

## ARTICLES

### Organismal Futurisms in Brown Sound and Queer Luminosity: Getting into Gressman's Cyborgian Skin

Sandra Ruiz

My skin glows in the dark shines in the light  
It's the color that holds me tight  
My brown me is the shade that's just for me  
I'm never not missing anything but me  
Cause I love you  
And I can't miss anything but you  
You're stuck on me  
And all this time I'm inside you  
Our time together we grow  
We stretch and show  
It's tough as it goes and it won't rub off of you  
—Helado Negro

For contemporary, indie, electronic singer-songwriter, and son of Ecuadorian immigrants, Helado Negro, or Roberto Carlos Lange, the above lyrics are an homage, a love poem even, to that Brown skin that “won’t rub off.” “It’s My Brown Skin” lays bare the intricate contours of our biggest organ: it is “stuck” on us, and we are always already inside of it. This interarticulation between the interiority and exteriority of the subject, as Helado Negro explains, intently coheres human affection to such an extent that one can’t “miss anything but” it. But what happens when the human skin we live in isn’t thick enough to mediate ideologies of race, sexuality, and gender? What happens when we must turn profoundly inward because the meanings that accrue to “the color that holds [us] tight” constrict, contain, and contort our Brown existence? How thick is our Brown skin, then?<sup>1</sup>

Pulling from the metaphoricity of skin, too, is Miami-born queer and Colombian avant-garde performance artist, Erica Gressman.<sup>2</sup> In *Wall of Skin* (2016), Gressman pulls back the layers of her Brown skin that both “shines in the light” and “holds one tight” by cloaking herself in five layers of white Lycra spandex zentai, or a face-covering full body suit, in order to eventually unearth her insides. Fusing noise music, analogue technology, including circuit-bent electronics, handmade synthesizers, cybernetics, and a process she calls “bio-feedback” (an intersection of aesthetics and science), Gressman plays sound and light through and across her layered skins, giving new meaning to phrases like “skin deep” and “jumping into one’s skin.”<sup>3</sup> Her cybernetic skin is composed of a handcrafted light-sensitive audio synthesizer, made in the tradition of composer and pioneer of “home-made” electronic music, Nicolas Collins.<sup>4</sup> As the image of the instrument below shows, an integrated circuit chip on a protoboard produces three separate, yet rapid, clicking signals that are controlled by three photoresistors.<sup>5</sup> In this original instrument, light is the input; sound is the output, making the latter responsive to movement. The more light is engendered, the higher the pitch of sound.

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Exterior shot of instrument. Image courtesy of the artist.

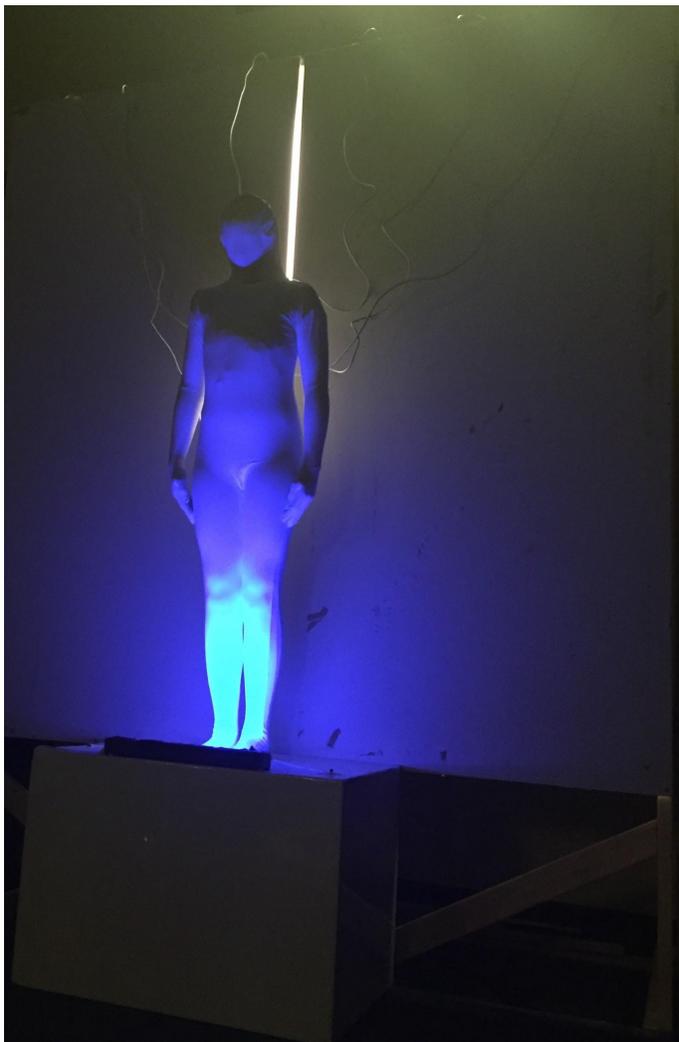


Interior shot of the instrument. Image courtesy of the artist.

Gressman begins her performance in the dark, on a raised platform in front of a piece of drywall with cables attached to it. She is dressed from head to toe in her snug white cybernetic skin, her breasts taped tightly against her chest and her face obscured to erase any conventional markers of sex, gender, and race. Erect and still, with her arms tightly by her side, the faceless artist bows to the floor. As the performance progresses, Gressman begins to move—deliberately. Immediately, one notices that these same cables are also tied to her back, exacerbating the sense of anxiety, difficulty, thrill, and extreme spectacle that already motivates the piece; forcing one to think: how will Gressman release herself from this wall, breathe against her own skin? Moving back and forth across the stage, while vigorously pulling cables from this breakable wall she too has made, Gressman slowly liberates light from the wall and creates sound. For almost twenty-five minutes, three sensors, set to different resistances, produce three distinct sounds in *Wall of Skin*. Her oscillating instrument is guided by three signals, each with a photoresistor enduring degrees of light, and a potentiometer filtering the resistance levels of individual signals. While no specific symmetrical harmonic structure is pre-planned, Gressman adjusts the potentiometers prior to each performance to create a “non-technical harmonization.” That is to say that the artist arranges a sense of harmony between the three signals by tailoring them to distinct ranges based on what motivates her ear. There is no actual pitch tuning or mathematical symmetry that motivates Gressman’s sounds, varying between consonance and dissonance. In this symbiotic relationship, Gressman’s ear is triggered by her own bodily movements; however, her moving body alters the direction of sound, creating a vigorous

ensemble between embodiment, sound, and light throughout the entire piece. With a fierce political impulse for the synesthetic, here, one sees how Gressman becomes an organism, prompting the proliferation of sound through the simultaneous interaction of bodily movement and light.<sup>6</sup>

