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RELIGION, SECULARITY, GENDER, VIOLENCE, & DEATH

For he must reign until he has put all of his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:26-26

He would like himself to be as necessary as pure Idea, as One, All, absolute Spirit; and he finds himself enclosed in a limited body, in a place and time he did not choose, to which he was not called, useless, awkward, absurd. His very being is carnal contingency to which he is subjected in his isolation, in his unjustifiable gratuitousness. It also dooms him to death. This quivering gelatin that forms in the womb (the womb, secret and sealed like a tomb) is too reminiscent of the soft viscosity of carrion for him not to turn away from it with a shudder. Wherever life is in the process of being made – germination and fermentation – it provokes disgust because it is being made only when it is being unmade; the viscous glandular embryo opens the cycle that ends in the rotting of death.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*

Seeking both to explain and justify the alleged resurgence of religion in the wake of secularization's failures, philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that religion has been resurrected because *something has gone missing* in the secularized world.¹ This sense of lack, says Habermas, is the condition that gives rise to the postsecular. He raises the example of novelist and playwright Max Frisch—an agnostic who, despite his secular identity, chose a religious burial. This was, argues Habermas, a public declaration that “the enlightened modern age has failed to find a suitable replacement for a religious way of coping with the *rite de passage* which brings life to a close.”² Unlike religion, Habermas suggests, the secular world has failed to combat the sting of death. It lacks the ritual gravitas of religion. Or, perhaps, it lacks the promise of an afterlife that effectively lays waste to death itself.

Upon closer examination, however, it might be said that secular cultures, or secular frames, are equally as invested in transcending death as religion has long been. Immortalists, such as the notorious gerontologist Aubrey de Grey, believe that medical technologies will soon become advanced enough to functionally

¹ This is, of course, the title of a project to which Habermas contributed: Jürgen Habermas (et. al.), *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge & Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2010).

² *Ibid*, 15.

“cure” humanity of aging itself, thus eliminating (at least) the threat of death due to old age. There is no shortage of attempts within a secular frame to transcend death, and to seek comfort through practices that enable and facilitate this transcendence. Secular frames, moreover, frequently borrow or take cues from religious discourse to give a quasi-sacralized aura to otherwise utilitarian practices and technologies that facilitate the continuation of life, after death. Many see organ donation, for instance, as a form of transfer that borders on the miraculous and facilitates the relocation of a loved one’s spiritual material into another’s body.³

If we know where to look, we can find both religion and the secular performing or facilitating various transcendences of death. We can find both religion and the secular working to take the sting out of death, quivering with a kind of mortal dread, and failing to interface with our fear of death itself. Simone de Beauvoir argued that there is gender violence embedded in this transcendence of death. The act of birthing, of pushing another life into the suffering and peril of existence, generates a resentment of the body that births, Beauvoir argued. It is because we are born that we can also die—being born initiates us (resentfully) into the contingency of our own flesh. The transcendence of death—putting death to death—is not only the transcendence of death but also the transcendence of mortality’s ripe, and fleshy, messiness and the disgust or dread that it often generates within us. It is because we are born—because we are natal— that we resent death.

In this essay I push back against Habermas’s clean distinction between religious and secular modes of approaching death—intimating that the secular feels somehow empty because it fails to bring ritual gravitas to the moment of death, or fails to take the sting out of death. Instead, I will pursue a line of logic that suggests that both religion and the secular, in their quest to transcend death, have each succumbed to a resonant resentment and mortal dread. I suggest, along with Beauvoir, that there is a kind of gender violence at play in this mortal dread that gives way to various quests to transcend mortality and make abject the mortal body. I highlight a feminist struggle to find another method of being with the mortal body: an attempt to undo mortal dread not through the transcendence of death but instead through a transfiguration of mortality (a metamorphosis, even a glorification of sorts). Ultimately, I pose the question: is this transfiguration a kind of postsecular negotiation—one that is produced out of the failures of both religion and the secular and resists categorization as either? This essay will not seek to answer this question definitively. But it will suggest that the confusion and ambivalence generated by it is important. I reject Habermas’s claim that death—in its imminence—is a force that reveals the failure of the secular and the subtle triumph of religion. Instead, I think, the imminence and immanence of death reveals a mutual failure of both religion and the secular: a failure to engage and interface with our fear of death, or inhabit and transform our mortal dread. What, then, do we name a project that emerges out of this religio-secular failure, and seeks to address what has gone unaddressed?

³ See the anthropologist James Green’s discussion of organ donation in James W. Green, *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 70-72.

Transcending Death

Western philosophical thought has always had a death problem, says philosopher Françoise Dastur. Rather than accept it as inevitable, thought and culture in the west has typically sought either to overcome it, or to neutralize it. Despite critiques of religion's transcendent illusions dating all the way back to the nineteenth century (exemplary in the work of figures such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche), the protest against death's finality remains firmly entrenched in the lives and imaginations of both religious and irreligious (or secular) people in the west. Skepticism, critiques of religion, the retreat of the supernatural, the demise of metaphysics: none of these have made death into a friend.

