The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical understanding of the connection between the colonial and patriarchal notions of ideal beauty found in western society and the attitudinal violence that girls and young women with facial differences experience. This violence is enacted through both the scientific gaze and the public gaze and involves consequences such as economic discrimination, hiding and masking difference, living a life of fear and being induced to self hatred. Central to this work is the life history of Ani, a young woman born with a port wine stain birthmark covering the right side of her face and neck which also enlarges her lower lip and tongue. At times, Ani returns the imperial, male gaze by refusing to feel shame for her ‘difference’ and rejects the many demands to ‘normalize’ her appearance. However, as the attitudinal violence intensifies, Ani is forced to withdraw into submission and once again become victim of the gaze.

It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different… Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time (Morrison, 1970, p. 40).

The face! It has launched a thousand ships, can be a mirror to the soul, one’s fortune or an open book (Landau, 1989; Macgregor, 1974). Walt Whitman claimed he could see God when he looked into it. The face is a visible symbol of not only one’s morality and ethics but also what makes us human and gives us our identity (Landau, 1989; Macgregor, 1974). But what happens if your face is not seen as ‘normal’ and you are stigmatized as being ‘ugly’ or seen as ‘monstrous’? The descriptions of faces owning
desirable social qualities no longer belong to you. People perceived as possessing an ‘unattractive’ face are stigmatized with undesirable social qualities and if seen as exceptionally ‘different’ from desirable faces could, until recently, be legally punished if out in public (Harvard Law Review, 1987; Gilman, 1999). Gilman suggests that this law was similar to racist laws governing Southern United States and the eugenic policies of Nazi Germany. As Macgregor (1974) argues the ‘damaged’ face holds greater social and emotional consequences than any other body part. Although no one has been charged under the ‘Ugly Law’ since 1975 attitudes towards and consequences for looking ‘different’ in our homogenised, patriarchal, capitalist society, have not changed and I argue that it is young girls and women who suffer the most from this tyranny.

There exists a substantial body of literature (mainly from psychology) examining the ‘effects’ of living with a face that is perceived as ‘not normal’ and ‘different’ (Demellweek, et al., 1997; Hildebrandt, 1982; Houston & Bull, 1994; Gerrard, 1991; Macgregor, 1974; Pruzinsky, 1993; Pruzinsky, 1996; Thomas, 1990). However, to date there are no studies examining the actual lived experiences of women and young girls with facial differences and in particular their experiences with extremely negative societal attitudes towards bodily ‘normalcy’, which I argue are manifested in violence.

This attitudinal violence involves malevolent viewpoints on bodily ‘normality’ that are heavily engrained in patriarchal and racist ideologies and are manifested through the male, colonial gaze. My definition is strongly influenced by a Marxist position in regards to how ideology is connected to both structural and symbolic spheres in Western capitalist society. Attitudinal violence is the enactment of both ‘structural violence’ (Galtung, 1969) and ‘cultural violence’ (Galtung, 1990) in our everyday lives and it includes being subjected to the scrutiny of (1) the scientific gaze including painful medical treatments that attempt to ‘normalize’ and (2) the public gaze involving hate crimes such as being accosted and verbally harassed by strangers in both public and private places. These two powerful forms of the gaze are subsequently linked to: (a) economic discrimination due to the fact that recruitment decisions based on appearance are still widely accepted as ‘normal’ in hiring protocol; (b) forcing the individual to hide or mask difference; (c) living a life of fear;

2 In the first draft I used the name Nicole to give Ani anonymity. After reading the first draft Ani informed me she wanted her real name to be used, as she doesn’t feel shame regarding her experiences. I believe that using her ‘real’ name validates her experiences by placing her as the embodied knower.

3 As an adult, Ani has experienced many forms of economic discrimination in addition to the examples of attitudinal violence being discussed here. For the purpose of this article discussion of her life experiences with attitudinal violence will just focus on her experiences as a child and adolescent.
and (d) being induced to self hatred.

The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical understanding of the connection between the colonial and patriarchal notions of ideal beauty found in western society and the attitudinal violence towards young girls and women. I do recognize the contributions of many post-modern interpretations of this topic including Bourdieu, (1990) Foucault (1975; 1978) and Kristeva (1982). My interpretation, however, is distinctly and deliberately a Marxist-Feminist materialist analysis. A thorough discussion of the merits of post-modern interpretations is beyond the scope of this article.