The spectator experiences shimmers of luminosity as the artist becomes the visual and live embodiment of sound. As she strips herself of four *zentai* within twenty-five minutes—one by one—light beams resembling the structure of pipe organs are revealed. This interconnection between the illuminated wall and her choreography becomes a necessary element in Gressman’s musical composition of controlled chaos. Through the aesthetic and political figure of the cyborg, the artist places pressure on white, heteronormative practices of sound performance and the ontic infelicities of Brownness and sexuality. “I have always wanted to find ways to artistically and scientifically capture and embody sound as a queer woman of color,” Gressman explains. “*Wall of Skin* is the closest way that I could visually embody sound, what it could look like. It is also a way for me to break down walls, our joined layers that block our inner core.” Brownness and queerness, here, become elaborated visual extensions of her anatomical self—life-lines that are soon cut through this white drywall that she herself pulsates through Brown sound, queer luminosity, and bodily movement.





Stills from *Wall of Skin*. Images by author.

In this article, I read Gressman's piece against the sensory stimulus of her unseen skin. I turn to philosophies of science by Donna Haraway, Chela Sandoval, and Michel Serres to argue that Gressman's sonic and kinetic enactments transition her into a new organism in which light changes sound, being Brown, racialized, and queer in performatively hybridized ways. Gressman provides a new way of doing politics by decentering the human form and reformulating the Brown, queer

subject through the interface of technology, science, and aesthetics. By controlling how sound determines light, and consequently spectatorial experience, she asks her audience to tap into the patience of the ear, and to experience race, gender, and sexuality carefully, sonically, uncomfortably. Such an act, importantly, allows listening itself to extend the senses and point out how the ear, too, can listen for, to, and beneath the skin.

It is in this practice that Gressman proposes an antidote for thicker skin: listen for it, be illuminated with it, turn inwards, and embody experiences that run counter to those sounds that deafen difference to one kind of “skin glow.” She concedes that “my brown me is the shade that’s just for me”—invigorated by the interplay of her queer luminosity and anatomical insight. Or, as she discloses throughout her work: when we stop peeling off our layers, we remain complacent in our human sameness, excluding, unconsciously even, our differences. It is in sites of controlled chaos, sometimes beside, around, a little outside of the human, that the most compelling identificatory markers reveal themselves, often testing one in order to free one of such entrapment.

### **Gressman’s Transcendental Layers: Rubbing the Skin Raw**

The above description of *Wall of Skin* only touches the surface of its many layers. Like Gressman herself, the more denuded, the less one can see and listen singularly. This is precisely Gressman’s political intention: to keep us transfixed by the multiplicity in meaning and experience within the space of first darkness, to the effervescent lights and experimental sound, all in cyborgian ways. In doing so, Gressman travels new citational pathways to undress race, gender, sexuality, and sex, propelling the spectator to join in. *Wall of Skin* is open-ended and often coincides with the constitution of the audience, she confesses in my 2016 interview with the artist.<sup>7</sup> “I’m post-human, I mix genres, the senses,” and they become analogies for “my own mixed background as a queer Latina with a white father, [who was] born and raised in a conservative Colombian family fuelled by Catholicism, in which my mother was both my mom and dad.” These details help frame the major tenets of the performance, even if she invites the spectators to project their own stories and selves onto her own. Her polemical relationship with religion, race, gender, sex, and sexuality and her love for experimental art and the philosophy of science all contribute to her aesthetic intentions, revealing just how closely tied art and politics remain for the artist. For Gressman, her history carries dissonant and disturbing sounds. She invites us to lend an ear, a listen-with.

Gressman’s tour with sound began at a very young age, participating in art camps and guitar and drum lessons in Miami.<sup>8</sup> Later, in high school, she played in various bands, spending copious amounts of time at punk shows. These punk shows were transformative and liberating, and they inform much of her aesthetic style today, or as she explains: it was the most “striking image for me to see queer Latinos as punks, in their ‘costumes,’ as a Catholic school kid. I wasn’t out yet at this time, but heard queerness expressed through the music, the clothing.”<sup>9</sup> The punk aesthetic has had a longstanding relationship with queers and people of colour, often serving as a refuge for many minoritarian subjects. For Tavia Nyong’o, this aesthetic provides an avenue for expanding constructions of sexuality, sound, and politics, that is, past binaries such as straight versus gay, conservative versus obscene (Nyong’o 2008). Punk enables the creation of new social spaces and innovative contrasts to dichotomous thinking by operating as a type of “running through and out of the shit the world throws at its most vulnerable” (Nyong’o 2010, 75). This “running through” is relevant to how José Esteban Muñoz rethinks the space of the negative in punk culture. While it appears that “punk aesthetics tells us the story of the negative” (one side of a binary), as Muñoz

asserts, for being anti-establishment and advocating for the destruction of institutions, it actually allows for a kind of being-with that stems from a reordering of the dialectic between the “positive and negative” (Muñoz 2013, 97).<sup>10</sup> If punk stems from a space of the negative, then it also produces a place for potentiality beyond it. Or as Elizabeth Stinson says of the movement, “punk sound, as a radical force, has the potential to open a vital and alternative space of sexuality and performance” (Stinson 2012, 279).

At punk shows Gressman became captivated by the theatricality of underground music, remembering how “a human body completely letting go in front of a group of people was the most radical thing” she had ever witnessed. But being a Catholic school girl was equally metamorphic: Gressman recalls that her daily life was saturated with religious iconography from sounds like Gregorian chants and playing pipe organs, to images of the “bleeding body of Jesus” beautifully suffering and “exposing the human as both very weak and powerful.” The confluence of punk culture and Catholicism remain central components of her body of work. One sees the artist negotiating between the radical and resistant impulses of punk culture and the guilty and guilt-ridden pleasures of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> This interplay, tension, site of personal and political disidentification informs the intricate details of her cultural labour: Gressman is always at odds with both her desires and her distastes—a mixture that remains as hybridized as her humanoid, and as erotic as her emotional pain.

