

Mistresses and Others:

The “body as subject” in (architectural) discourse

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Apparently Arab scholars when speaking of the text use this admirable expression: the certain body. What body? We have several of them; the body of the anatomists and physiologists, the one science sees or sicusses: this is the text of grammarians, critics, commentators, philologists (the pheno-text). But we also have a body of bliss consisting solely of erotic relations, utterly distinct from the first body: it is another contour, another nomination; thus with the text: it is no more than the open list of the fires of language (those living fires, intermittent lights, wandering features strewn in the text like seeds and which for us advantageously replace the “semina aeternitatis,” the “sopyra,” the common notions, the fundamental assumptions of ancient philosophy). Does the text have a human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need. The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas - for my body does not have the same ideas I do (Barthes, 1975: 16).

Greatness, or recognition, as a master architect is not possible for most people. Only a few in history attain such stature and this might have to do with a number of variables: family history, work, genius, talent, economic foundation, labour, intensity of personality and luck. The ideal image of the master architect is not the real image of the architect; it is the mirror or the lens through which the real architect is seen. Nonetheless this image mediates each self-identity as an architect, and mediates the question of who can become an architect.

A popular exemplification of this image is the architect in the 1949 film, *The Fountainhead*, famously captured by Gary Cooper playing the lead role, as architect Howard Roark. Howard Roark is portrayed as creative, artistic, brilliant and unforgiving, an image that is typical of the genius in history. He will not give in to the mediocrity that is central to the society he lives in. He is perceived as a solitary figure acting against the grain. He believes in his own creativity and his own vision, and will not negotiate this with others or with the context within which he must function. This makes him both impossible - he burns drawings and goes to work as a labourer - and desirable for the same reasons. Howard Roark (Gary Cooper) is both elegant and understated, demonstrating the effects of his masculinity as mind, and, handsome and sexy, demonstrating the effects of his masculinity as body. The image of the master functions as an ideal image. It is argued in contemporary psychoanalytic theory that idealization is the single most powerful inducement for identification – we cannot idealize something without, at the same time, identifying with it (Silverman, 1996: 2). The first instance of this is the idealized image of the body. The body of the master architect is a determinate body; it permeates the architectural community at a level of identity and idealization.

Within a field in which the master holds a transcendental and heroic vision that budding architects aspire to, how can identities perceived as the non-master - subjects who are crossed by signs of the female body, the black body, the migrant body, the working class body, the peasant body - become great architects? If notions of genius, as that "part of us that surpasses and exceeds ourselves" (as outlined in the theme description for this periodical) are etymologically and intimately linked to notions of genealogy, as the tradition of interdependence and becoming-embodied, then the struggle is between a grand narrative of master architect - always already masculine, Eurocentric, white and privileged - and the story of others embedded in a group (not individual), and located in a place (not universal). The idealized image of the body alludes to both genius and genealogy, in that it contains a specific body rendered beyond its specific details. How can unmasterful subjects, construed through their specific detail, stage themselves as provisional masters? Secondly, how does this affect the canonical topography of the discipline, and what kind of architectural discourse is generated through this staging?

This essay will focus on sexual difference as a specific detail symptomatic of the unmasterful subject. Within language, a strange equivalence between the two terms 'old masters' and 'old mistresses' is revealed; the second term carries traces of entirely different histories and connotations (Pollock, 1988). In the first part of the essay, theories of sexuality and otherness will be introduced. The second part of the essay will elaborate on this, through a case study of Zaha Hadid and the effect of her presentation of her work at The American University of Beirut, in late 1996.

Body as object / Body as subject

Theorist and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, argues that gender and sex, or the social and biological are interwoven, and the connection she makes between them has thereby provided a radical and influential theory of sexual difference. Society is divided and organised in terms of two sexes, male and female, not only two genders, women and men, Irigaray argues. The human subject is more like a body-subject, and the subject's social practices are embedded in the inscriptions of a sexually specific body history (Irigaray, 1985; Grosz, 1989). A very different concept of human subjectivity emerges, one that differs from both the essentialist claim, that gender is an innate biological condition, and from the culturalist claim, that gender is constructed culturally and has nothing to do with biology. Earlier theories of gender and sexuality proposed that culture (gender) and biology (sex) were either conceptualised as two separate realms, or that they were conflated. Irigaray, drawing from psychoanalytic theory and practice, develops a concept of the body as structured and inscribed, even at levels of bodily experience. Irigaray refers to the morphology rather than the biology of the body, a body that is already coded and given meaning socially and historically (Grosz, 1989: 111).