The primary source of material for this study is the life history and experiences of Ani2, a young woman who was born with a port wine stain birthmark covering the right side of her face and neck, which also enlarges her lower lip and tongue. Ani attempts to return the imperial gaze by refusing to feel shame for her difference and now, as an adult, rejects the many demands to ‘normalize’ her appearance. This is, I argue, a counter-hegemonic act of resistance that not only threatens the hegemony of aesthetics of bodily beauty found primarily in Western society but also capitalism and the market economy3. Further, by examining the ‘relations of ruling’ from the standpoint of women we are engaging in what Dorothy Smith (1990) refers to as a ‘feminist sociology of knowledge’, which is instrumental to challenging the ideological practices that govern our lives.

The Medical Gaze

For Ani, attitudinal violence began at birth. When she was born the doctors assured her nervous first time parents that their ‘pink’ baby would turn a ‘normal’ colour in a few hours or days after birth. Once her overall pinkness faded and the brightness of her birthmark remained, they were informed that their daughter was born with a ‘vascular hemangioma’ that not only covered the right side of her face and neck but was also found throughout her internal body including her brain. Most commonly referred to as a port wine stain birthmark, it is made up of a collection of small blood vessels called capillaries that are considered ‘abnormal’ and ‘affects’ approximately three in every 1000 births (Mulliken, 1988).

Since the diagnosis, Ani’s parents were left questioning how this ‘tragedy’ could have happened. Her mother wondered if the burgundy colour of the mark was due to her over indulgence in cherries while pregnant and she blamed herself. Maternal impressions have a long history in folklore literature surrounding difference and disability and today it is still widely believed by the general public as the cause for birthmarks (Mulliken & Young, 1988; Oliver, 1990). Ani (2001c) describes her mother’s own belief in maternal impression:
My mother was young—she was twenty-three when she had me. She was confused as to how I could be born with this birthmark. She thought [laughs] she ate a lot of cherries when she was pregnant and she felt so guilty that it might be because she had eaten too many cherries and it had done something. She was just trying to find out why. Even today it is very difficult for my mother to speak about my birthmark (2001c).

Medical discourse with its emphasis on ‘normalization’ can be overwhelming. ‘Anatomicopathological’, ‘embryological’ and/or ‘biological’ classifications are used intermittently with words such as ‘defect’, ‘deformity’, ‘abnormality’, ‘deviance’, ‘disfigurement’. All of these terms are routinely used to describe port wine stain birthmarks and—as with all forms of medical discourse—serve to alienate people from their bodies, which in turn dehumanises them. They become nothing more than a diagnosis and hence a stereotype and cease to be seen as persons (Gilman, 1986).

Gilman (1986, p. 24) examines the “overlapping systems of conventions” in both the world of aesthetics and medicine and concludes that both are iconographic because they organise and “represent [the] realities [of those represented] in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers.” Therefore, medicine defines ‘difference’ according to its ‘scientific status’ which, as an ideological system, is extremely powerful. Representations of facial differences within medical discourse render individuals with facial differences as medical objects which in turn creates a medical subclass that provokes such questions as: ‘What happened?’ Something happened or something is wrong which warrants medical intervention to ‘fix’ the ‘problem’.

Ani’s parents were also informed that occasionally the tissue surrounding the port wine stain might enlarge which could cause ‘soft tissue hypertrophy’. The doctors were particularly “concerned” with the port wine stain around Ani’s mouth and chin, which could eventually cause her lower lip to enlarge. While some forms of port wine stain birthmarks can cause internal health risks, such as an increased risk for glaucoma and Sturge-Weber Syndrome (a deeper blood vessel ‘abnormality’ affecting brain function (Mulliken & Young, 1988), Ani was not diagnosed with any of these complications. Her parents were informed that their child’s ‘abnormality’ was purely aesthetic, but they had to prepare themselves for invasive medical ‘treatments’ or their child would ‘face’ a lifetime of suffering due to the social stigma surrounding facial differences. Ani (2001b) summarises this:
And my parents were very young when they had me. They were twenty three. So my mom was told by the doctors that it would be very hard for me and so before school started she wanted me to hopefully feel like everything was ‘normal’, like every body else. So yes it [treatment] was important and doctors were encouraging it and she wanted to just do her best.