Overcoming death is, Dastur acknowledges, intimately linked to the advent of culture itself. The ritual preservation of a corpse, for instance, is also "a refusal to submit to the natural order", a refusal to play by the rules that seem to govern all other living creatures.⁴ The elaboration of human burial rites has increasingly, over time, distinguished us from other animals. Disposing of the corpse also facilitates a new form of (virtual) relation with the deceased person – mediated in whatever mode a given culture has developed to make tangible this virtuality. Once the body is buried or cremated, what remains of the person is transformed for those who survive. Dastur argues that the purpose of funerary rites is to combat the erasure or disappearance of the deceased individual, to ensure "that something of the individual remains and endures". It is a method for gathering around, and giving testimony to, that virtuality once (and, for some, still) called the soul.⁵ The notion of the soul's immortality is not merely a consolation but, argues Dastur, a method for creating a space of continued exchange between the living and dead: a site where relations survive after the body's disappearance.⁶ Religious traditions are rife with methods for overcoming death via both ritual and mythical elements (such as the realm of supernature, or the promise of a life that we will be allowed to lead once this one is over). Dastur does suggest, however, that many of these ritual or mythical methods for overcoming death were historically more effective than they are now.

Modernity has ushered in a demystification of death. Intellectual skepticism and the premium placed on empirical evidence have generated doubt regarding the actuality of the soul or the credibility of the afterlife. And changes in the social order, such as urbanization, keep death warehoused in hospitals and nursing facilities where it falls out of contact with the everyday lives of most working, consuming, living, breathing bodies.⁷ In the modern west, death has become distant, and invisible. Interestingly, then, skepticism and empiricism have not driven us to confront the material reality of death (to cease our quest to overcome it). Instead, Dastur argues, we are still on a flight path away from death. Making death invisible in our everyday life, removing contact with dying or dead bodies:

⁴ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, Translated by Robert Vallier (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 4.

⁵ *Ibid*, 6-7.

⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

these are simply new methods for transcending death. This method of transcendence is, of course, stripped of religious meaning or metaphysical cargo. But, nonetheless, death remains abject—a thing to be done with, to overcome.

Dastur sounds, perhaps, a bit like Habermas on this point: she suggests that, on at least one level, modernity has left us with a disenchanting perspective on death. Our contemporary culture seems to have lost the ritual gravitas of the liturgically decorative religious funeral. We no longer feel the same sort of confidence in the rising of the immortal soul, as the body is lowered into the cold ground. But Dastur, unlike Habermas, is not nostalgic for religion's pre-modern death defiance. She does not commend a return to, or a resurgence of, the ritual gravitas or supernatural metaphysics of religion. Instead, she simply suggests that the conditions under which we seek to flee death, the methods we use for transcending it, or the practices that we spiritualize in order to nullify the psychological effects of death have shifted. If one regime of death denial has been disenchanting, another enchanted regime rises in its place.

In addition to this quest to overcome death we humans also, says Dastur, seek to be done with death by neutralizing it. Rather than an attempt to be done with death definitively, neutralization seeks to make death's impact less discernable. Our mortal condition often leaves us racked by anxiety: we do not know when death will take us, or how. When death does arrive, it almost always seems premature. This feeling—of life's brevity—pushes humans to transmit something of themselves into subsequent generations: knowledge, or genes.⁸ While the process of intellectual transmission can often be bound up within religious institutions (the diffusion of mind can also be the diffusion of spirit), the process of transmission through either childbirth or cloning are decidedly more mundane, or secular. But Dastur argues that, even in the case of the transmission of biological material (so often purpose oriented), the bonds and ties that are generated are still "more spiritual than biological." The concern, she says, is "to leave a trace in the memory of others, to survive not only in the flesh, but also and above all in spirit."⁹ To determine whether this transcendent "trace", surviving after the body's death, is religious or secular is really just a matter of splitting hairs. It can, indubitably, be both: much depends on context. What matters for the present discussion is that these are methods for transcending, or being done with, death.

In the end, however, death is never effectively overcome or neutralized. Techniques of avoidance, or transcendence, are merely stopgap measures. "Though human being has admirably tried very hard to lie to itself," says Dastur, "there is always a moment when the veil is torn asunder, and human being is summoned to accept its mortal condition."¹⁰ Bold acceptance of death's inevitability is, at least on the surface, the perspective commended by Christianity. At the heart of this tradition is a particular sort of god who assumes the cloak of mortality, and is violently put to death. To be Christian is, in one sense, "to live in the imminence of death." The spectacle of the passion calls Christians to "remember that death is what constitutes the very essence of their being."

⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

Christianity, in its contemplation of Jesus, is also a contemplation of death.¹¹ And yet there is, on the other hand, the resurrection: a phenomenon that brings the dead back to life in a resurrected body. The macabre becomes an alluring source of fascination for Christians, says Dastur, only because at the heart of the tradition lies the knowledge that death has been “forever vanquished.” Thus, this manner of “accepting” death ultimately takes on a dialectical form: “a recognition that is at the same time a denial.”¹² Christianity is a kind of ultimate embrace of death in its gruesomeness. But Christianity is not, in the end, a pure embrace of death. Indeed, the resurrection is designed to snuff out death’s power.

Dastur’s own question then becomes: is it possible not only to accept that we are mortal, but to see within our inevitable death a condition for joy? Is there a form of acceptance that sees, in death, not something to be denied, overcome, neutralized, or transcended? Can we pursue another sort of transmutation through a radicalized finitude? Can we free ourselves from the anxiety of our mortal condition—from our mortal dread—through what Meister Eckhart called “detachment” or “letting go” or “releasement”?¹³ Can we, finally, learn not to begin thought with the infinite and think downward? Or to think ourselves out of mortality by grasping at the infinite? Can we begin, instead, with the contingency of finitude and remain there? Can we learn to see death not as a “scandal” but instead as “the very foundation of our existence”?¹⁴ This is a modified Heideggerian argument. Dastur underscores that the human is a being-toward-death. But she ponders whether we can live toward this mortality not with anxiety so much as with joy.