But this hybridization of aesthetics, spirituality, and politics would evolve as Gressman encountered new experimental art practices. While at New College of Florida, one of the most liberal colleges in the state, Gressman became involved in the noise music community, which altered her overall conception of sound. During this time, in which the free trade protests dominated the daily scene, musicians were encouraged to rage against the state and form alternative affective states of belonging and music/world making. While she found “her kin” in queer and experimental communities at New College, she missed connecting with students of colour. This would become, as Gressman explains, a critical realization in her work: the overabundance of whiteness in the institutionalization of aesthetics, something she visually plays with in *Wall of Skin* via the preponderance of the colour white—in noise, lights, costuming, props, set design.

At New College, Gressman studied philosophy, psychology, and music, eventually being led to experimental sound. But, the first two fields of study remain influential in her work, particularly in *Wall of Skin* where she builds from the unconscious renderings of human fantasy to exploit social life. Or how the philosophical pursuit of the human—from her facticity to ontology—beautifully mirrors the anatomy of the subject. All of these fields of thought eventually led Gressman to performance art where she could combine her love of theatre, film, music, and movement and continue to investigate opposing modes of her identity.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2009, Gressman has produced work that expounds on ideas of embodiment, sound, science, and technology. From *Hair Composition*, in which she amplifies the sound of her hair being brushed, to the sound of a hacked corset being pulled out in *Female Distortion*, to *Wall of Skin*, Gressman plays with the spectator’s experience of bodily noise and generates new sensorial politics of bodily materiality, where one’s innards are as apparent as the outer film of skin, and where inside and outside are anything but distinct. This is exemplified in one particularly notable piece, *Full Frontal Biopsy*, in which Gressman performs what she calls a “self-surgery” on her abdomen, using a Dremel drill to stand in for a scalpel. Gressman transforms herself into the character of Boogita, a “hyper-feminine Miami consumer” turned monster. Boogita is an uncanny monster covered in “frightening

makeup, fishnet stockings, corsets, a lab-coat,” and an untamed wig. It’s a Brown monster we’ve all seen someplace in urban Latina life; its excessive raunchiness calls us forward in a familiar and disturbing way. Placing a plastic plate on her stomach, attached to a contact microphone, Gressman uses the “drill to operate on herself,” amplifying vocal noises from a different contact microphone in her mouth. Her vocal noises and the sounds of the drill on the plastic plate are looped with effect pedals, creating deep drum-like vibrations and layers of sound. As the drill is in direct contact with the plastic, the contact microphone transduces the actual sound, and the contact microphone in her mouth amplifies biological noises. This performance produces what the artist describes loosely as a bio-feedback composition: she constantly responds to the sounds she creates with both her body and the “scalpel,” generating new layers of sound to create a “desired output response.” For the artist, sound and image exact memory, feeling, a sense of belonging/non-belonging through a figure both manufactured and consuming. Gressman pushes noise music into the space of theatre and science in this work, stating, “I am the input and the output, the patient and the surgeon, the artist and the audience.”

Boogita, Gressman states, exposes “her innards in a manner both abject and narcissistic. The performance is erotic and horrific, as she tears herself to pieces with the drill. Its masturbatory appearance transforms into a violence that once again becomes uncomfortably erotic.” The tension between abjection and the want to cleanse the body of such distaste, a Kristevian admission to say the least, leaves Gressman always under her skin but safeguarded by the fantasies that protect it. Gressman never gives us all of herself; it would be, as she notes, a pleasure we must work toward together, in constriction, tightness, the small spaces of the self.

### **Gressman’s Bio-feedback: Posthuman Desires**

*Wall of Skin* commences with Gressman as human-like organism recently, and neatly, dropped on planet earth, silent and still in the darkness: only the play of light on cybernetic skin awakens its other/worldly voice. Gressman is an avatar, a cyborg, an alien, a familiar, yet strange posthuman, not-quite-human, or more than human fantasy. Gressman notes: “I think it’s incredibly seductive to enter a fantasy, even if it ends in a somewhat dystopic way, where there is something familiar to human form, and no face.” For the artist, the seduction of this lies in the detail between the human and non-human, science and science fiction, the senses and aesthetics.

In her groundbreaking 1984 posthuman manifesto, philosopher of science Donna Haraway turns to the cyborg to examine the feminist modes of embodiment and politics at play in emergent forms of bio-communication. For Haraway, “communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies” (Haraway 2000, 302). The manifesto suggests that we, too, forge ahead with the times by learning to communicate in our feminist practices differently. Haraway proposes new feminist “affinities,” not identities, fostered and mediated by different relations of power between and across material formations: the organic/inorganic, technology/human, human/animal, animal/automaton, and their subsequent hybrid intersections. The cyborg, here, is both a cultural figure encrusted with political histories and an analytic by which to read “the name of one’s feminism” outside a “single adjective” (295). The cyborg is a site of resistance and foresight, a transgressive mechanism destabilizing the human’s role as the centre of subjectivity and existence. The cyborg “is a matter of fiction and lived experience,” a “cybernetic organism,” a blend of “technology and biology” (291). Haraway adds that the border between

science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion . . . we are all chimeras; theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism . . . the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is the condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. (292)

In further elaborating this tension, Haraway assembles a theoretical hybrid, built from the space of intersectional thought. In her assemblage of a postmodern feminism, there's a deliberate interexchange between women of colour feminist thought, feminist science studies, science fiction, and all those relevant "techno-monsters" in fiction and film. Thinkers such as Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, and Chela Sandoval help articulate Haraway's cyborg feminist agenda.

In particular, Sandoval's decolonial feminist position runs deep throughout Haraway's piece, helping Haraway move toward a politics of "affinity and coalition," and beyond figurations of identity as a definitive and stable signifier of the subject (Haraway 2000, 296). In theorizing the details of intersectionality, Sandoval propels us to account for the "science of oppositional ideology"—a consequence of US Third World feminist thought and women of colour revolutionary labour (Sandoval 1991, 2). Third World feminist thought, for Sandoval, is a corrective to second-wave feminism in which the white female human remains at the apex of inquiry. Sandoval's theory calls for an "oppositional consciousness" against "hegemonic feminism" (3). In this, she establishes her own technologies (i.e., equality and social reformation across modes of difference) for reordering structures of power and ideology, which often reinforce the dichotomy of gender and exclude people of colour from dominant dialogic encounters, from feminist theorizing itself. In a direct address to Haraway, more than a decade later, Sandoval proposes her own manifesto of a cyborg feminism through the methodology of the oppressed. In her positioning, however, "the colonized peoples of the Americas have already developed the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions as a requisite for survival under domination over the last three hundred years" (375). For Sandoval, the racialized, sexualized, colonized human has always already been "cyborged," forcing one to rethink traditional constructions of cyborg consciousness, in which the colonized other is front and centre. Sandoval underscores the colonial legacies of and resistances to the rendering of human beings into technologies in the service of other humans and systems of power. Her cyborg feminism is not only a theoretical proposition, but a practice she hopes will inform feminism's newest trajectory, whereby women of colour are no longer marginalized from the category of the human itself.