At the age of three the treatments began. A preliminary test involved burning the skin behind Ani’s ear to try to determine how the blood vessels in her face would react to the invasive procedures that were to follow. Ani (2001c) describes these early treatments:

They took an iron and they burnt behind the back of my ear. They were testing. It was an experimental treatment… they were destroying the blood vessels under the skin. So but it must have been a little bit traumatizing. A little painful when you wake with that kind of severe burn.

Ani was now ready for the main treatment, the one that promised to normalize her appearance. The procedure, first used medically in 1835, attempts to tattoo the birthmark closer to a ‘normal’ skin colour. Generally the procedure was disappointing, needing multiple treatments with dismal outcomes. It has been well documented that children are at high risk for scarring (Mulliken & Young, 1988). Strapped into a straight jacket for two weeks to prevent her from touching her face, three and a half year old Ani endured the sticking of thousands of needles into her face.

The entire process of hospitalisation and treatments left Ani with deeper scars than what was visible on the surface. While the medical procedure failed, the social lesson was a success. For the first time, Ani started to perceive herself as different. Ani (2001c) explains:

So, to me that was like the turning point when I found out I was different… It was because I was in a room with this little boy who’s three years old and his name was Daniel. He had stood up [pause] one morning on the oven on the elements to get something. And his little hockey player pyjamas had caught on fire. So his whole body was burnt to a crisp. And I was so sad—so sad for this person. And that is the day that I realised that I was different because I realised at such a young age that there was horror and pain in the world. I was so young going through a lot of emotional and physical pain and yet all I could think about was his pain and that I am destined to live a life of pain—I made that connection then.
It wasn’t particularly the fact that she was in a hospital that created the sense of difference for Ani. It was the realisation that the doctors had to work as hard to normalize her appearance as they were working to keep Daniel alive. And yet, Ani realised she had not caught her little pyjamas on fire; it was her birthmark that was causing her to be in the same room as a little boy who was ‘burnt to a crisp’.

Throughout her teenage years the interventions continued. At the age of fourteen, Ani underwent her first of twenty laser treatments. Laser therapy was first introduced as a ‘treatment’ for port wine stain birthmarks in 1965 and involves penetrating 1.0-1.5 mm. of the skin and generally takes an hour and a half to complete. The Laser heats the area causing the blood vessels to collapse and the flow of red haemoglobin to decrease, resulting in a lighter skin pigment and a flattening of the surface (Noe, 1988). Despite denials by doctors and nurses, the procedure proved to be very painful. It is now recognised that the earlier attempts at tattooing her birthmark had left her skin not only scarred but resistant and more sensitive to the heat of the laser.

Once the treatment was finished the pain continued. Not allowed to go out in the sun Ani had to cover her face with a greasy cream and wait for the blistering to pass which usually took a minimum of two to three weeks. Despite the pain, Ani underwent the procedure every three months because of the promise of removing her birthmark:

[the doctors told her] that you have three to six of these treatments... you won’t have your birthmark anymore. So, I actually did a video of me saying, ‘You better look at my birthmark because it’s going to be gone soon!’ [laughs]. Yea and so that is how they sold it. So, [they said] you don’t want to leave too much time because, well, because it comes back that’s why. Now we know—now I know that it comes back. They can’t fool me anymore (Ani, 2002a).

The desire to pathologize physical differences has been around for thousands of years. Since the ancient Greek culture first placed emphasis on medicine to help achieve a true beauty, aesthetic surgery of the face has played an important role in helping to define the ‘healthy’ homogenised look. In the late 18th Century the practice grew even more popular due to the rise in racial ideologies and the invention of a device to measure facial angles by Dutch artist/anatomist Petrus Camper (1722-1789). Camper used the facial measurements of Greek statues in order to try to ‘quantify beauty’ (Etcoff, 1999; Gilman, 1999). Camper assumed the Greek statues were a representation of the ‘perfect angle of beauty’, essentially creating a hierarchy that put European males ahead of ‘Orientals’ followed by ‘Africans’ (Etcoff, 1999).

This beauty hierarchy justified the ideological belief in white,
European racial superiority and helped make the link between beauty, intelligence, race and goodness. As Gilman (1999) concludes, aesthetics of the face is really the aesthetics of race. It is interesting to note that female skulls were not measured but, as Schiebinger (2004) notes, what was measured were body parts that were seen as connected to women’s sexuality and propagative capabilities. This is an example of the desire for control over female anatomy and reproductive capacity through the medical gaze. The white European male body was represented as not only the norm but also as Kaplan (1997, p. 258) argues ‘the most virtuous and aesthetically appealing’ and any ‘other’ was considered a deviation.