Of course, there is an almost myopic anthropomorphism at work in this possibility: the idea that, at the foundation of existence is the death that we know as the expiration of the human body. There are reasons, I think, to resist such a formulation. My individual body would not exist, of course, without death: my body is built from reconditioned material that is on offer only because other creatures have died. The destruction of matter is what makes possible the creation of matter. Life is forged out of death. Life feeds on death. Life is fermented out of dying things. Death is, no doubt, a foundation.

Death, however, also feeds on life. And when death endures, life endures alongside it. This whole process—life and death, feeding on one another—is itself mortal. It is a process whose intricate and particular organic twists and turns, so far as we know, only takes place on this planet: a mortal planet, spinning in the light of a star that will also die. But we are scarcely able to perceive, or conceive of, the time scales that govern the planetary system in our own galaxy, let alone those that govern galaxies that we cannot—yet—give sensory witness to. The spread of time, within the outermost regions of space, is so potentially vast that when we contrast it with the finitude of a human lifespan it begins to look more like something infinite. The death of a human body, and even the death of our planet, is dwarfed in the wake of this sort of extension. It looks less like death is

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

the condition of our existence and more like the folding of death into life (and vice versa), or their mutual consumption, devastation, or re-creation, is the condition of our existence. Whatever we call it, death does not seem to act alone in sovereign omnipotence.

If we respond to Dastur's questions with a resonant "yes", these other dimensions of reality are muted. Death becomes a sovereign. Moreover, the call to accept death and live in its imminence can quickly give way to the charge that there is something fundamentally foolish or perverse in the quest to transcend death. But we are animals whose sensory systems are attuned to a drive to keep living. At the edge of a cliff, we pull our bodies backward. Approaching an interstate pile-up, we hit the brakes. We attempt to outsmart, or live above, death almost without thinking about it. This is not necessarily distortion or folly, but also instinct. And the instinct to stay alive can, in its way, render the demand that we *accept death* an empty kind of dogmatism.

Nevertheless, there are social and political consequences for turning death into an enemy. It is not ideologically neutral to make death a sovereign. But neither is it ideologically neutral to abject death—to think of it as a rival to be beaten or overcome. The drive to transcend death risks all of these things: abjection, violence, disgust. It instills our mortality with a kind of unnecessary violence. When death (as a general, rather than a particular phenomenon) becomes a site of anger, or disgust, these affects can give way to a kind of rage or violence that begins to seep into the social in other ways. It begins to condition the way that we perceive of our mortality, the way that we think about (and treat) our mortal bodies. If it is indeed the case that our abjection of death, our mortal dread, drives (or derives from) a kind of gender violence, then this showcases at least one of the effects of this problematic violence.

The Gender of Death

Death, it is often said, is a great equalizer. All creatures die, thus death shows no preferences. But all manner of differences, including gender difference, play out in our assessments and representations of death. Why, for instance, is the chess-playing death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, a man? This figuration of death evokes the grim reaper: he wears a hooded robe, and wields a sickle. But there is something rather genderless about the reaper at large, a figure whose faceless face is often shrouded behind the shadows of its hood. *The Seventh Seal*, however, presents us with the battle of wits between a knight and his rival. Is death a man, here, because this is a masculinist battle scene? Or is death a man, here, because this makes the battle of wits—played out on a chessboard (a stage for logic and reason)—more rhetorically convincing?

Whatever the case may be, this encounter with death looks quite different from the figuration of death that appears in Francis of Assisi's *Laudes Creaturarum*. In this hymn, Francis praises the greatness of God by praising God's creatures. Additionally, the saint evokes a sense of kinship with these creatures by dubbing them his brothers and sisters. Francis lauds, for instance, Brother Sun (a powerful creature who he calls a "master brother") who "dawns for us" and acts as a filter or channel for God's light. This light is, to be sure, a "mighty luminescence." But

Francis observes that it is “merely a glimpse” of God’s power and glory.¹⁵ Francis goes on to praise Sister Moon (and all the stars around her), Brother Wind (surrounded by his clouds), Sister Water (who is, he notes, so “humble and useful”), Brother Fire (“merry and strong”). He praises Sister Mother Earth (not, notably, a full mother who might be an equal consort of father God but instead a “sister mother”). Finally, even he reserves some praise for Sister Bodily Death, who “no living man can ever flee.” But this is only a problem, Francis notes, for those who die in mortal sin. The blessed can expect, through their “second death”, what is actually a resurrection into eternal life. In other words, those who are close to God will find the power of this sister nullified: God will put death to death. Here Francis performs the embrace/denial of death that Dastur has already illuminated for us.

None of these creatures are afforded, by Francis, a power that is equal to God’s. Even the power of his glorious Brother Sun is relativized in the wake of God’s power. But why is it that the Sun is given a greater power and status than death? The Sun, of course, is also a mortal—subject to death—though we might forgive this medieval saint his lack of knowledge on the subject. More notable, perhaps, is the fact that the active elements who goad, inspire, or inflame are gendered male, while the passive elements who support and sustain (the moon, water, earth) are gendered female. What is Francis saying about death, when he genders her female alongside the moon and the Earth? Is he suggesting that death is a supporter and a sustainer? Perhaps. More likely, I suspect, is that this renders death as something passive: not a force whose strength is great and cannot be vanquished but instead a passive element who God can easily subject to his own power. Death must give way, for Francis, to the power of God. Thus death (unlike the Sun) must submit, rather than transmit. Is it the demand that death *submit* that drives Francis to make death sisterly? Brother Sun reveals the power and glory of God. But Sister Death is destined only for submission: God must be willing to do a kind of violence to her. Death may be a fellow creature, but she is still (as the Apostle Paul has put it) the last enemy to be defeated.

