

## Relishing the Minor: Juliana Huxtable's Kewt Aesthetics

Adrienne Edwards

*"Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams...?"*<sup>1</sup>  
– Audre Lorde

Juliana Huxtable has mastered the affects of boredom and disinterest in her performances. Her stage is an insulated and insular arena in which she often paces back and forth or languorously reclines, reading her texts in a luminous, modulated, and slightly dissonant sex-kitten-cum-valley-girl voice while twirling her knee-length hair twists. She isolates her audience, though there is something striking about her stage presence. Her physical capacity to hold space and, thus, one's attention, contrasts with a seemingly lackadaisical, retro performance style—in a manner reminiscent of the spoken-word style popular both in the 1990s among artists like Saul Williams, and in the mid-20th-century among the Beatniks in downtown New York City—that is decidedly in the register of "minor" aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> The minor things in which Huxtable revels defy easy interpretation, and are always far more complex than what one immediately experiences. While it could be interpreted as kitsch or, more specifically, camp, "kewt"—a colloquial replacement for the word "cute" among queer people of color—better encapsulates Huxtable's affect. Indeed, she repeatedly drops the word in casual conversation, wielding it like a singular, definitive verbal gavel, conveying that the thing being judged falls somewhere in the range of clever, desirable, and intriguing. The constituting force of kewt aesthetics is the wresting and shifting of power through minor acts that express themselves in surprising ways, which we can unexpectedly locate in the historical and cultural formations of the fetish and the ornament; like kewt and cute, they overlap and differ in ways that make their boundaries increasingly apparent.

*There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*, Huxtable's most ambitious performance to date, co-commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art and Performa, has a sense of disproportion and inequality as its conceptual bedrock in at least two distinct ways. On the one hand, the performance concerns the meta issue of history and the ways in which historical knowledge is constituted, circulated, and reified. This is approached as an object of analysis with which Huxtable contends by questioning who and what is sidelined and devalued in the process of historicizing specific beings, civilizations, and, more broadly, the human race overall. On the other, she explores the modes through which this knowledge circulates, from printed texts to the Internet. In particular she illuminates how the Internet, with its promise of more "democratic" access to narratives typically eliminated from "History," is nevertheless compromised by its ephemeral nature.

The artist's three-part text (which demarcates the performance's tripartite structure), is a romantically inclined hybrid of lyric poetry, abstract script, and philosophical musings. Each section begins with spoken word—with Huxtable herself serving as narrator—followed by video projections and music. The first section, *TRANSITION*, explores the ways in which historical imagination is linked with anthropological and reference-library aesthetics, in which Huxtable traces motifs from the emergence of life to contemporary society and its obsession with digital technology, considering the role of eroticism, violence, and culture in the history of humankind. *MOURNING*, the second act, contemplates the sense of loss that results from the impermanence of online sites—and specifically from the disappearance of a specific set of diverse perspectives and revisionist discourses that were vital to Huxtable's artistic and personal development. The final part, *AVATARS*, immerses the viewer in the realm of fantasy, combining such unlikely citations as costume-play performance; the American Revolution as realized in the video game *Assassin's Creed III*; and portraits of 19th-century icons of the black radical tradition Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, who were known for their savvy approaches to circulating their images. At its apex, the performance unmoors such iconic representations and their symbolic meanings from their historical points of reference, allowing them to float, shape-shift, and take on entirely new significance. Huxtable's text is an evolution of her online status updates—highly descriptive, self-reflexive, wryly poetic, and always in capital letters. Her writings are embellished responses to everyday incidents, exhibitions, films, or music mixes,



**Figure 1.** Juliana Huxtable. *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*. The Museum of Modern Art, November 2015. Pictured: Juliana Huxtable. Photograph © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Julieta Cervantes

often layering imagined scenes triggered by the sounds or feelings aroused by them. Instead of regurgitating philosophical concepts verbatim, Huxtable embodies and enacts theoretical positions in her writing. She generates her work in relation to this range of references; through such riffing, she situates her own voice within the context of a broader artistic and social field.

Huxtable, who came of age in Bryan-College Station, Texas, delved into the Internet to explore her imagination and to open herself to new worlds, creating digital art as a teen and researching the kind of black history usually elided in school textbooks, from Egyptology to black nationalism. She accumulated reams of this online research, printed from now-closed servers and bounced URLs and stored in boxes over the years. (Such research was incorporated into *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*, with texts such as Chancellor Williams's *Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* lining the walls of The Museum of Modern Art's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2.) Seeking a liberal environment (the opposite of her hometown), Huxtable attended Bard College—where she originally majored in studio arts before switching to literature and theory during her sophomore year—which she has said was more of a “meritocracy.”<sup>3</sup> Huxtable has commented that she was seduced by images on Bard's website of “people in pashminas and black people with natural hair.”<sup>4</sup> Though upon her arrival striking racial and class differences between she and her peers left her feeling socially isolated, these conditions ultimately allowed her to begin to gain a different understanding of herself. Through creative writing, reading theorists—including Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, George Bataille, Luce Irigaray, and others she described as her “white German hole”—and participating in performance debate, Huxtable began to evolve her performance style.<sup>5</sup>