Despite the fact that female skulls were not initially measured in the search for the perfect angle of beauty, it is women’s faces in post-modern society that are severely scrutinised by Camper’s racist findings. Notably, Dr. Stephen Marquardt of the Marquardt Foundation in California has utilized Camper’s beauty grid (although there is no reference to the inventor available in his literature) in his efforts to quantify beauty and facilitate his ability to provide the beauty ideal to patients. Citing symmetry and harmony as the key sites for facial attractiveness, Marquardt utilizes the classical notion of the Phi and the Golden Ratio (which is reported to be present in ‘beautiful’ things) creating a Golden Facial Mask. Visitors to his web site are encouraged to place their image underneath the Golden Mask and see how they ‘measure up to the ideal beauty (Marquardt, 2006).

The fact is most of us would never measure up to Camper and Marquardt’s beauty ideal despite our participation in the beautification process. Instead, the majority of women struggle with negative body image and this issue is becoming more and more prevalent with young girls and adolescent women. Statistics Canada (2003) reported that 80% of female grade eight students were dissatisfied with their appearance, while Boyce (2004) found that 21% of grade 10 females felt that they were not good looking. Further, the majority of studies examining ‘Body Dysmorphic Disorder’ (Hollander & Phillips, 1993; Pruzinsky, 1993; Pruzinsky, 1996; Rosen, 1996; Sarwer, 1997) locate appearance-based self-hatred in one’s psychology, rather than connecting body image dissatisfaction with structural forces. While these studies and others specifically examining facial differences do mention the effects media images have on our psyches, the critical examination generally ends there. Gilman (1999) makes the link between negative body image and structural forces by arguing that unhappiness with one’s appearance actually serves the purpose of camouflaging and replacing the political unhappiness that is created by class and poverty.

Today, the female body in Western patriarchal capitalist society is represented as being defective in order to foster the desire for regulation and discipline. Bartky (1997) argues that a young woman’s body has been regulated in the fact that her body language of tension and constriction is
an embodied example of her subordination. Lack of freedom and movement are now seen as the embodiment of ‘femininity’, which is a socially constructed category created in order to control and dominate women (Bordo 1993; Bartky 1997; Wolf 1997; Goffman, 1998). If a young woman seems to embody freedom from these constraints in her appearance or movements it is read as a threat to the normative capitalist system and will be cited as an example of her failure to conform to the regulated and disciplined body. The failure to conform will involve the punishment of being viewed as not normal, deviant, or not female and will lead to isolation and invisibility within the culture of a society and subject those individuals to attitudinal violence.

The Public Gaze

Not only is Ani invaded with attitudinal violence from the medical community in their pursuit of creating normalcy, she is also subjected frequently to stares, comments and attacks from strangers. Despite growing up in a small northern Ontario town where everyone knew her and didn’t react to her birthmark, there were encounters with people, generally adults and strangers, who would interrupt the family dinner at the restaurant to ask, ‘What happened to your face?’

Every time I was out at a restaurant—almost every time somebody would come up to our table and ask ‘what happened?’ to my face ‘what was wrong?’ with my face. In stores people would follow me around. And we’d be like running my sister and I holding each others’ hands. And I was followed a lot (Ani, 2001c).

Due to the advice from the medical ‘experts’ about the increased risk of children born with facial differences growing up to become ‘introverted and shy’, at a young age Ani was left to defend herself in regards to the attitudinal violence from strangers:

The good thing about it [was] that I learned to deal with people and answers… I didn’t have anybody protecting me and answering and speaking for me… And I was like the little adult answering the questions… when they come to the table at the restaurant, ‘What happened to your face?’ ‘I have a birth mark on my face’… and my mom says she wanted to kill people. It was so hard for her to just bite her tongue, especially when people were really ignorant (Ani, 2001b).

Goffman (1963a) argued that social stigma based on differences in physical appearance serve the purpose of keeping certain groups away from the avenues of competition. Lorde (1996) adds that the categories of
difference are products of capitalism, which needs ‘outsiders as surplus people’. Central to Goffman’s (1963a) stigma theory are the concepts of covering and passing. Covering is where the stigmatized individual ‘restricts the display of those failings most centrally identified with the stigma’ and is similar to assimilation techniques used by other marginalized groups (p. 86).