Francis renders death into a woman. But he is far from the only figure to associate women with death and dying. The cultural associations between women and death are ancient. Many historians have examined the gendering of death through the figure of the lamenting, or wailing, woman: in funeral settings in ancient Greece, Rome, Israel, Egypt, and elsewhere, women were hired to wail and lament for the dead. In Ireland the wailing woman was supernaturalized in the form of the banshee. In Greece, the social function of the wailing woman has been subject to repression in modernity¹⁶—indicating, perhaps in part, just another way in which the rawness of death and its mortal body have been transcended. Regardless, contemporary Greece is far from the only place where women have continued to be associated with death in modern life. A recent study of Icelandic patients on palliative care—at death’s door—appears to indicate that women are

¹⁵ English translation of this poem borrowed from: Allesandro Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ See, for instance, C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

more comfortable talking about death. Over the course of three years, in 195 separate interviews, 80% of women (compared with 30% of the men) initiated conversations about their own impending death, leading the researchers to conclude that gender can make a difference when it comes to processing one's own mortality in the face of death.¹⁷ Of course, equally as likely, is the possibility that one gender is taught and encouraged to engage thoughts and reflections on the mortality of the body.

Beauvoir argues that the associations between women and death are driven by men's fears about the contingency of their own flesh. Birth serves as a reminder, she suggests, of the "murderous" hold men perceive that nature holds over them. Man, "feels horror at having been engendered," humiliated by his reduction to an animal body.¹⁸ The figure to blame, for this humiliation, is the birthing body: "to have been conceived and then born as an infant is the curse that hangs over his destiny, the impurity that contaminates his being."¹⁹ But because the birthing body (for Beauvoir, the woman's body) is associated with fecundity, there is also a sense of possibility within it, she argues. "Woman condemns man to finitude, but she also enables him to exceed his own limits; and hence comes the equivocal magic with which she is endued."²⁰ The consequence of this, however, is that the birthing body then becomes a bad (or false) infinite. Like Saint Francis's Sister Death as bad infinite, the birthing body becomes "an ideal without truth" which "stands exposed as finiteness and mediocrity and, on the same ground, as falsehood."²¹

Death, to extrapolate from Beauvoir's analysis, is not inherently linked to women but is instead related—by association—to the birthing body, which stands the other side of mortality, across from death. Death is a site of abjection and disgust because it is a reminder of mortality, and mortal vulnerability. It is the contingency in both death and birth that generates resentment. This resentment—of contingency, of finitude, of vulnerability—drives the quest to transcend death, and to secure a share of the infinite. The resentment of death, then, can result in a set of violent reactions against death. When death is personified, this figure seems to provoke violent reactions (Paul, for instance, sees death as an enemy to defeat). When death is personified as a woman, or gendered female, violence against death appears in the guise of gender violence.

Beauvoir's own argument is, I think, still too bound to the ancient symbolic associations between women and death. In many cultures, at many different historical moments, death has been gendered as a woman, or counted among womanly things. While it may not be the case that these gendered associations are cultural universals, they are deeply pervasive. But what is incisive about Beauvoir's analysis is not that she explains this resonance between women and

¹⁷ Bragi Skulason, Arna Hauksdottir, Kozma Ahcic, and Asgeir R. Helgason, "Death Talk: Gender Differences in Talking About One's Own Impending Death", *BMC Palliative Care*, 2014, 13:8.

¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Translated by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 148.

²¹ *Ibid*, 187.

death as a function of femininity. Rather, what is incisive is that she argues that these cultural associations are the symptom of a physical process: they are symbolic associations that accrue around a material and physiological phenomenon that gives shape to mortality. Birth and death appear to be opposites: birth is the joyous inauguration of life, and death is its regrettable end. But, as Beauvoir argues, these moments are simply partners that give shape to our creaturely condition. What the associations between women and death reveal is a deeply seated mortal dread – and an antipathy of that which pins us to this mortal body.

Historically, the body that births is a woman's body. But as gender norms and relations shift, the cultural understanding of birth shifts alongside it. Transgender birth events are changing the gender of the birthing body. While it may, still, be the case that certain physiological elements must be in place in order for a fetus to be conceived and grow to full term, it is now the case that babies can be born to a body that is gendered male. When this is the case, it is equally as likely that mortal dread—a hatred for the contingency of mortal flesh—may not be a hatred associated with women but instead with the birthing body itself. The potentially violent associations (and rejections of) the birthing body that makes mortal life are subject to greater gender fluidity than even Beauvoir acknowledged. Indeed, this critique also helps us to account for the fact that men are not the only ones to be possessed by a mortal dread. Cultural associations between women and death do not render women themselves more capable of coping with their mortality. Some, perhaps, may live into their mortality with a sense of inevitability and resignation precisely because of these cultural associations. And it may even be the case that the process of childbirth does throw those who give birth into a forced meditation on the impending possibility of their own death, through this deeply mortal (and often intensely risky) process. But improvements in medical care in Europe and the contemporary US (for those with access to suitable health insurance) have decoupled the long historical association between childbirth and death, for many. Ultimately the terror of death, and the resentment of contingency, does not belong to men alone. Regardless of that fact, however, what I do think Beauvoir's argument helpfully suggests is that there is a kind of gender violence present in the fear of death: one that may find a home of sorts in the resentment of the body's contingency, introduced via the birth event. In this sense, then, I think that our perception of death is a feminist issue.

