with Brown dropping both children from the fifth-story window. Kwame screams and Naomi reaches for the arms of her mother. How is the audience expected to respond to this story? How are the other characters? Lorde states she has “no creative use for guilt,” that it is “only another way of avoiding informed action” (9). Shange invites anger, sure, but more so she invites community-building in the concluding poem, “a layin on of hands.” Here, all of the ladies “repeat to them-/selves softly the lines ‘i found god/ in myself & i loved her.’ It soon/ becomes a song of joy …” (87). This “performative action” allows participation on behalf of both the audience and the other characters through the body in a “repetitive attempt to cope with the inexplicable” that is cyclical trauma (Parekh-Gaihede 180). The “song of joy” confronts us with the necessity of finding joy, of finding pleasure, of the hysterics of a celebratory song “to each other, then gradually/ to the audience” (Shange 88). *for colored girls* thus concludes in an act of wish-fulfillment—the women are “held” by each other, physically and emotionally, satisfying the need for togetherness. The community found in this hysteria exists because it is unrecognizable in the Empire-approved “feminine” that demands separation of the body and mind.

To track community formation as we have in *for colored girls* in Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019), we must acknowledge how each work invites audience engagement. Shange “asserted that even though she wrote colored girls, she actually meant people of color,” and the piece was originally performed by “black, white, Asian, and Native American women,” but her Broadway debut invited a regional understanding of the term, and the work became “specifically about the lives of black women” (Keleta-Mae 36). Theater critic Susan Bennett understands this shift as a result of the audiences’ ability to make meaning of a performance or of a performance text “bound within cultural limits” (Bennett qtd. in Keleta-Mae 36). The “explicit performance is carefully staged and constructed for us to watch” and knowing this “influences how we watch, what we see and how we interpret and respond” to stimuli, which is further informed by “our awareness of genre and our cultural understanding of form and media” (Reason 139-140). Shange invented a genre, or form, because *for colored girls* would not fit into the expectations, or vocabulary, of Empire-accepted performances of race. “To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, and to be addressable means one is always within stigma’s reach,” making the choreopoem an act of transcendence by resisting conformity (Rankine and Loffreda). An invented form will always challenge the audience’s sympathetic imagination because it challenges the framework of engagement we’re socialized to accept. The shift away from Shange’s original intent points to lacunae in the audience’s capacity to understand and accept the community she set out to represent. Aster similarly transcends the bounds of culture industry as a white artist who acknowledged the limitations of the racial imaginary and instead pursued a narrative that “embodie[s] and examine[s] the interior landscape that wishes to speak of rights, that wishes to move freely and unbounded across time, space, and lines of power, that wishes to inhabit whomever it chooses” (Rankine and Loffreda). Aster also confronts the sympathetic imagination of his audience by transcending genre expectations and labeling his film “folk-horror.” The same lacunae emerge when engaging with Aster’s piece as with Shange’s.

*Midsommar* was marketed as a horror film, so let’s consider genre through dominant culture’s expectations. “[H]orror films frequently operate through a specifically affective relationship between viewer and film” (Donaldson 170), inviting allegiances based on “imagined risk” (171). Genre in the dominant culture is often a gross oversimplification. What Aster has ostensibly attempted to do is invent one for Hollywood: the hyphenated “folk-horror.” This intersection is still under development and therefore does not carry the same weight as Shange’s choreopoem; instead, this investigation will rely on Aster’s position that *Midsommar* is a “wish-fulfillment film” (Aster 2019). This phrasing conjures Freud’s professional obsession with the female psyche and hysteria. For Freud, a dream consists of manifest and latent content. The former is the dream relayed through the filter of the conscious mind, subject to the narrative rationalization we apply to make the inaccessible, accessible—a form of recuperation. The latter refers to the unconscious motivation behind not only the narrative elements of the manifest content but also the extent of distortion achieved by dreamwork. Latent content reflects the individual’s repressed desires—wishes—that the dream aims to fulfill. Through this lens, *Midsommar*’s protagonist Dani is no more a character than she is a revelation.