At an early age this ideology of ‘passing’ and ‘covering’ infiltrated Ani’s self concept. A gifted musician and singer, Ani wrote her first song at the age of four. As she reached middle childhood she began performing regularly in front of large audiences. At age eight, it was suggested that she begin to cover her birthmark while performing. By the age of twelve she was camouflaging her birthmark every day.

I don’t remember how my mom put it to me, but I think she just said you know if you want you’re going to be changing schools so maybe it’s a good idea that you start wearing it all the time… And I used to wear makeup just for my concerts. But that was like it was a special occasion. And I did that until I was twelve. And then by age twelve I started to wear makeup every day when I hit grade seven because I changed schools (Ani, 2001b).

The daily ritual of applying makeup has been referred to as a rite of passage which young girls must ‘consciously choose to partake in’ if they want to absorb the culture of femininity (Brand, 2000; also see Wolf, 1997). Keeping women tied to the regime of beautification is another way of controlling what is organic about the female body. Walter Benjamin referred to this process as mimicking ‘organic nature’ which in turn “invents an artificial humanity” (as quoted in Buck-Morss, 1999, pp. 100-101). Benjamin writes, ‘the living, human body mimics the inorganic world (skin strives through cosmetics to attain the color of rose taffeta)’ (pp. 100-101). The ideal mythic, homogeneous look all women are to strive for is a racialized image of beauty possessing red, full lips (but not too full) and rosy cheeks on a clear, creamy complexion. We are to mimic on a daily basis what is believed to occur naturally to the desired white face when experiencing an orgasm.

While the idea of wearing makeup is extremely intoxicating for most eight-year old girls and is not without its pleasures (Bordo, 2000), even as a child Ani (2002a) never lost perspective on why she was wearing it: “I knew it wasn’t that kind of makeup. It wasn’t like you know fun. I [knew] that this [makeup] is to hide my birthmark and it is very important to hide my birthmark.”

Peiss (1996) argues that the solitary practice of beautification consumes energy and time at the expense of women’s social and political activity. For Ani, the robotic, isolating transformation process took over
an hour and a half. Ani (2002a) describes the routine:

\[\text{I... really hated getting up in the morning and being alone. I hated that time so much. Everybody is sleeping and the house is so quiet and I am tired and I am just kind of stumbling. I have my shower I put my makeup on. And this automatic dabbing—dab, dab, dab, dab.}\]

The cost of having to transform her identity into something acceptable by Western societal standards, started to take its toll on Ani. Chained to a false identity through the safety of concealment, Ani did not experience any sense of freedom, thus solidifying her feminine identity. Ani (2001c) states:

\[\text{I could never just get up and go and do things... and I lived my life around makeup. Some days I just didn’t want to put my makeup on, like on the weekend or something, so I would be just stuck in the house. There was no way I was going to go close to a window... And swimming was hard but my makeup was water proof. So I would go swimming but I would be [have to be] careful.}\]

As a child Ani was never comfortable wearing the camouflage mask because none of the other 12-year-old girls were wearing as much makeup as she was. Sometimes there would be comments from young teenagers who didn’t know about her birthmark and would ask her why she wore so much makeup, but the majority of comments came from disapproving adults:

\[\text{‘You’re so beautiful. Why are you wearing so much makeup?’}\]

\[\text{It’s like, ‘You know why! I’m wearing so much make up because you don’t like what I look like under [it]. And you’re not happy with that either’. It’s exactly those people who would tell me that [they did] not like my birthmark either (2001c).}\]

There is also a masquerade quality of wearing camouflage makeup, which, ultimately, demands an eventual unmasking. Goffman (1963a) argues that for the individual living a double life involved with covering and concealing a particular social stigma, the greatest danger is advertent disclosure. For Ani (2001c), that fear of disclosure hung over her heavily:
I feel like I’m lying to men. That I’m pretending to be something I’m not. And… then I have to tell them after a few dates that you know what? I have this birthmark on my face. And that’s why I wear so much makeup… And it stresses me out so much to have to come out and tell them… And it’s so scary for me to bring that up.