With this in mind, it seems worth noting that while the association of death with women has been a site of gender violence it can also be a site of power. Interestingly, it may also be the case that death in her sisterliness is becoming—in at least one enclave—the site of a push back against gender violence. Indeed, death as a gendered figure has begun to offer some umbrage for those who experience gender violence in their everyday lives. The Mexican folk figure Santa Muerte (Holy Death)—a figure who is gendered female and often presented as a skeleton, garlanded with a cloak and colorful flowers—is one of uncertain origin. It does appear that references to her, in the historical records of New Spain, date back to at least the 18th century Inquisition. But her popularity, particularly in and around Mexico City, has dramatically increased over the past couple of decades, garnering her (according to some reports) as many as four million devotees. She's often spoken about as the favored intermediary for narcotraficantes, and has been

condemned as an idol by the Catholic Church. As one Catholic deacon has put it, “the cult of Holy Death is one of idolatry. In Catholicism, one is not supposed to adore death.”²² But she has also proven to be attractive to (and deemed a source of protection for) transgender people in Mexico, as well as immigrant communities in North America.

In a series of interviews with transgender (male to female) sex workers from Guadalajara (some interviews were conducted among migrants in San Francisco) Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky, and Lois Ann Lorentzen learned from devotees in this industry that many consider themselves to be Catholic, but feel ostracized by and isolated from the church itself. While many have stopped attending church services, and are aware that their lifestyles and identities are often condemned by the church, they continue devotional practices individually through the adoration of (especially) the Virgin of Guadalupe, Saint Jude, and Santa Muerte. Knowledge about, as well as worship of, Santa Muerte is primarily encountered through friends and co-workers in the industry. Given the church’s rejection of Santa Muerte, there are no formal codes or rites that govern devotion to her. This teaching is, instead, passed along through informal networks and worship of her is often highly improvisational. Devotees also report that Santa Muerte is fickle, demanding, and highly selective. Devotion to her can be unpredictable because she will not answer the prayers of everyone. She is attractive to those who are rejected by the church, in large part, because she is known to accept you just as you are. But she may have little interest in protecting those who do not live a challenging existence.²³ Santa Muerte may only be concerned to answer the prayers of those who are most vulnerable to danger, violence, and death. Some sex workers reported, in their interviews, that they would pray to Santa Muerte for strength and protection before each visit from a client.

Does the gender of Santa Muerte matter here? Is there any correlation between her subversive power—her embrace of the marginalized—and her gender? Perhaps, and perhaps not. It should not pass without note, however, that she is a figure rejected by the patriarchs of a male-dominated church, who enforce heteronormative and transphobic religious structures. There are, undoubtedly, several figural elements of Santa Muerte that serve as symbolic counterpoints to this patriarchal authority. But she is, among other things, a woman in a man’s world and marks a kind of difference in this regard. Perhaps this gives impetus to, or emblemizes, her embrace of those who are outcasts from the proper channels of church authority.

More significant, perhaps, is the fact that she appears to give her devotees a power that helps them to confront the conditions of a dangerous, and often violent,

²² As cited in an interview in Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky, and Lois Ann Lorentzen, “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco” in Lois Ann Lorentzen, Joaquin Jay Gonzalez III, Kevin M. Chun, and Hien Duc Do (Eds.), *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 29.

²³ Howe, Zaraysky & Lorentzen, “Devotional Crossings”, 28.

marginalization due to their gender and/or sexuality. This is not unrelated to the fact that she is a symbol of death. As a sex worker named Jajaira tells interviewers:

You know that some people are homophobic. Some people are claustrophobic, others are afraid of spiders, closed rooms, darkness, etc... [But] all of humanity is afraid of death. One hundred percent of people are afraid of death. [The worship of Santa Muerte], it's about *not* being afraid of death, about not being so attached to the fear of death. More than anything it's about *not being afraid*.²⁴

Santa Muerte, as a figuration of death, may help her devotees to inhabit the fear that surrounds them in what is a dangerous and marginalized situation. The marginality of transgender sex workers is one that leaves them disproportionately vulnerable not only to death, but to a violent death. Santa Muerte offers them protection as well as the promise of a transformed relationship with the death that hovers at the door. She helps sex workers like Jajaira channel one of the most enduring and universal fears—that old sense of mortal dread. But more, through an embrace of Santa Muerte—an embrace of death as holy, and sanctified—another relationship with death is forged. She facilitates not an abjection of death, not a triumph over it, but a kind of confrontation with it: an intimacy or familiarity with death. As Dastur notes, the idea that any of us can overcome death is a delusion. But some of us can live *as if* such a triumph were possible. Some bodies are less exposed to, reminded of, or haunted by their mortal contingency. For sex workers like Jajaira—who are deeply aware of the fact that violent death is always a possibility—such a triumph is more obviously a delusion. Santa Muerte, with her particular sort of compassion, does not try to hide this from them.