The cyborg, then, is most viable as a site of resistance and transgression when its wires are crossed in intersectionality. Gressman claims that the multi-dimensional figure of the cyborg allows her "to be free of being completely human, since the human can be too limiting." The cyborg is a site of political potential that the human form, as figured in hegemonic social and biological discourses of "man" cannot offer her. The cyborg, she adds "is the best way to embody sound because sound can help move with and beyond politics, race, sexuality" without erasing them, of course. One can easily say that this is a piece about metaphorically shedding one's identity, but as Gressman poignantly notes: "I don't get out of the last layer of skin because there's no way to actually escape ourselves"—our markers of difference remain central to our essence and pursuit of eternal freedom. For Gressman, the nearest way to a futurity in which she can breathe in her own skin is through the ephemerality of sound and "keeping her fantasies alive through this cyborg creature." Her oppositional cyborg is both trapped and empowered by tearing down walls.

Gressman's hybrid-human is fuelled by this mediated tension: her cyborg is the site that frees her from the limiting constraints of the human, but that also binds her to her own skin and laboured breath. This skin is not one she hopes to "rub off," but instead to mask, in order to unsheathe, showing just how painful, exhausting, and all-consuming easy constructions of difference can be, precisely when the subject is supplanted by an illusory identity politic. Here, Gressman expounds on the brilliant residue left over from Haraway's feminist cyborg and Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed. Gressman is Sandoval's Brown cyborg, labouring against the sonic and kinetic impulses of racial capitalism. We witness this act of labour in her moving body as well as in the residue of her trapped breath—air she must sustain under layers of *zentai* over and as her own skin. Her cyborgian flesh against our own, all of us covered by the thematic impulses of the cycles of life, or perhaps a desire to return to warmest of wombs, where breath, too, is measured, contained, and evidence of existence.

Gressman's piece is meant to elicit fantasy and play, and although her cyborg is visually and sonically stunning, it is equally asphyxiating. One is required to sit with Gressman's difficulty in order to exit the performance. In deliberately imagining what being Colombian and queer might sound, feel, move, and look like in everyday life, she reorders our normative schemas of deep listening, sight, and viscerality; and by extension, sensorily breaks the spell of difference, while never revealing her flesh. Gressman does this by reorganizing her breath and movement in the space of extreme difficulty—both for herself and the spectator. Jennifer Doyle reminds us to use the term carefully and to be with difficult objects in all their ambivalent overtures (Doyle 2013, xvii). For Doyle, "difficulty" is a mode of thinking, an analytic by which to read and experience art and spaces generally considered controversial, immoral, deviant, and too problematic to endure. She cautions us to do the hard labour of being with objects that might elicit pain and tap into other negative affective registers, and that might be dismissed for requiring too much work. If the viewer is willing to put in the work, even at the expense of a (be)laboured breathing, art can enable a transformational moment between the artist, viewer, and even the object itself. Gressman presents us with this call in *Wall of Skin*, as she, too, fights against her own histories and materialities.

*Wall of Skin* materializes the everyday sentiments of a Brown, queer subject; it stages the minoritarian labour of learning to respire, move, remain in/visible under difficult systems of oppression and subjugation. Perhaps Gressman shows us a way to make it in a world that is inherently refusing: learn to inhale and exhale against the tempo of the world's dominant sound and light system. For the first five minutes of *Wall of Skin*, which inevitably feels more like fifty minutes, Gressman remains completely cloaked, steadying her breathing with slow patterns for the first half of the performance. As the piece evolves and the *zentai* come off, Gressman starts to liberate her breath; however, she is still unable to see, hear freely. This contributes to the continual difficulty of the performance: overheated, exhausted, drained, she performs within the claustrophobic walls of her own skin, trying to escape her invisibility through and against her fabricated visibility. Here, too, as she records in an email correspondence, she is trying to break out from but confront her debilitating history with sexual abuse and violence. Gressman's perpetrator, here, becomes *that very* skin she can't rub off, even in her desire to scratch the surface of her violent contusions. Desiring to peel off her skin to erase this historical violence, Gressman attempts to take leave of her body. But alas, her cyborg, after approximately twenty-five minutes of struggle, ends lying on a platform, practically in a fetal position, with the white bodysuit still on. Gressman is a body without a face, face without inherent organs, on the brink of humanness and machine, at the edge of breath. The latter gives her just enough sentiment to pull through and hold on to her own skin.

## The Skin She's In: Gressman's Mingled Body

Gressman's entire performance is a deliberate play on the term skin, showing us just how many ways there are to skin one's skin. If our skin's central function, as our largest organ, is to protect our internal organs from harm and infection and to manage how we receive information through our other senses, such as touch, Gressman takes this idea to the extreme by using layers of synthetic cloth to protect her flesh; this artificial texture binding her entire synesthetic and somatic experience, and ours, too. But if the skin enables us to touch something and be equally touched in return, Gressman both limits and expands this sensory symmetry. While she is sensorily restricted by the multiple layers of *zentai*, her instrument, via the photoresistors running to audio-oscillators, incites heightened material abilities, as it allows her body, through the control of light, to both manipulate and respond to sound.