In a dead-end relationship with Christian, Dani is introduced to us in crisis. The film opens with a homicide-suicide leaving her without family and Christian too uncomfortable to end things. We immediately are made of aware of Dani’s “outsider within” status, playing into what film theorist Murray Smith calls the “structure of sympathy.” When we meet Dani, she is, of course, alone, while Christian is at a bar with friends complaining about how needy she is. Christian invites her along on the research trip hosted by their mutual friend, Pelle, to Pelle’s ancestral commune in Sweden for a midsummer celebration. His invite, we can infer, is out of pity and, perhaps, guilt. We are provided with “visual and aural information more or less congruent with that available to the characters,” so our sympathy increases every time Dani exits from a group to process her lingering grief and the newfound traumas that emerge within the context of *Midsommar* as a horror film (Donaldson 162). She’s aware of her “outsider within” status as much as we are, so we, as the audience, are encouraged to form an allegiance with Dani. Florence Pugh’s embodiment of the character is vital to this allegiance formation. The “work of the performer’s body, the relationship between how we are invited to see the effort and its affective relationship to our bodies” is contingent on the expressive nuance of the psyche-soma connection (Donaldson 160). Pugh is nothing short of hysterical in countless moments as she observes the close-knit community of Hårga in contrast to her own failing network. Like in *for colored girls*, Dani’s nonverbal communication helps us “crucially understand” her situation (Donaldson 162).

The commune, Hårga, hosts its midsummer celebration once every 90 years. The festival beings with an ättestupa—ritual senicide off a cliff—by two elders who have reached the prime age of 72. Attempting to digest the event she witnessed as a cultural relativist fails Dani whose recent familial trauma is too fresh a wound. It is precisely this emotional baggage, however, that enables her to seek kinship with the commune and with Pelle, who at one point questions her relationship with Christian: “Do you feel held by him? Does he feel like home to you?” (1:12:47-1:12:54). This question echoes the poem “dark phrases,” and in both *Midsommar* and *for colored girls*, points to a yearning for community, for human emancipation. Pelle’s question triggers the choreopoetic turn of Dani’s character arc. The “relationship between bodies on-screen and the camera … is central to the way we experience film” and the “invitation of empathetic response” (Donaldson 159). Before Pelle’s question, Dani is more often alone in moments of emotional tension. After, we see her making a conscious effort to redirect her grief and find community among the women of Hårga.

What does it mean to feel held? For Pelle, technically an orphan raised by the commune, it is more than kinship or family or romance. It is a shared language of mores that literally exists outside the dominant narrative. The Hårga language uses a runic alphabet, which, like the community, is “forever in progress, forever evolving” (*Midsommar* 1:25:10-1:25:14). Dani’s sense of belonging was never stable and now she’s technically an orphan, too, untethered to society in a quantifiable way, limiting her modes for grief expenditure. Dani’s catharsis is what makes *Midsommar* a “wish-fulfillment film” by means of its inexplicability. She goes from an interloper in her boyfriend’s social network to one in the commune until, in a bout of exhaustion from a day-long dance competition for May Queen, she finds herself speaking the Hårga women’s language: not Swedish, not English, but something shared, something of body and voice. She wins the May Queen crown, and we are shown a brief, first-person overview of the crowd coming toward her in celebration. Dani’s “spatial, emotional and sensuous relationship to characters” temporarily becomes our own (Donaldson 160). It seems absurd that dance could break a language barrier, let alone a fourth wall, but Aster rejects traditional modes of communication, challenging us to think of the body and mind as inseparable and as a language itself. It is within this transition “from isolation to community, from repression to expression” that *Midsommar* is akin to a choreopoem (Allen 2019). Dani and the Hårga women form a collective voice, a collective movement.