One embraces, through Santa Muerte, not a figure who *transcends* the mortal body, but a figure who creates an interface with mortality, invites one to inhabit her own finitude and contingency and to find within this a site of power and strength. Perhaps there is even a transfiguration of mortality that happens in this process: mortal dread is transformed into something else. This contemplative embrace of death may be idolatry according to the church (an institution that would rather counsel believers to do battle with death, or to transcend it). But in this refusal to make death abject, do we see the cultivation of a perspective on mortality (a touse with mortal dread, a communion with mortality) that both the religious and the secular have—more often than not—failed to generate?

Postsecular Transfigurations of Mortality

I have argued that the transcendence of death is proper neither to religion nor to the secular but is instead a common heritage: one that both regimes seek to perform or facilitate. In what remains I analyze two examples of an attempt to *transfigure mortality*, rather than triumph over death. In the work of feminist philosophers of religion like Grace Jantzen and Beverley Clack, I suggest that we witness critiques of both religious and secular systems of value. These thinkers point to failures in both religious and secular regimes. But the transfiguration of mortality that they each commend is meant to speak constructively into both

²⁴ *Ibid*, 31. Italics mine.

religious and secular systems of value, as well. What we see in their work, then, is a rejection of (a protest against) *both* religion *and* the secular – but it is a protest that does not, entirely, abandon either. Should we, then, call their transfiguration of mortality “postsecular”?

The problem that both Jantzen and Clack address—in their critique of the transcendence of mortality—is a feminist problem. It is because of a kind of gender violence, realized primarily through misogyny, that mortality is abjected, they argue. And the vision they offer—of a transfiguration of mortality itself—is the product of a feminist philosophical turn. But their transfiguration of mortality is not unrelated to the transcendence of death (so often gendered as a woman). Indeed, for both Jantzen and Clack their feminist turn is a protest against this transcendence.

Pushing back against the symbolic association between women and death, feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen argued that western thought has, affectively, been both fascinated by and fearful of, death. She argued (echoing both Beauvoir and Dastur) that this has resulted in a draw – within both religious and secular contexts – toward alternate realms that transcend this world of death: the religious afterlife, or the secular obsession with instruments of flight and telescopic vision. But Jantzen argued that this is not necrophobia—fear of death—and is instead *necrophilia*—an obsession with it.²⁵ This love of death operates, she suggested, as a kind of disavowed foundation of modernity—an element that, alongside the feminine, is violently repressed within philosophy (which seeks to transcend both women and death). Jantzen explored the associative links between women and death in the western intellectual tradition—in the work of psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan, as well as philosophers such as Levinas and Derrida.²⁶ Ultimately, for Jantzen, the obsession with death, and the attempt to overcome or transcend it, is linked to a masculinist rejection of body’s materiality (associated with birth) and an obsessive orientation toward the rational thought that transcends it. Jantzen argued that feminist philosophy of religion could counteract or combat this through a focus on natality.

Jantzen borrowed the concept of natality from the work of Hannah Arendt: it is the condition of having been born, of being a natal. Arendt argued, in her doctoral dissertation on the work of Saint Augustine, that our natality should be—like our impending death—a philosophical category. As a student of Heidegger, who argued that being-towards-death frees us for our authenticity, Arendt argued that being a natal (the condition of natality) was the source of an even deeper authenticity. Natality was, for Arendt, the “condition of human possibility” and so, therefore, “the foundation of freedom.”²⁷ The focus on mortality, for Jantzen,

²⁵ Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 130.

²⁶ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, on Freud and Lacan (discussing God, death, and the woman subject) 43-58, (on figures such as Hegel, Feuerbach, Levinas, and Derrida who have contributed to the promotion of necrophilia in modernity, along with its gendered associations) 131-137.

²⁷ Arendt, as paraphrased by Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 145.

carried a range of possibilities for feminist philosophy. Above all, perhaps, it implies the *affirmation* of human embodiment.

The feminist embrace of mortality, Jantzen argued, would amount to a privileging of the repressed “other” of mortality. Western culture has been obsessed with (and fearful of) the deathly sides of mortality, and has suffocated the birth element of our mortal being.²⁸ To embrace natality as a condition of possibility, as a source of freedom (and thus the disavowed foundation of Enlightened values), is to suggest that mortal embodiment should not be a problematic site of disgust and abjection but instead a privileged source of religious and secular value.²⁹ Jantzen argued that a focus on natality would also result in an ecologically minded sensibility that affirmed, through the embrace of the mortal human body, a subsequent affirmation of other mortal bodies—it would generate a sense of kinship with all life, especially other mortal creatures.³⁰ Ultimately, Jantzen argued, the feminist emphasis on natality would be an embrace of the “inescapability of limits.” Masculinist western philosophy has rejected mortality because of its inherent (misogynistic) “drive to infinity: an insatiable desire for knowledge, a quest for ever-increasing mastery, a refusal to accept boundaries.”³¹ To embrace natality is to embrace the contingency, the finitude, and the vulnerable limits of mortality itself.