In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, philosopher and history of science professor Michel Serres sets out to recuperate the senses from a capitalist world system inundated with information and discourse (Serres 2008). For Serres, the language has overdetermined our engagement with the senses, telling us how to sense, instead of actually sensing through the body. In an attempt to rethink and reorder our inter- and intrasubjective experiences, Serres privileges human perception, the body, and sensory stimulation and considers how our senses contain a reservoir of knowledge outside the mandates of *cogito* and language. To elaborate, he first attempts to disentangle our senses but inevitably fails at this already impossible feat—our senses are more conjoined than they are separated. Like all of his work, Serres's book on the senses “is a hybrid; and its connectivity and cohesion” are conjoined by the interarticulation of categories and schools of thought (Sankey and Crowley 2008, vii). He moves from literature, philosophy, art history, aesthetic theory, and science, crossing genres, to bridge his contemplation with the sensory stimulus. Throughout his book, however, the reader is left without signposts; our hands are held by something other than footnotes, marginalia, or elaborate context between objects of analysis. Here, the reader's hand is held by the sensory input they also experience in their mingled bodies. For Serres, like for Gressman, the senses are always already intimately conjoined.

But still Serres attempts to create a categorical imperative for all senses: each of his chapters is separated and shaped by a sense. Serres even advocates for a sixth sense (“Joy”) that forms the full composite of our sensorial body and the affective responses it conjures.<sup>13</sup> For example, in “Veils” he meditates on skin and touch, and by extension draping, or veiling, texture upon skin, or how symbolically every “epidermis would require a different tattoo” and “each face an original tactile mask” (Serres 2008, 24). He argues an important point in this chapter that is also fundamental to Gressman's work: the skin is the prime locus for sensory input and output. The skin “can in one sense be regarded as the ground or synopsis of all the senses, since all the organs of sense are localized convolutions of it” (3). He adds that “in the skin, through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border . . . the skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling” (97). In other words, at the apex of our “mingled bodies” lies the contingency of the skin; the skin is what informs our central and most important encounters with the self and others. It is the skin we live in that tightly drapes our other senses: our very ears are covered by flesh, the tip of our noses a reminder of texture. The skin, then, precisely adheres our senses, adheres us.

Gressman challenges the science of the skin through an alternative position of flesh, race, sex, and the ecstasy of the subject. First, Gressman covers her already white skin in multilayers of white, clingy fabric, preventing herself the privilege of her full senses. Second, she eventually unveils these layers one by one, although remaining cloaked in one last layer. We are never granted the pleasure of her body-body. Third, the internal chaos she sustains, inflicted by sexual abuse, racism, sexism, queerphobia, essentially becomes visual and electrical life-lines; eight fluorescent lights eventually resemble the structure of an organ pipe, or the circulatory system Gressman pulls out from her insides. Here, she illuminates the electrical interiority of the human, or just how fundamental light is to the “vision” of the subject. “Our bodies are full of electricity; we are electric,” she reminds me in our interview, and “light and sound share similar scientific properties.”

When asked why she turns to light (and not other sensors activated by temperature, or water, for example) and the overabundance of white objects, space (why not appear in all black?) alongside the figure of the cyborg as a larger commentary on being Brown and queer, Gressman explains that there are several reasons, some technical, some personal, and some political:

I need to be in a white suit, costumes, surrounded by a white wall because they all reflect light to create more sound; white reflects light and works like a mirror. The sound is responsive to my movement; and I am working to make the sound as active as possible. I’m trying to offer the audience a type of light ecstasy. My cyborg is empowered by light, not blinded.

Sound amplifies this sentiment, as Gressman notes: “it’s like queer ecstasy, reaching full movement, and cadence in both movement, light, and sound.” In his last chapter called “Joy”—an attempt at that sixth sense—Serres turns to bodily joy, or ecstasy as a sense. Of this bodily ecstasy, covered in skin, Serres says that the body is not a mere object in space and time or a “simple passive receptor. . . . It loves movement, goes looking for it, rejoices on becoming active, jumps, runs, or dances, only knows itself, immediately and without language, in and through its passionate energy” (Serres 2008, 316). But this movement and energy are tethered to the body’s potential collapse: “it discovers its existence when its muscles are on fire, when it is out of breath—at the limit of exhaustion” (316). Gressman labours in this type of visceral ecstasy throughout her piece: a queer joy meets the painful pleasure of being Brown differently. The artist moves into the light—an existential act in longing for that body that will “stretch and show” into the future, as Helado Negro conjectures in his love poem above.

But in her call against the exhaustion of the Brown subject and its continual link to the enduring Brown body of the future, Gressman explains:

*Wall of Skin* is not traditional endurance or body art. I don’t want this piece to be read as about human form, meat, flesh. It’s about how to harmonize and hybridize sound, the body, and light. I have never been attracted to time-based, or endurance-based work either. I don’t think it is realistic to life. A piece loses its value because the audience, too, will become exhausted and come to see the artwork, as opposed to the experience.

Yet, watching this piece is an act of endurance in its most literal sense. Even the artist herself credits the work of Stelarc, Orlan, Butoh, and Ron Athey as major influences throughout her oeuvre. Still, there is deliberate political pause and intent for Gressman in her move past endurance art: “I think a lot of art forces the brown body to be the art piece.” Not wanting to carry the burden of

representation, to always be live, or on, and Brown, Gressman refuses us her own flesh in any of her work. She instead covers up her body to witness it shed into another organism. When asked, “What does Brown sound like?” Does it sound like light?” she playfully but poetically responds “What does queerness sound like? It’s an exploration, and Brownness is a rebellious act in itself.” Being Brown and queer are acts of inquiry and experimentation, Gressman shows, rather than states of stability that have already happened. Her art is of the future, of fantasy, a Brown futurism that calls for the “joy” of the body, as much as the Brownness in one’s skin, the accumulation of the senses as much as the technologies that enliven them.



Still from *Wall of Skin*. Image by author.

### **The Skin’s Archival Sounds: The Production of Noise**

Even within this temporal joy of the body, one must contend with the political tenacity of Gressman’s noise. In *Noise*, philosopher Jacques Attali argues that music is an “organization of noise” that should be used as an analytic to read social spaces (Attali 1985, 4). Since the sixteenth

century, music has been culturally commodified, a “tool of power” forcing subjects to believe in, forget with, and be silenced by the state (19). On the flipside, Attali points out that music has been a novel mode of production that both reflects and distorts the world, similar to a collection, a series of mirrors (5). How do we listen to ourselves in the images we reflect, reflect back upon us? He writes that music is “a mode of social expression, and duration itself. It is therapeutic, purifying, enveloping, liberating: it is rooted in a comprehensive conception of knowledge about the body, in a pursuit of exorcism through noise and dance. But it is also past time to be produced, heard, and exchanged” (9). Music is prophetic, as the “noises of a society are in advance of its images and material conflicts.” Attali remarks that music is simultaneously “science, message, and time,” allowing for the futural to be awakened and the musician to become a site of potential disruption and subversive (11). Gressman bodies forth from the very scene Attali enlivens above. Her noise is a mixture of genres, the senses, modes of difference, and a commitment to the political affinities found in experimental art and music.