In the practice of architecture, as in other creative work, the body also refers to the created object, its form, shape and matter. Buildings become body-objects in a counterpoint gesture to Irigaray's body-subjects, acting as metaphoric expressions of subjectivity. Theories of deconstruction were disseminated and found

expression in visual fields. Ideas about the western subject as a deconstructed subject became associated with broken looking buildings and forms. The specific body is also pointed to: Viennese architects, Coop Himmelblau, ironically use images of their own faces to generate urban design schemes. Their bodies do not actually generate the design, but are turned into visual representation, a two-dimensional map or composition. Representational techniques, already within architecture, are used to manipulate the images. At one level the process has nothing to do with their bodies, at another they joke about their own bodies as inanimate objects. Unwittingly, their bodies, integral to their identity as creative artists, are turned into objects on which they act out their creative processes.

Notions of the other, and theories of otherness, are explored through radical and illicit body-objects, exploring that which is strange to and yet within architecture. Most poetic is the work of American architect John Hejduk. While he was in Vladivostok, and as shown in his book, Hejduk's drawings explore the human subject of architecture - user, symbolic figure, or fictional character - transforming the nomadic, the homeless, or the vagabond, as figural concepts, into architectural imagery and signification (Hejduk, 1989). The subject becomes a particular kind of metaphor transporting humanity, as understood in literature, into the field of architectural making. It offers a point of encounter with the opening quotation from Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text*, because Hejduk preserves the creative process of making architecture as a dialogue between objects and subjects, but, more importantly for the understanding of Barthes, as an intimacy and conversation between the reader and the work. Barthes is referring to the reader, not as a subject who is merely absorbing information, or reacting to it mentally, but as a body-subject who might wander into a daydream. For example, if architecture is largely a field of housing, Hejduk presents the architectural community with human figures that have strange relations to housing. This inspires rethinking about housing. The rethinking is not about housing as a typology, but as constitutive of architecture, begging the question, "what, who and how does architecture house?" It is the precise openness of the question that enables Barthes' pleasure because it liberates ideas about architecture.

Titles of recent publications, including *Sexuality and Space* (Colomina, 1992), *Building Sex* (Betsky, 1995), *Architecture and Body* (Flynn, Al-Sayed, Smiley, Marble and Lobitz, 1988), *The Sex of Architecture* (Agest, Conway and Weisman, 1996) indicate that there is theoretical engagement with the body and sexuality in architecture. Aaron Betsky's argument is founded on concepts of gender conflated with biology, and endeavours to divide space according to a feminine interior and a masculine exterior. If, as Barthes suggests, the pleasure of the text is associated with a body that pursues its own ideas, then, in the analytical essays of *Sexuality and Space* and *The Sex of Architecture*, the body is buried within architectural discourse, becoming the silent other. The body, as reader, is subjected to the density and weight of theory, or to an explicitly ideological position. In contrast, *Architecture and Body*, comprising a mixture of creative projects and visual musings rather than a collection of essays, and Jennifer Bloomer's critical creative essay, "The Matter of Matter: A Longing for Gravity" in *The Sex of Architecture*, present an erotic body. The reader finds herself looking at, or reading literally, about a body rather than discovering the body of and within language. The text thus behaves auto-erotically, presenting its own enjoyment of itself as a body. The reader is subjected to being a witness of this performance.