When wearing her heavy camouflage makeup she manages to completely conceal her birthmark. However, as a young adult, Ani now wants to be seen. She no longer wants to hide behind a mask fearing disclosure and her true self. She also feels trapped in the paradox of unwanted questions: If she wears makeup (‘Why are you wearing so much makeup?’) and when she doesn’t wear makeup (‘What happened to your face?’):

I started seeing my therapist on a weekly basis and we started talking about my makeup and it became an issue. And it was something that I needed to do. I think it took like three weeks of therapy for me to just take my makeup off. And I remember the first time that I went out and it was just like everything was kind of heightened and I was so concerned about how people reacted to me and I was really nervous and shaking inside (Ani, 2001c).

Much of the discourse around the politics of ‘coming out’ resides in Queer Theory, which grew out of ‘resistance to capitalist forms of domination and power’ and requires having a known community to come out to (Kirsch, 2000, p. 116). However, Ani does not see herself as belonging to a community of women with facial differences because there isn’t a visible community. When she looks around at all the images we are bombarded with on a daily basis in both public and private spaces she does not see representations of her image anywhere. Further, part of the process of coming out involves political collectivity. However, community action can’t occur if there isn’t a community to come out to. Community reawakens our social past and is threatening to the order of capitalism. By refusing to showcase diversity and only having representations of an unattainable beauty keeps us tied to the paradoxical relationship of individuality and indistinguishable sameness.

Most of the existing studies examining public reactions and people with facial differences conclude that avoidance, not violence, takes place (Demellweek, et al., 1997; Hildebrandt, 1982; Houston & Bull, 1994; Reed et al., 1999; Thomas, 1990). However, these findings are in contradiction to Ani’s lived experiences. As she has matured, the assaults by strangers have moved from them demanding answers to more overt and disturbing forms of attitudinal violence:
I got woofed at yesterday. It wasn’t the kind of woof like ‘woof!’ it was the kind of woof like ‘you’re a dog’… So that was really insulting… And this girl scrunched her whole face up and turned her whole head but it was such an exaggerated face that it really shocked me. And after I passed her and she made that face I thought, ‘You know Ani, stop looking at people’ (Ani, 2002a).

In public situations where we are supposed to be safe Ani becomes trapped. While on the subway Ani (2001a) feels particularly vulnerable:

I don’t like being stared at on the subway… On the subway it is another interest other than me… they are just staring at the physical me. It makes me uncomfortable and uneasy because they can’t know who I really am. I feel that people are looking right at the surface and at the same time looking right through me because to them I don’t exist—I am just a ‘thing’ to look at.

These experiences transcend what Goffman (1963b) referred to as the protocol for behavior in public places. He argued that there exist “self-applied rules and legal sanctions” to keep people from initiating contact when in the public sphere unless there are mutual glances. Eye contact leaves one vulnerable to “engagement” (p. 145). Ani is very aware of the power of eye contact and what happens if you mistakenly allow your eyes to meet another’s whose gaze is scrutinizing and oppressive. Ani (2002a) describes how this makes her feel:

[We] walk around in the world making eye contact and we react non-verbally to people in our world. For me to protect myself I need to ignore. To ignore these non-verbal communications that are going on around me towards me, at me, bombarding me… I notice every single stare and that is the paradox of this. I am always looking at how people are looking at me always, constantly. And, then I see how they are looking at me and then I ignore it. I put it somewhere else.

With the act of removing her makeup, though a solitary celebratory act of pride, Ani began to see herself as belonging to a wider, inclusive community of all women and did find a temporary place for political action. She started speaking publicly about beauty and physical difference and recounting her own lived experiences. She was accepted and welcomed as an embodied knower and experiential person and
began running workshops and one-on-one body image counselling for women with facial and physical differences and disabilities.

By attempting to resist the hegemonic demands of Western, patriarchal capitalist society to emulate (or to be seen attempting to emulate by way of consumption) the idealized, homogenized look, Ani is partaking in what bell hooks (1997) refers to as a ‘counter-hegemonic’ activity. Further, since she is actively engaged in trying to publicly challenge the attitudinal violence that has imprinted her since birth she is now viewed as threatening to the social order that relies on the presence of the ‘abnormal/ugly’ in order to be able to define ‘normal/beautiful’.