Gressman’s work is influenced by artists such as John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Nam June Paik, Pamela Z, Clara Rockmore, and La Monte Young—artists who have placed pressure on traditional constructions of space, time, and aesthetics by advancing sound through technology. Cage, whose piece *4’33”* was composed of silence and ambient sounds (audience coughing, for example), is considered the forerunner of experimental music (Cage n.d.). Gressman notes: “Cage’s work showed me that sound is constant, even in silence: a concept that I have used in all my artistic endeavors.” Cage’s use of unplanned actions and incorporation of texts such as the *I-Ching* served as an inspiration and challenge for her in producing her own avant-garde music. She further describes this tension in our interview to express how her sound methodologies are distinct from Cage: “I’m not directly responding to Cage in my work; he was my gateway into experimental music.” Her performances carry the transgressive spirit of Cage and other experimental artists, although Gressman further expands the relationship to sound and image via embodiment, incorporating breath, choreography, and identificatory concerns marked by difference.

Gressman was also influenced by more contemporary methods of experimental artists, including those of Pauline Oliveros, a performance artist known for her technique of deep listening. Paik, who is most famously known for his television and video installations, also created several musical works, such as *Hommage à John Cage* (1959), in which he spliced sound and music, and performance pieces like *Simple*, *Zen for Head*, and *Étude Platonique No. 3* (1961), where aggressive movement was an integral component of the piece (“Nam June Paik” 2017). He also collaborated with the cellist Charlotte Moorman on several performance pieces, such as *Opera Sextronique* (1967) and *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969). Though Paik has influenced many young artists with his video work, Gressman personally and artistically connected with his musical works, noting that Paik believed that sound has deeper meaning than both image and sound together. Another of her major influences, La Monte Young, experimented with the possibilities of sound through drone compositions, expanding upon notions of what musical performance should inherently be. In his piece, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, which plays for over six hours, Young produces a tuning system broken into various themes and sections (Service 2013). Pamela Z, a contemporary artist who uses her voice to create layered compositions digitally (“Bio” 2017), and Clara Rockmore, who was involved in enhancing and popularizing the Theremin, an electronic instrument heard in songs such as the Beach Boy’s *Good Vibrations*, are at the centre of Gressman’s musical archive (McGoogan 2016). For Gressman, Cage and the multitude of artists under the umbrella of experimental music and performance have given her the aesthetic stimulus to “try different languages and methods of reaching ‘inside sound’” through the use of the body and light.

Noise music enables Gressman to explore the embodiment of sound, to queer her instrument by taking an object such as a hairbrush or a drill and “mak[e] it do things it is not naturally supposed to do.” Gressman is intimately and politically invested in repurposing and recycling dominant objects. For example, she takes instruments or everyday household objects and creates new apparatuses that make noise on their own or contain sensors that produce sound, as in *Wall of Sound*. She is actively involved in building her instruments, hacking radios, wigs, brushes, shoes, and helmets, among other things, always turning to analogue electronic sound. In all of her pieces, the artist controls the function and manipulation of her handmade instruments, even if she plays and waits with chance. Not to mention that noise’s socially transgressive character makes it conducive for Gressman to explore embodiment further. That is to say, in *Wall Of Skin*, the main point of dialogue between the body and noise is the essential choreography influencing and expanding sound. This, coupled with the body as already marked in difference, engenders a new type of listening/seeing/feeling practice in which intersectional concerns match aesthetic fortitude.

For author Stephen Graham, the noise genre is at the very core of underground music (Graham 2016). The genre, which Graham claims developed over the late 1970s and 1980s, typically has been marked by the use of electronic instruments, guitars with distortion pedals, digital audio workstations, and what Gressman uses in her performance, contact microphones (Graham 2016, 169–70). Graham posits that noise, whether through words, images, physicality, or aural means, is political and a resistant force. Pulling from philosophers Hegarty, Brassier, Serres, and Attali, he asserts that

noise qua abstract concept *and* qua specific sonic event, *reveals*, whether that revealing is of the limits or frailties of a system; of the “redundancy” or lack in the perceiving systems of its receiver; of the artificiality of seemingly “natural” boundaries between, for example, tonality and atonality in music; or, in a more positive sense, of new possibilities and alternative, even emancipatory, principles and procedures. (174)

Artists such as Throbbing Gristle, SPK, Merzbow, and This Heat tested the limits of noise through electronic instruments, varied sound effects, and transgressive performances (Graham 2016, 183–84). In the last twenty-five years, the genre has grown to consist of what Graham calls a spectrum of current noise music, going from harsh noise to cross-genre noise to post-noise (187). Gressman cites noise artists who create or adapt musical instruments and push the limits of the genre, such as Lightning Bolt, Russian Tsarlag, Unicorn Hard-On, Naomi Elizabeth, Yip-Yip, This Is My Condition, and Japanese band Boredums, to name a few as influences. She also attended and performed at the annual International Noise Music Conference in Miami, where devotees of the local and global noise community have met for fourteen years (Bennet 2017). At this conference, Gressman was exposed to an eclectic range of experimental and performative artists who were “the best most obscene and radical acts.” However, she notes that her work particularly responds to artists such as 90s Miami noise rock group Harry Pussy (“Harry Pussy” 2017); solo artist Kites, who records with oscillation batteries, circuit boards, and stringed instruments (“Kites” 2017); underground duo Pedestrian Deposit, who use feedback, recordings of objects such as dry ice against metal, and a cello (Holslin 2015); and Justice Yeldham, who performs using various vocal styles through sheets of amplified glass (“Granpa (Previously Justice Yeldham)” 2017).