Jantzen shared, with Beauvoir, a diagnosis: for both of these feminist thinkers, the fear of death in western thought (its mortal dread) derives from an obsession with, or a desire for, the infinite and the limitless. It seeks to transcend the finite contingency of the mortal body. This drive, or quest, to transcend the contingent, the finite, the mortal, is linked with a rejection of the bodies that generate mortality in the first place. For both thinkers, this is the source of the gender violence embedded within mortal dread. But Jantzen was more optimistic about the possibilities that are resident within the mortal body. Beauvoir on the other hand saw, in natality, further evidence of the denigration of mortality—she argued that mortal dread is made more acute, or intensified, through reminders of our natal condition. For Jantzen, the encounter with natality had the potential to transform the way that we think about mortality and all its complications (both birth and death). She argued that natality had the potential to drive an affirmation of finitude’s contingency, navigating around that old mortal dread. For Jantzen, then, mortality was *transfigured*: it undergoes a metamorphosis, or a change. No longer something to dread, overcome, fight, or transcend, she suggested that it can be something to affirm—a source of spiritual potency and possibility. Indeed, Jantzen suggested that the embrace of natality—its transfiguration of mortality—is the channel through which women will be able to experience the process of *becoming divine* on their own terms.³²

²⁸ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 129.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 151.

³¹ *Ibid*, 154.

³² This is the title and subject of her book: natality is a concept that she develops in service of this broader notion of “becoming divine.”

Jantzen argued that her feminist philosophy—which aimed for women’s becoming divine—should be directly aligned with neither Christian nor secular feminism. Secular feminists, she suggested, reject religion as a site of patriarchal damage. Christian feminists, on the other hand, are likely to resist the pathway that she herself commends (becoming divine) as idolatrous.³³ Lacking a source of value in which to cleanly place her own feminist thought, Jantzen critiques instead the bifurcation that separates religion and the secular, in the first place. While religion and the secular are often held up as oppositions, this opposition itself is merely a condition of modernity, said Jantzen. And what her feminist critique advanced was, in essence, a critique of the modern condition that holds religion and the secular up as opposing forces in the first place. “Both secularism and religion need to be rethought as mutually imbricated in some of the most objectionable aspects of the project of modernity,” said Jantzen. Her work, then, sought to destabilize (though not destroy) them both.³⁴ The muse of Jantzen’s work was the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray—a thinker who both critiques and pillages from Christian thought.³⁵ Thus, while it was important for Jantzen to distance herself from *both* religion and the secular, in the end her own constructive project did not fully distance itself from either. It remained both critical of, and yet still entangled with, the Christian project.

Feminist philosopher Beverly Clack argues that the basic facts of human existence can be summed up in the following statement: “we are animals who are born, who reproduce sexually, and who will die.”³⁶ Subsequently, she argues that only by accepting that we are “sexuate” and mortal will we, as humans, be capable of constructing a meaningful life.³⁷ Despite this, however, Clack notes that there are powerful intellectual trends in western thought that deny and repress these basic facts of our mortality. Given an enduring polarization between transcendence and immanence in western thought, there have been endless attempts within both theological and philosophical forms of thought to transcend and distance us from our animal mortality: to transcend the reality in which “we reproduce by sexual intercourse” and “are mutable, fleshy beings who will ultimately die.”³⁸ Clack, in her thinking, pursues a contemporary spirituality that engages with the profundity of our existence—one that does not seek to escape either our existence as sexuate beings or as bodies that die.³⁹

While Clack does acknowledge that reproduction (birth) results from sex, the mortal existence that she highlights does not oscillate—like Beauvoir and Jantzen’s commentaries—around the birth event that structures mortality. Instead, Clack illuminates the entanglement of sex and death in her attempt to highlight the contours of mortality that are erased, eviscerated, or evaded in mortal dread.

³³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See for instance Alison Martin, “Luce Irigaray and the Adoption of Christianity” in *Paragraph*, Vol. 21 No. 1 (March 1998), pp. 101-120.

³⁶ Beverly Clack, *Sex and Death: A Reappraisal of Human Mortality* (Cambridge, Oxford, and Malden, Mass: Polity Pres, 2002), 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Through a critique of western thinkers such as Plato, Augustine, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Freud, Clack exposes the ways in which this western intellectual lineage works to transcend our animal mortality, through a denial of our sexuate and perishable natures. Notably, Clack critiques Beauvoir's acceptance of the symbolic links between women and death. While Clack may share Beauvoir's appraisal of the misogynist fear of mortality, Clack also critiques the fact that Beauvoir does not find female sexuality, the woman's body, or the birth event to be sources of power for feminist thinking. Instead, Beauvoir describes female sexuality and embodiment as mysterious and tragic.⁴⁰ Beauvoir recommends that women work to transcend their environmental conditions in order to realize their own freedom (an act which includes a rejection of motherhood as such—a total evasion of the birth event).⁴¹ Because of this, says Clack, Beauvoir herself fails to hold together the transcendent and the immanent and the result is simply a new affirmation of the transcendence of mortality.⁴²

Clack's own vision for resisting the transcendence of mortality—for embracing our mortal nature in its fully sexuate and perishable state—is to argue that death is what makes our lives meaningful. It places a border around our experiences, and gives shape to the process of living itself.⁴³ By removing death from its rightful place *in the midst of life*, we have become "sick animals", she argues.⁴⁴ Ultimately, she suggests, we need to become capable of accepting (not resisting or transcending) the contingency and vulnerability that shape our humanity.⁴⁵ But Clack is clear that she is not recommending we learn to structure our lives around the grief and loss that is generated by the death of others. Instead, she argues that we embrace mortality in both its tragedy and its creative profundity (we are, after all, *both sexuate and perishable animals*). The sign that Clack embraces as a source of resistance and power is one that is at least as strong as death: that of love (which is "in all its mutable messiness" also "eternal".⁴⁶) In the actualization of love (kissing, caressing, intercourse) the immanent and the transcendent "the eternal and the mutable, mind and matter, meet and merge."⁴⁷ In love, mortality is both embraced and transfigured.