In this discussion, my enquiry is oriented towards a study of otherness. If body, sex and gender index *woman*, my discussion will read for *difference* within woman (Gunew, 1994). In particular I am thinking of two tactical moments: the moment in which a woman is different from a man, even though she may be an architect and, momentarily, a master/mistress; and the tactical moment in which *women* is different from woman, one woman is different from another woman (and man is different from men), a moment which coincides with culture, race, ethnicity, class and a history of the present (Spivak, 1986, 1988, 1990). How are *different subjects* either enabled or disabled by the bodies of, and in, architecture, and what is the possibility of agency for these subjects? Subjects are positioned in a hierarchical structure of society partly through the specific characteristics of their bodies. Ideally, their objects of production are independent of this position as subject. However, my discussion, in this essay, explores how the body is a link between subjects and objects. In a similar sense, the body is a point of collision in the perceived opposition between genius, as the impersonal divine that is within and exceeds the personal, and genealogy, that ties persons to their biological/cultural lineage. The study of a presentation by Zaha Hadid serves to elaborate the ongoing resistance and battle undertaken by subjects, in order to make this collision between genius and genealogy a productive and performative meeting, wherein identity is that which is mimed and constructed rather than pre-given (Butler, 1990).

Mistresses: Zaha Hadid At The American University Of Beirut (AUB)

In a presentation by Zaha Hadid at the Department of Architecture and Design, The American University of Beirut, some specific factors around the theoretical concerns raised here came to the surface.¹ The architectural community were the recipients of a presentation from Hadid, who has emerged as an international architect and an important speaker and critic on architectural projects and design approaches. While there was much to ponder in Hadid's presentation, the questions from the audience shifted the discussion from the realm of the object, in terms of form, composition, and philosophy, to one about the role of an architect in the field of identity, politics and cultural representation.

Zaha Hadid's work is most often categorized as deconstructionist and placed in the same field as the work of Bernard Tschumi, Lebbeus Woods and Daniel Libeskind (Noever, 1991; Gulsberg, 1991; Norris & Benjamin, 1988). Hadid's work is not categorized with the work of the so-called regionalist architects, and Hadid is not seen to belong to a specific architectural tradition. She does not, in any immediately visible way, make references to Arab culture, to the Middle East or to femininity. For example, Indian Charles Correa, and Sri Lankan Geoffrey Bawa, are too easily placed in the regionalist category by both local and international architectural forums. In questions of ethnicity and ethnic identity, Daniel Libeskind, as the architect for the Jewish Museum in Berlin, has not been explicitly discussed, or rather Libeskind's Jewishness is not transferred over to the object as an essential ethnic identity. The Jewish Museum does not look Jewish, in a traditional sense of the term, and Libeskind receives projects other than Jewish projects.² The subject-object relation here is not essentialized as a fixed and bounded cultural structure. However, there is a belief that, through his Jewishness, Libeskind was able to bring a profound architectural sensibility to the project. The term regionalist implies an identity intrinsically related to place, a location that is non-western, a genealogy perceived as the antithesis to western constructs of genius.

1 The presentation by Zaha Hadid at the School of Architecture and Design, The American University of Beirut in 1996 coincided with a seminar course, "The body in/of architecture," that I ran at AUB in 1996 and 1997.

2 The idea of traditional Jewish architecture is difficult to describe due to centuries of Jewish diaspora. However, it is evident that Libeskind's use of the Star of David is not a feature of the museum, but a less visible reference generating the design. Libeskind is represented as an architect in forums that are not about Jewishness, such as the competition for the World Trade Centre.

In the regional category, the subject-object relation becomes essentialized, and both subject and object are contained and constrained within traditional parameters that the western subject is liberated from. Hadid has noted that Kenneth Frampton and Rem Koolhaas have commented that the fluidity of her architectural plans is associated with Arab calligraphy. In response, Hadid asserts that this association “has nothing to do with the organization, it has to do with the fluidity of the pen - these very fluid spaces which seem to flow like a line, like a sentence” (Hadid, 1995: 15). This comment specifically ensures that the association between the plan and Arab calligraphy is not about an ethnic building tradition, but about sketching and writing. And yet it reveals a trace of the generative potential of tradition, of the original within genealogy. It might be only a small step to imagine that the work of the regional architect engenders creative architectures through that which ties her to a tradition.

