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English

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

"That confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh": Mothers, Daughters, and the Body in Postwar and Contemporary American Literature

Dissertation Abstract:

My project investigates how the body limits, disrupts, ruptures, or recuperates the mother/daughter relationship in postwar and contemporary texts by twentieth-century U.S. women writers. These narratives portray the construction of female subjectivity when the feminine self seems insufficiently distinct from the mother (or daughter). In four chapters arranged chronologically by decade, I examine texts by Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Edwidge Danticat, and Jamaica Kincaid. On the one hand, mothers in these texts often enforce a social order that defines the body as excessive, abject, and in need of regulation. On the other hand, they themselves frequently embody that excess, becoming the engulfing and off-putting bodies that daughters want to reject. The women writers in my study draw upon this ambivalence to cultivate a feminist poetics of the body that sees abjection as the shared state of mothers and daughters. The starting point of abject embodiment ultimately offers an opportunity for women to reject the myth of mind-body dualism and to value the intersubjective and corporeal rather than patriarchal individualism. As Dariack Scott writes in his important study of abjection and blackness, "abjection produces a 'break' in gender and sexuality – and... therefore produces an opportunity for different configurations of gender and sexuality." Bringing together the insights of fat studies, critical race studies, and corporeal feminism, this project proposes that these "different configurations" include the possibility of new relationships between mothers and daughters, escaping the painful dyad of self-hatred and maternal surveillance.