Clack, like Jantzen, critiques voices within religious and theological tradition (such as Augustine). While the constructive elements in Clack's project are certainly less overtly religio-theological than Jantzen's, she does clarify that its ends and aims are ultimately spiritual. In this sense, then, Clack resists locating her work in either religious or secular sites of value. Clack does define the term "spiritual" on her own terms as something that refuses to resist immanence. "Commonly," she writes, "the word demarcates a lifestyle based upon a transcendent other, a lifestyle which is grounded in specific religious practices." She uses it, instead, as a term that affirms the attempts we make, as human animals, to endow our living

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 53-55.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid*, 58.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 133.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 136.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

existence with meaning. Clack characterizes spirituality as a form of contemplation that produces a full engagement with our immanent material reality: in this sense she sees it as distinct from religion's transcendent source of value and justification. From one angle, then, her vision of spirituality is rather secular. But she also acknowledges that because of the colonization of spiritual and contemplative resources by the Christian tradition, it is impossible to avoid engaging with Christianity on a practical and constructive level. Indeed, in Clack's vision of love as that which embraces our full mortality—at its peaks in both sex and death—she reflects on love as *eternal*, which cannot but evoke the Christian figuration of the eternal God as love itself. And, of course, her suggestion that love is stronger than death evokes Book 8 of the Bible's Song of Solomon. Her feminist vision is, in this sense, biblical.

In sum, both Jantzen and Clack come into tension with Christian theological thought, while also generating their alternative visions in partial conversation with it. Both thinkers illuminate a problematic complicity between Christianity and the secular—arguing that each of these social and intellectual regimes seek to transcend our mortality. But the problematic conjunction of secular thought and Christian theology can still be sourced for contemplative and spiritual resources. This problematic conjunction, in other words, still offers materials that these thinkers want to use to confront their circumstances: resources that they want to use to cope with being mortal, to begin a different sort of conversation with death.

Despite the impetus to critique modernity's racist, sexist, and colonialist legacies and its complicity with Christian thought, it is still the case that some critics turn toward theological materials in an attempt to cope with trenchant issues that are neither religious nor secular in any inherent sense but, rather, something more along the order of physiological processes. Mortality itself, perhaps, is the most striking and difficult of these issues. What do we name the turn toward these materials, in the wake of their simultaneous critique? This is a turn that is often chastened, and critical, but seeks to resource this tradition nonetheless (though not without some resignation). Is this work categorizable? Unlike Habermas's claim that religion provides superior resources for dealing with realities such as death, I have instead argued that religion and the secular have both produced problematic treatments of the issue of mortality. And, yet, the project of building better methods for interfacing with death—for coping with mortality, for transforming mortal dread—does not entirely *avoid* either religion or the secular. To call this critical negotiation with religion and the secular something that is "postsecular" risks, perhaps, too much of an association with the more Habermasian project. But is there a better descriptive term?

One could also argue, of course, that all of this (the agonized critical/constructive engagement with modernity and its Christo-secular legacies, this honeyed attempt to transfigure brute mortality in ways that this legacy has failed to) is merely symptomatic of a botched and wheezing postmodernism. Philosopher Gillian Rose castigated the postmodern feminist attempt to critique the maleness of reason and to embrace the body, calling it a "new baroque protestantism of the body." She argued that it was a flimsy critical method that, "would have no real effect" beyond lulling our senses "with the rainbow of saturated hues, with the aroma of

sweet herbs.”⁴⁸ Reason, for Rose, has its function. And to reject it in favor of the body itself is like attempting to live off of cotton candy: it’s a saccharine solution that, in the end, will only make us sicker. Rose reduces, in one stroke, the attempt to think differently about the mortal body to a helpless and tired postmodernized protestant impulse. Perhaps, in the end, that’s all this attempt to render death less of an enemy is: a protestantism working itself out, weakly, in the entrails of the modern. Perhaps this is what it should be called. And perhaps it should simply be acknowledged that protest, in the face of something so inevitable, is idiocy.

Yet Rose herself does not commend a turn back toward religious metaphysics or authority, in order to cope with mortal dread. And she does commend her own resources for coping with mortal dread. Indeed, she recommends humor. “Comedy is homeopathic” she writes, “it cures folly by folly.” We can cut through our suffering with laughter, she suggests, “which is neither joyful nor bitter.” She evokes “loud belly laughter”, or “the endless sense of the mundane hilarious”, or “the gravelly laugh roused by the whimsical poetry of the incongruous in one who has damaged lungs.”⁴⁹ One could ask Rose, however, whether laughter itself isn’t also a transfiguration of mortality – whether a loud belly laugh isn’t, also, a form of protest. Is laughter not, in its way, an occupation of the living body? A vocalization that protests its silencing? A protest that shifts the body’s suffering – perhaps even transfiguring it? Is humor not a kind of protest that we would be simpletons to reduce to a protestantism? Perhaps it is this protest that protestantism did inhabit and embrace, that modernity’s protests have inherited, that postmodernity’s protests have occupied and made their own, and that those nameless coping mechanisms we forge in the half light of some epoch we cannot yet identify will also protest. Perhaps it matters little what we call it. Perhaps what matters, instead, is that we know it when we see it. And that we know how to use it.

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Marovich, Beatrice. “Religion, Secularity, Gender, Violence, & Death,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 16 no. 2 (Spring 2017):

⁴⁸ Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995), 143.

⁴⁹ Rose, *Love’s Work*, 143.