If Hadid’s work is not identified in relation to a specific cultural tradition or ethnicity, I argue that it is not the object of architecture that invites the unusual response to Hadid’s presentation. That Zaha Hadid’s visibility, as an immaterial media figure, shifts from untouchable to embodied and specific is a transgressive event between audience and speaker. An intense interest about Hadid’s body and appearance, and factors of identity and physicality, entered and intervened in Zaha Hadid’s presentation. The audience enquired whether she was an ambassador for the Middle East, and whether she represented this marginal position in relation to the dominant west. After the presentation students came to me and made comments about her shoes, her jacket, and her physical presence. They found there was something especially confident and excessive about her appearance. The object was radically overlooked in this case. While this is only one event, it is symptomatic of the role of the body as subject in architecture. It is also a curious coincidence that three internationally acclaimed contemporary female architects are not western, not Anglo-Saxon, American or European: Zaha Hadid, Itsuko Hasegawa, Kazuyo Sejima.

The Body

According to Mary Douglas, in her radical anthropological work, *Purity and Danger* (1966), the body is invested with social demarcations; its perception and experience is mediated through a cultural map of social coherence. “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” and that “all margins are dangerous. ...Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins” (Douglas, 1966: 138-145). Somewhere between the objectivity of Zaha Hadid’s architectural work, and the embodied subjectivity of her presentation, a certain boundary is crossed, so that what should have been separate is joined. In this case, there is no tidy distinction between the representation of the object and the presentation of the subject. It seems that Hadid’s presence and presentation as a subject is incongruous with the representation of the object for which she is recognised. If there is symmetry between the subject and object in canonical production, in this event, it is unwittingly disturbed. The debate that resulted amongst the audience and the speaker was an attempt to redraw, to make right again the institutional and disciplinary lines. It was a way to turn away from the fragile lines and orders between the objects and subjects in the structure of knowledge in architecture.

If, as in contemporary writing in psychoanalytic theory and identity studies, the body is not determined by nature and biology, the question of Hadid's body is not simply a physical one, but becomes a cultural terrain of signification. The body as signifying and physical, rather than the body as metaphor, or the body as process, is a concept that intervenes in the discourse of architecture. Zaha Hadid has already crossed the structural lines that divide woman/architect, oriental/western, local/foreign. If questions of the body as subject are marginal to central canonical interests of the architectural edifice, of form, design and urban strategy, this particular presentation made visible the interwoven layers between them.

Most visible is her dress and appearance. Hadid is reputed to wear clothing by the Japanese designer, Issey Miyake. On this occasion the jacket Hadid was wearing - black and made of the folded fabric that Miyake has invented - appeared to be one of his pieces. The jacket behaved like a shawl, loosely sitting on Hadid's shoulders. The weather always seems to be warm in Beirut; it was that day, though it was autumn. Hadid's simple black soft dress set the background for the jacket. On her feet was a pair of slip-on shoes with a small black heel and a clear plastic strap over her toes. They were somewhat like Cinderella shoes, redolent of fantasy and dress-ups.³ Hadid has an expressive, strong face and flamboyant hair that complements her stature. Miyake's clothing is noted for its innovative technology and imagery, referencing the east and dismantling a simple division between east and west (Miyake, 1997). This is demonstrated in his interest in the space between the body and the garment, and for allowing the female form to create the shape of the garment. The star architect's dress functions as a Eurocentric global code, following the Miesian dictum of 'less is more', and making the body more or less invisible. Invariably black and tailored garments are structurally set against the form of the body, rather than sensorially responsive to the kinetics of the body as was Hadid's jacket. In dematerializing the body, the code of dress, in the west, functions predominantly as a sign. It does not entangle itself with the body as physical and sensual matter, and attempts to avoid historical or cultural discrepancies. Zaha Hadid produced a version of the west through the code of black and designer label; but also produced a version of the west's image of the orient. Her performance is differently crafted, reproducing an exotic and feminine imagery through a play of signifiers of femininity, and perhaps an irony about an oriental woman/architect. Her dress, as appearance, is in play with her body, making both strangely visible. It is a discomforting visibility. The audience found themselves doing in-disciplinary things - looking at her not her work, stealing moments for their own gaze at a body rather than at the architectural objects. The audience is confronted by the *body as subject*, initially via Hadid's subversive manner of dressing.

In its most radical sense, an oriental appropriating the occident (and in Hadid's case, especially Englishness) is perhaps explained as a kind of mimicry that shows up the west, as well as the east, as an artifice, a kind of masking or dressing that makes for theatrical play and performance. The effect is one of restaging appropriation. If Hadid has become an internationally acclaimed architect through particular routes and economies within the west, her dress displayed that she was not strictly assimilated in that role. Hadid looked like a foreign woman, but this appeared to be an act rather than an authentic position. In this sense, her presentation was like a performance of a creative actress subverting both the central place of Eurocentric subjects and the authentic places of others.