This movement comes to a head after Dani witnesses Christian participate in a mating ritual with one of the local women. She attempts to retreat to the barn they have been sleeping in but is accompanied by an entourage who understands her grief “needs to be amplified, echoed, and diffused among them” so they “shout it until it fades” and they all collapse on the floor (Allen 2019). Heaving in unison, the women engage not only in “emotional duplication, but a more physicalised connection” in which verbal communication is completely absent (Donaldson 162). At this moment, Dani and the women succumb to the hysterics of a group cry, bonding over Dani’s deep-felt anger and confusion. She realizes she is something of a choreographer for the scene, acknowledging with knowing eyes that these women seek to mimic her pain, to transcend it past the body and mind into a realm where it becomes the actionable connective tissue of their bond, as Lorde says. No words are shared but the women intuit what is needed.

In the film’s final scene, Dani is swaddled in a blanket of flowers, wholly accepted as one of the Hårga women. We watch her watching with an empty grin as a now paralyzed Christian, stuffed into a bear carcass, is set ablaze at the concluding ceremony of the festival. The apparent wish-fulfillment of Dani’s repressed desires asks us to unpack what makes resonant its sublime visuals. Dani cries in tandem with a commune—she is *held* by excess in ritual (and in hallucinogenic use) and this hysteria engulfs her physically with the excess of an expansive spread of vibrant flora. She’s gone *batshit* within the realm of an isolated commune. Dani’s grief, expunged, has eliminated the need for Empire’s vocabulary.

The group cry and the final scene were revealed, decontextualized, in most promotional trailers for the film, bringing us back to our initial entry point of the invitations of the genre. Both scenes could be read as parodying horror conventions, brushed off as theatrical or clichéd or highly stylized. Aster’s surface-level concern with what Anna Backman Rogers describes as the “feminist politics of the image” attempts to aestheticize hysteria (16). While Rogers is referencing specifically Sofia Coppola’s “undermining [of] the rhetorical strategies of Hollywood” (16) through her “fascination with the cliché as a form of cultural shorthand” (18), the same mold applies to *Midsommar*. Clichés are produced from overuse, like a genre convention, rendering it meaningless. Meaninglessness exists outside the dominant paradigm concerned with the rational, effectively equating meaningless with irrational. Possibility—for resistance, for survival—exists in tandem with meaninglessness, with irrationality, because it will not register as a threat on Empire’s radar. What is more clichéd in the dominant narrative than the Hysterical Woman in horror? And, what are the ethical implications of the “spectator’s empathetic and embodied engagement” with one on screen (Reason 140)?

In the same way Shange’s intention for the inclusivity of *for colored girls* was lost on an audience hellbent on a particular reading to the performance and text, Aster’s exploration of survival through hysteria can be lost through genre expectation. Whereas Shange succeeds in the invented form of choreopoem, Aster’s nuanced “folk-horror” or “wish-fulfillment film” is still in its developmental stages. Through the lens of horror, the Hysterical Woman is a played out “damsel in distress.” *Midsommar* indulges this surficially, but we are left with Dani’s growing smile as the camera zooms in on her otherwise pained expression. The “structure of sympathy” Aster’s built prevents us from villainizing her, even while her boyfriend and the other, now-dead guests burn. She resists concise characterization—she occupies a lacuna in our allegiance, even if that allegiance falters. She smiles just as inexplicably—like the final scene in *for colored girls*, Dani’s grief is shared, dissipated across a community. She is finally “held.”

When Chu describes “femaleness” as a “universal sex defined by self-negation,” she likens the denial of self with the denial of community (Chu 2019, 11). Empire sells us negative space as a cavity to be filled instead of as an opening for community formation and human emancipation. Hysteria—be it obsolete diagnosis or movie trope—makes an inseparable entity of the mind and body. Hysteria, and the anger that comes with it, is generative, and therefore a force of resistance. Where Empire’s language fails expression is where otherness becomes a rallying cry. Derrida’s fascination with lacunae as cultural hotspots can be understood through this lens—an omission signals something to be felt, an experience of expressive nuance may not have a name but does not need it to exist. Hysteria effectively turns the spectator into a kind of spectacle, and those who share in that yearning to be seen find community and joy safely through Empire’s misunderstandings.

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