No longer protected by her ability to ‘pass’ while wearing her mask, Ani has started experiencing the horrors of attitudinal violence in a new and deeply disturbing way. Since becoming active in addressing issues surrounding body image and beauty, Ani has been interviewed on television, radio as well as in magazines. For these interviews, Ani combined promotion for her CD, *Beauty*, with her band, *Ani’s Whisper* and education by citing her own experiences living with a facial difference. She has received some very positive comments and e-mails from people who, I would argue, listened to her story as active listeners, connecting their own history to that of Ani’s. However, she also received several hostile e-mails, including this one with the subject line ‘WOW!!!:

> Wow, you are one delusional chick. I was so embarrassed for you when I read that interview you did on your birthmark. I feel sad that I actually have to point this out for you but when people tell you that you are ‘beautiful’, they’re only trying to be nice… you know the way people tell the parents of an ugly baby that their kid is cute. But thank you, my co-workers and I had quite the morning laugh. And don’t feel hurt by our comments because you put yourself out there. Poor ‘vulnerable’ creature, playing on the schoolyard all by yourself (we especially liked that one). Have a nice day!

The statement ‘You put yourself out there’ reinforces my argument that by engaging in counter-hegemonic political activities Ani is seen as threatening to the dominant order. Without question the most violent attack came from a man called ‘dan’, who completely shattered Ani’s ability and desire to be visible. The e-mail asked her to click on a URL to view an image that ‘dan’ wanted her to see. Ani (2001c) describes the incident:

> So I click on the URL and it comes up right to a page with my picture on it. And it was written ‘UglyPeople.com’ and I thought, ‘What?’ And I looked at the site and I was blown away and then I was on the floor—I couldn’t get up… and this is like...
the expression ‘floored’ I think. This must be where it comes from. I was on the floor. My whole body was sobbing—my whole being was just like—just being completely destroyed.

From the home page you have a choice of several links. ‘Ugly Men’, ‘Ugly Women’, ‘Ugly Couples’, ‘Ugly Celebrities’ and ‘Ugly of the Day’. I clicked on the ‘Ugly Women’ link and was horrified at what I saw. It was a photograph of a young woman with a facial difference. Her fully frontal image is staring straight ahead, not really meeting my gaze, her mouth has a slight smile, her hands folded over in her lap. Underneath her picture is an ugly scale—she has been rated by the previous voyeur and there is even an area for me to “rate this ugly”. I can even ‘put this ugly on a T shirt!’ if I wanted to. I am also encouraged to ‘send this ugly person to a friend just to let them know that when you saw this face, you were thinking of them’.

The spectator of UglyPeople.com becomes a perverted voyeur and always remains isolated—an individual. UglyPeople.com does not involve a social body; it is a body with a fixed, rigid identity. The power behind the imperial gaze lies entirely with the spectator and s/he appropriates it with every click of the mouse. However, despite their docile nature the spectator’s gaze is active. Mulvey (1975) argues that the “controlling and curious gaze” of the “fetishistic, scopophilic” spectator not only turns the person being observed into an object of both fear and desire but also actually requires an active participation by the spectator (pp. 28-29). The spectator is not only consumed with his/her anxiety about his/her own identity, but intermixed with these anxieties is desire. So as not to be dangerous, the spectator turns the object into a fetish, which creates a power imbalance (Mulvey, 1975). Mercer (2000) adds to Mulvey’s argument that part of fetishist logic is that of mimetic representation, which involves the male gaze obtaining complete mastery and control over the object of the ‘Other’.

However, for the spectators of UglyPeople.com their investment in rigid, fixed bodies not only perpetuates the binary opposition of normal/abnormal, but the active nature of their participation goes

---

4 When I first began writing this paper, I believed I had to be a passive, silent observer. After listening to the first interview I was surprised at how present my voice was in Ani’s story and realized it needed to be included. The self-reflection I have done (all of which are beyond the scope of this one article at this time) is so important to feminist methodology and has helped bring me into her story—to somehow leave my handprint on the earthen vessel as Ani has left her imprint on me. I also wanted to be able to create an accessible body of work and a link that offers an active participation and self-reflection in you, the reader. This association acknowledges what Walter Benjamin (1968) referred to as an ‘epic remembrance’: a web connecting all stories together to create the social—a continuous flow from storyteller to writer to reader. By reflecting on your own position and history in this social world where appearance and the centrality of vision have both surfaced as hegemonic tools of oppression, helps minimize the chance of becoming voyeurs or passive observers to Ani’s story and subsequently exerting more violence upon her.
beyond the male, imperial gaze. The UglyPeople.com spectator has the ultimate power by not only being able to place images of whoever they want to on the web page for all to see and rank, but also the added power of being able to send those images out and in Ani’s case, send her image to her. This subsequently gives them further power by forcing her to see herself through their malevolent gaze.