3 The way clothes have played a role in Hadid's role as a designer and as an identity are noted in an interview in which Hadid states that she used to wrap herself in fabric, tying it and fastening it with pins; and later that she would wear designed clothes upside down (Hadid, 1995: 9).

4 I have found that 'international speakers' in other disciplines might also be subjected to this type of questionnaire. Recently a presentation by Slavoj Žižek, "The Only Good Neighbour is a Dead Neighbour," (The University of Melbourne, 27th July 2001) inspired such a response. In one example, Žižek cited an incident about a reaction to him as a representative of the Balkans – barbaric, volatile, violent - a reaction that crossed over the line of the usual tolerance and political correctness given to specific significant 'others'. In that moment, Žižek, the master theorist, and Žižek, the symbol of Balkanness, coincided, and Žižek projected that coincidence back to the audience.

The problematic is not Hadid's presentation of her work, but the presence of her body. Zaha Hadid displayed an image of a non-master (an eccentric foreign woman) and yet she was speaking in the mode of a master architect. What is being threatened here is the neat division between the west and the non-west. If Hadid's work is already central to economies of the west, her identity, as not strictly part of this economy, affected that place of her work. Identity theorists propose that the difference that is encountered in the body as subject is always an indigestible or irreducible difference (Gunew, 1993: 3, 9). An international architect is assumed to have a disembodied subjectivity which, in the presentation, coincided with a specific subjectivity, through the body as subject. The idea of a disembodied subjectivity is therefore a misreading of real practices and presentations. The fantasy body of 'master' is precisely not mistress, not Arab, not black, not Asian and not working class.⁴ It is the antithesis of indigenous, to the extent that these signs belong somewhere. In this sense, the canon is bought into a field of encounter with the margin in and through the body of the subject. The specific identity position that enters the scene of architecture literally changes the terms of the discourse (Gunew, 1992). The specific body renders itself visible because it is not the same as the determinate body of the master architect, and its visibility calls into question the subject position of the architect. Is this architect in the right place? What gives this architect the authority to present her work in a masterly way? How can we take the work of this architect seriously? The discourse shifts from one about the architecture as an object of study, about the work and the symbolic production, to one about the architect as a specific subject.

Difference

Identities are not fixed in time or place - they are not ahistorical - rather they are produced within institutional parameters and disciplinary structures (Hall, 1996: 4). Two levels of symmetry are disrupted in the visibility of the specific body as subject: firstly, the projective symmetry between the subject and the object; secondly, the reflective symmetry between the specific subject and the constitutive subject of the discipline of architecture. Psychoanalytic theorist, Elie Ragland-Sullivan, explains Lacan's mirror stage as a moment in the subject's awareness of her own reflection, from the point of view of another. As a result, the ego is an imaginary form, both alien and yet also whole (Ragland-Sullivan, 1987: 16-30). The mirror stage is not a developmental phase in Lacanian theory; rather, misrecognition repeatedly acts like an interruption to symmetrical reflections of the subject, and between the subject and the object. If man is perceived as constitutive of humankind, and if whiteness is perceived as constitutive of a hegemonic humanity because it has the capacity to be no colour or all colours, then a misrecognition, or a cultural mirror stage, would occur precisely at the moment that such a myth was dismantled. The excess and limit of whiteness is a specifically coloured human subject, as the excess and limit of man is a specific man or woman (Gunew, 1994: 31). White is invisible only until it encounters something which is not white, its own margin, its own limit, something that interrupts the fiction of its mythical field of representation.