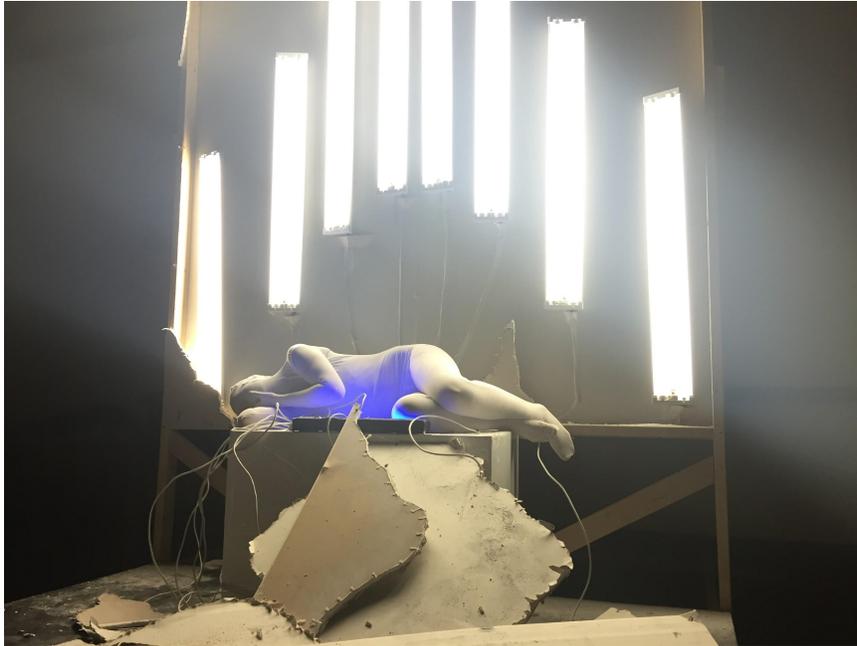
Ultimately, Gressman departs from the traditional works made by white male noise artists, precisely because they are unable to evolve their instruments. While they place pressure on the genre, as an anti-music aesthetic, they are often unwilling to address identity and the contours of a racialized and

queered body. She notes, “so much of identity is lost by these men in noise music.” Her instrument, in particular, has similar properties to the body; she comments that by incorporating sound and light, “there is something organic” about her instrument that will always pulsate existence. Analogue electronic noise offers Gressman “a very physical force” that she can undertake and manipulate to charge her body in performance. *Wall of Skin*, then, brings the body (from within) to noise music.

Working from within the tradition of the aforementioned noise and experimental artists, the music from *Wall of Skin* derives from a light-sensitive audio-oscillator, a small circuit that Gressman places inside of a sunglass case, along with three photoresistors. A return to the mechanics of the instrument is warranted to demonstrate the precision and disorder of noise in this piece.

Photoresistors sense the light and ignite the resistance of clicks coming from the integrated circuit. Her bodily movements simply block light as the light affects the photoresistors and consequently the sound (pitch) output. The sound output, on the other hand, changes based on how she tempers her body. As such, her moving body controls the degree of illumination as she tears down the wall to alter the light-sensitive audio-oscillator. Gressman’s instrument is similar to the Theremin, the electronic instrument used in 1950s horror movies that changes pitch and volume through hand movement. The instrument allows her to actively produce and manage “variations in sound that happen fluidly with light,” demonstrating to the audience how light and the body control sound. The resultant sounds form a musical composition precisely because Gressman scores the theatricality of the event, pre-routing the lit grooves that are seen as she pulls the embedded cables down the wall, creating a “highway” that draws “life/light lines.” As she pulls on the cables and pieces of wall during the performance, the increasing amount of light causes the music to change distinctively in pitch. When *Wall of Skin* begins, the audience hears a droning, vibrating sound in a low pitch: Gressman’s cyborg is embodying its first moves about the stage. The sound is hypnotic, created by “clicks going faster and faster to create a familiar pitch.” Gressman wants her audience to be lulled by the hypnotic feel of the music, “to be under” the influence of sound, as she sustains those very acts against her own skin.





Stills from *Wall of Skin*. Images by author.

In *Wall of Skin*, the lulling, hypnotic sound is reminiscent of Gregorian chants; Gressman notes the influence of the rhyme and metre of religious incantation in her work, and the three pitches heard in the piece create a sense of spirituality, a religious experience. The influences of film scores are also evident in the piece, for as the amount of light increases over time, the sound increases as well. When Gressman pulls apart the drywall, the overall tone increases and the audience hears the frequency and pitch of the pulsating sounds becoming higher, bringing about a feeling of human urgency.

In this piece, there is a type of “controlled chaos,” to use Gressman’s term. As she moves closer to the light, sound harmonizes; if she pulls too far from the light, the sound becomes unbearable to the human ear, and the pitch emitted by the light-sensitive synthesizer maxes out. Gressman is keenly aware of this as she’s vigorously moving and making sound across the stage; however, there is a window built into the score for unpredictable elements, creating moments of tension, improvisation. Her work technically relates visual and sonic material while also exposing the complexity and intersectionality of identification. Over and above, Gressman’s aesthetic and political intention is to highlight the temporal relationship between movement, light, and sound, to demonstrate how they can join us in our differences.

### **Notes for the Future, Or Build the Wall: Gressman’s Cyborg as Aesthetic Transmission**

On April 7, 2016, during the US presidential campaign season, I saw Erica Gressman perform this version of *Wall of Skin*<sup>14</sup> to a both stunned and energized room full of minoritarian audience members during the University of Illinois’s 2016 inaugural “Being Brown, Being Down: Performances of Spic and Span” symposium. The symposium, led by the Department of Latina/Latino Studies, was a two-day event that turned to different forms of performance, such as drag, experimental performance art, sound poetry, the documentary film genre, and visual art as sites of Brown resistance and existence. It was a hybridization of genres and artistic media that helped the

department address the recent queer and ethnic-racial backlash under Donald Trump's new campaign to "Make America Great Again." While this backlash was a national epidemic sweeping across the country, for the department, it was a bit closer to home. The night before Gressman's tantalizing and spirited performance, an anonymous party chalked "build the wall" and "deport them" in front of the department building's steps. In response to this threatening message, the department contacted campus security and asked them to circle the Channing Murray Foundation during the performances by Gressman and other artists such as Lola Van Miramar, Tracie D. Morris, and Kenneth Pietrobono. Filmmakers Dan Sickles and Antonio Santini, who screened their award-winning documentary, *Mala Mala* the night before, sat in the audience, waiting to be moved by a different type of wall.<sup>15</sup>

The symposium began by asking how we could jointly, through performance, redirect the illegalities of Brownness and queerness. In my opening remarks, I suggested that the historical reality of Brownness is perpetually tied to the persistence of the always in-waiting and waiting-on Brown subject. Even when quiet, this subject is still excessive, and when responsive, runs the high risk of being silenced. In light of the recent attacks against faculty and students of colour at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, acts of aggression against subjects just trying to keep breathing in the world, being Brown and being down—acts not exclusive to Brown folk—became perpetual exercises of endurance, resistance, and reimagined civility. By co-opting the pejorative of spic and span (that cleaning product that could never sublimate our cultural stains anyhow), the symposium was an homage to all those who've cleaned before and for us. By reimagining that spic, that span that pushes against walls and refuses to build new ones, the symposium hoped to reframe how both race and queerness are exercises of everyday labour. Such a claim allowed for a reading of Brownness that is about a *waiting-with* but also a *waiting-on*. The audience was given the task of thinking about being dirty and excessive together, and to locate those sublime shimmers of light near that no exit sign, against those all-consuming walls.