This site is all about violence and hate and yet engulfing the central images found within UglyPeople.com are sexualised images of women. On every page there are interactive links advertising other websites that involve voyeurism, fetish objectification and misogyny. ‘Tired of looking at ugly people? Then click out really hot naked people!, ‘Single?’, ‘Pleasure Me’, ‘Girls Get Crazy’, ‘College Girls NAKED’, ‘Girls’, ‘ChickClick.com—girl sites that don’t fake it’ and ‘Anal Fuck’ are some of the links flashing on every page. The pleasure that these private pornographic distractions offers is a form of confirmation and relief for the spectator that it is not the image of the ‘Other’, in this case the ‘ugly person’, that is in fact causing sexual arousal. It is the objectified pieces of female nudity offered on the side of the web page that are generating the excitement.

Since the UglyPeople.com incident, Ani has not only started fluctuating back and forth with camouflaging herself again, she has also stopped performing her music. It isn’t shame that is causing her to withdraw from the tyranny of this violent gaze, it is fear:

So, anyway, it [the web site] just blew me away and then that was it. That was it for me. It scared the shit out of me. Like I hate admitting that I’m so vulnerable but when you feel like you can’t do anything and you try and you’re all alone and you know I felt all alone in this fight. I have taken my make up off. I’ve stood on the stage. I’ve spoken, I’ve been interviewed. I have had my picture plastered everywhere. I’ve been strong and positive and I loved who I was. And hoped to change something. And then [pause] and then this kind of thing happens. And I’m so vulnerable and I am so alone. Nobody really understands what I’m going through. So and it was time for me to protect myself. You know? I almost kind of lost interest in that fight because it made me too vulnerable (Ani, 2001c).

This fear prohibits full participation in the social world and is what situates Ani’s experiences within the realm of violence. Ani’s choice to once again retreat into hiding was a matter of protection from the continual threat of attitudinal violence.
CONCLUSION

Upon reading the Morrison (1970) quote I chose to begin this work with, Ani articulated the paradoxical nature of being marked with a physical difference in this society. While exalted at the evidence of sharing something intimate with Morrison’s protagonist Pecola, Ani also demonstrates the pain that goes along with that identification:

This [the quote] makes me feel so warm inside right now because I can relate. At this time in my life I am struggling with how I am perceived by others and how I perceive myself. Even away from the gaze, the stares, the questioning looks, I am alone. This gaze is the curse, not the actual difference (Ani, 2002b).

The attitudinal violence that is making Ani walk off the stage and question her right to have a place in the world is the very same violence that made Pecola pray every night to be released from her world of terror and become ‘beautiful’; she is essentially wishing to become white, to somehow emulate the ideal form of beauty that is understood to be truth. To be marked as different positions one further away from the mythic ideal and subjects one to attitudinal violence. I am arguing that according to the ideology of the beauty myth all of our images could be placed on UglyPeople.com. Beauty is a deeply political and ideological tool that is used to control and dominate not only young women, but all of us. It keeps us from creating any sense of community and prohibits our reconnection with a true and just social world.

While UglyPeople.com may initiate disgust from most people, the hate behind its creation has been a part of Western capitalist history and culture. Starting from birth, Ani has been subjected to this imperial gaze, which has manifested itself in every aspect of our society creating a climate rich in attitudinal violence against all forms of diversity. Located not only in the medical discourse surrounding ‘normalization’, this gaze has become an accepted part of everyday life, which makes it all the more powerful and damaging, reducing people, especially young women, to marginalized ‘others’ and filling them with self-hatred.

5 The first draft of this work opened with a quote from Hawthorne’s (1968) The Birthmark. While I thought it was a perfect literary reference it left Ani feeling empty and confused. She stated that she felt no connection to it. Situating Ani as the embodied knower concedes her memory of her own history as the authority. This acknowledgment pronounces her as a subject of history and gives her voice power. Nothing is included in this work without Ani’s permission and understanding. I removed the Hawthorne quote from the text.
REFERENCES