Stuart Hall argues that identity arises at the point of intersection between the political field of the social realm and the psychoanalytic conception of subjectivity (Hall, 1996: 2-10). The function of misrecognition, and the concept of ideology in

Hall's social theory, elaborate that "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference" (Hall, 1996: 4). Theorists, including Jacques Derrida (1981) and Judith Butler (1993), have termed this the subject's constitutive outside, "the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks" that the term identity can have a positive function (Hall, 1996: 4). In other words, the subject is a precarious sort of identity in a process of redefinition against the grain, against that which it excludes. What might be seen as a dominant discourse in architecture, invested through the object of architecture and body-objects, is contingent on what it delimits to its outside, or its margins. In my discussion, this limit is defined as the body as subject. It can be read as the encounter between genius (the masterly subject who exceeds her personal boundaries) and genealogy (the manifestation of her material lineage) in the becoming of a great architect.

It would be a mistake to think that the reaction to Zaha Hadid's presentation was due only to the traces of her gender, ethnicity, culture - in other words to her identity as a signal of origins. Histories of origin, co-existing within a subject speaking in a masterful way, are imagined as journeys and routes which suggest movements rather than static points. They indicate a radical enunciative position in Hadid's presentation: not who Zaha Hadid is, her being, but rather the process of becoming Hadid; not a projected restrictive genealogy, but the genius within a genealogy that is becoming of interest to the field of representation in architecture. Sneja Gunew describes such practices of identity:

so here we are, ethnics who are pagan or heathen in the sense that we are not part of the dominant ethos of this culture – hence we mimic its character at times in order to produce our own performative gestures of a different aesthetics, a different rhetoric (1993: 11).

The subversive impact of Hadid's presentation is not strategic or planned; it is an outcome of a continual readjustment in the relation between subjectivity and disciplinary boundaries.

The architect who enters the discourse from the margins is threatening, if her enunciative position is contradictory and complex when participating in an intellectual field of sophistication, irony, double vision, hybridity, subversive play, or mimicry. Why? Because that sort of intelligence, insight or pleasure threatens the stability of the normative subject of western culture and civilization, whose constitutive outside becomes visible as an excess that is central to its own construction. In an uncanny way a similar destabilisation occurs with the normative other, the non-western subject constructed through western historical delineations:

Minority individuals are always treated and forced to experience themselves generically. Coerced into a negative generic subject position, the oppressed individual responds by transforming that position into a positive collective one. And therein, precisely, lies the basis of a broad minority coalition: in spite of the enormous differences between various minority cultures (Gunew, 1994: 42).

5 In a similar sense, a gesture of object-making and object-love in the hand of a man who is a slave or a native has associations that are entangled in a web of sexuality and power, the difference between a master and a non-master, a slave.

Conclusion

Hadid is recognised for developing a strange mathematical basis to her drawings, not a strictly western perspective. Hadid's design for The Peak Club, Hong Kong, 1982-1983, won the Pritzker Architecture Prize (Hadid was the first woman to win the prize in its 26 year history) and has been recognised for its extraordinary visual imagery using 89 degree perspective. The perspective projection interfaces the picture plane surface tilted at 89 rather than 90 degrees. Drawing on Hong Kong urbanism - Kowloon crowds and the city's high-rise prowess - Hadid had planned to excavate and rebuild the landscape. In drawing after drawing, Hadid has produced a new geology that combines this urbanism with the organicism of the mountain. Through an extraordinary mathematical construction, the perspective approaches its own margin and excess, its own planar surface materiality. It produces a strangely surreal image of topography and building, in which the distinction between ground and figure is dismantled, and both are strangely floating beyond the grasp of reality. It is a kind of morphological genealogy of Hong Kong.

In one slide during the presentation, Hadid - who paints her architectural drawings - revealed the edges of the painting, unmasked, showing at once that the construction of precise lines is dependent on a highly extensive labour of the hand. Hadid's presentation exemplified a labour of love, and also indicated a substantial body of work. That the architect is both the subject of this work - the creative origin - and also that the work preoccupies the architect - the subject is pre-occupied by the object - becomes a fantasy about the master architect. The object extends the subject backwards and forwards. Such a relationship between the body as object and the body as subject is circumscribed by desire and pleasure. It belongs to the hand of the master in the gesture of object-making and object-love. Transferred to a non-master (a mistress, as language has it, or a slave, as in philosophy) it is a pleasure that risks transgression. It is a transgression because a gesture of object-making and object-love in the hand of a woman has associations that are entangled in a web of sexual difference, the difference between a master and a mistress. A coincidence between genealogy and genius becomes a transgressive act.⁵

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