In direct response to the linguistic wall staged across the building's steps, I suggested that when the state says, "deport them, keep them out, send them all back, build that wall and make them pay for it," we must believe that aesthetics can talk back, redirect that chalking hail that doesn't mark out our chalk outlines. From drag performance to sound and image in the avant-garde, to fearless bodily gestures and social activism as art, I called for *new walls of skin*, against such violence. Or, how do we aesthetically learn to keep on living, pulling from the full capacity of our senses, in a world that doesn't want us, in a world that can't love us, but easily mourns us, even before we disappear? How can performance redirect the silence and inner noise embedded in Brownness and queerness?

These were the questions guiding Gressman on April 7. Of the event itself, she claims: "I did something right in this version of *Wall of Skin*; the seats were not filled with white male experimental noise artists, and I was moved. I had the deepest sleep that night; I felt open for the first time." And she did do something right: as the audience sat in anxious anticipation of her every move—some in tears, others feeling vindicated politically by her rendition of a wall—Gressman found the right note or harmony between/in difference, the human/automaton through the embodiment of sound in a space filled with allegories of both the wall and skin. In Gressman's Brown futurism, like my own, experimental aesthetics sound luminously, blurring the already hybrid lines between race, gender, sexuality, and the human. And this sound is not so much a replacement of more popular ones, but an experimentation that in its own right intervenes in new organismal futurisms. For Gressman, the world is a scientific experiment in which constant variables change at the line between the human/humanoid. And Gressman frees us from the overdetermination of the human, finding a new

and emergent way to stage a political scene through the interplay of technology, science, and aesthetics, at the very limit of animated existence.

## Notes

1. I turn to Helado Negro, not to privilege, conflate, or naively juxtapose versions of Brownness. His lyrics offer me the mileage I need to read for Gressman's type of skin. I have also been trying to find a way to theorize Lange's theorization of race and embodiment. Gressman's work, yes, offers a different tempo in electronic sound than Lange's, but both offer sonic reverberations of existence, neither closing off a call to advance the future of Brown politics and aesthetics. For me, they both make up a Brown Futurism where the call to life is resolutely tied to those resistant and radical aspects found in abstract and experimental aesthetics.
2. For more about Erica Gressman's work, see [www.ericagressman.com](http://www.ericagressman.com).
3. *Wall of Skin*, by Erica Gressman, Channing Murray Foundation, Urbana, IL, April 7, 2016. The performance was part of the "Being Brown, Being Down: Performances of Spic and Span" Inaugural Symposium initiated and led by the Department of Latina/Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
4. Nicolas Collins is a musician, author of *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking*, and the chair of the Department of Sound at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (see Sheridan 2006).
5. According to Gressman, the chip is a CMOS Hex Schmitt Trigger Integrated Circuit 74C14. The output of the instrument creates a square wave oscillation (see Collins 2009, 118).
6. Previous iterations of *Wall of Skin* involved photosensors placed on the artist's arms and head, which were activated by light and the movement produced by Gressman drumming.
7. Erica Gressman in discussion with the author, October 1, 2016. In addition to the in-person interview, Gressman and the author conducted a series of e-mail correspondence from November 2016–May 2017, which also inform this article.
8. Gressman recalls that at age ten, she snuck into the garage to play her brother's drum set when he wasn't home—it was a rebellious act for a young Latina to be playing the drums.
9. It is Sun Ra himself, "a brother from another planet," combining identity, outer space, and aesthetic vision who said that "costumes are music" (see Corbett 1994, 11). I mention this here because in our interview Gressman gestures to a similar tradition, remarking how noise musicians and punk musicians tapped into the spectacle components of costuming to interact with sound.
10. Though the punk movement has provided space for resistance, scholar Fiona I. B. Ngô, through her analysis of the punk scene in L.A.'s Chinatown, points to how punks also rehashed state and imperialist narratives of pathology towards people of colour in their establishment of an outsider status (see Ngô 2012). Scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen, in her analysis of the Riot Grrrl Movement, warns us against the perpetual erasure of women of colour in punk. For Nguyen, women of colour have been at the forefront of the Riot Grrrl Movement but have not been positioned as such (see Nguyen 2012).
11. Gressman's movement between punk and Catholicism in her work can be viewed through the lens of disidentification. Muñoz describes disidentification as a "survival strategy" in which the minoritarian subject learns to negotiate and repurpose dominant ways of being in the world (see Muñoz 1999, 9–11).
12. Following college, she travelled Europe, creating a solo act she called BOOGA, where she used her "little electronic instrument" and a borrowed drum set from a Danish band. Following this short stint in Europe as a musician, Gressman returned to the US to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received her MFA in performance in 2012.

13. The chapter entitled “Boxes” focuses on sound and hearing, setting up categories for how to entertain different kinds of hearing, and the sensory receptor of the ear. In “Tables,” Serres focuses on smell and taste, the least aesthetic of the senses. “Visit” entertains the properties of vision.
14. Gressman has performed *Wall of Skin* seven times since first performing it in 2011 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She also performed it in 2013 at the New College of Florida and at the 2016 performance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign symposium discussed in this article.
15. During the panel with filmmakers Dan Sickles and Antonio Santini, and moderated by scholar Larry La Fountain-Stokes, La Fountain-Stokes argued that *mala mala* is more than a film title. To be *mala mala* is a way of being-in-the-world, a way of accessing subjectivity and boldly exhaling in those spaces often reserved for the amenable, consenting subject of the world (see La Fountain-Stokes 2016; La Fountain-Stokes, forthcoming).

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