After graduation, having completed her senior project on Simone de Beauvoir, Huxtable moved to New York City in 2010, supporting herself as a legal assistant at the American Civil Liberties Union for two and a half years. While there, she escaped the doldrums of office life through Tumblr and listening to music mixes for more than 20 hours a week while at her desk. The first instance of her current style of writing for performances came when artist Stewart Uoo invited her to write the press release for his 2012 show at Canal 47, an art gallery on the Lower East Side.<sup>6</sup> Huxtable wrote two texts, one a more traditional essay and the other an impulsive response to the show titled “Life Is Juicy.” Uoo selected the more experimental text, and with that support and encouragement Huxtable came to build on this model of writing. In addition to impulsive responses to online encounters and discoveries, Huxtable was heavily influenced by Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), expressing a

proclivity for its drama, dreamlike sequences, and surreal scenes.<sup>7</sup> While Internet outlets exposed her to the work of different writers and artists, they more importantly served as vehicles for the primary modes of artistry that have become the core constituents of her work: written text, self-portraits, and video and music experiments.

Huxtable's trajectory illumines key moments in which we can situate her artistic development, specifically in light of cultural theorist Sianne Ngai's understanding of cute—and what I am for now superimposing with *kewt*—as “the subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object.”<sup>8</sup> Cute, for Ngai, is reactive, an aesthetic response to a particular social position, one that presences itself as minor, subaltern, and weak. Accordingly, we recognize the cute through typically amplified feminine tropes in art and culture, realized through problematic symbols of powerlessness, such as particular modes of speech, high emotion, and seduction. In other words, cute is an expression of willed vulnerability and available submission; however, the cute performs the very desire it seeks.<sup>9</sup>

This desire reinforces the gap between the viewer of the performance and the artist/work of art. In *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*, and possibly throughout Huxtable's work, *kewt* is expressed in a multitude of self-knowing ways. It is reflected in the manner in which Huxtable comports herself in relation to her viewers, literally the making-object of herself. In so doing, she offers up the intersection of race, gender, and queerness for the gaze of others, which points to the longstanding, problematic history of representation of such subjects—which has been redressed in vastly different ways by artists such as Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, Wangechi Mutu, Lorna Simpson, and Tracey Rose, to name only a few. This sly self-object-making move, or *kewt*-being, forces viewers to engage with their own feelings about Huxtable's playful significations of, for instance, femininity, which is to say all the socially constructed, embodied symbols that have operated to render them minor. In Huxtable's public demonstration of becoming-minor, the viewer becomes cannily aware that more is quite literally at play; Huxtable simultaneously flips this position while enacting it. She is reacting to a specific set of conditions realized in the very execution of the performance and in the broader world in which it takes part. Further, Huxtable's approach to her “archive”—all the myriad source materials for her texts and performances—renders these references *kewt*. The narratives that we categorize as historical fact are not merely questioned but approached as minor, negligible, and trivial. Huxtable makes history submit.

Here it is useful to comment on the proliferation of a strikingly broad range of people who have seemingly drawn Huxtable as a figure *in art*, as opposed to the

artwork itself. A cursory review of her press clippings reveals an overwhelming number of references to her as a model or muse, as oppose to what she is: an artist. In this context, we can better understand her artistic choices in performance, particularly the affective registers of alienation in her slightly bored, distant voice, and her use of the papers she reads from as a kind of shield from direct encounter—despite the fact that she is *there*, ostensibly performing for the viewer and thereby available for our sensual (visual, aural, etc.) consumption. Huxtable's live presence, a thoroughly mediated encounter, is mimetic of online interfaces—literally the ways in which the screen filters our digital experiences, mitigates cyberspace encounters, and is the primary (self)-reflective surface for the banal and the spectacular alike—through which she first began to create and disseminate her art. She beckons, while simultaneously estranging. One can only get but so close, and any sense of proximity is already, always, a fantasy, a total projection of one's own imagination. This is to say that the performance itself is a highly fantastical, sensually enveloping wonderland. Nevertheless, vital to understanding Huxtable's performance is the fact that the alienated viewer is just as responsible for creating this world through projections of a desire that animates the encounter as Huxtable is for creating the conditions for its emergence. The performance is a vector wherein the viewer, sensually compressed—both fulfilled and denied by Huxtable's coolness—responds to such exertions of soft power<sup>10</sup> with an overwhelming desire not to merely watch but to rapturously consume, wanting to have, wanting to be like, wanting to be with.<sup>11</sup>

As Ngai points out, “cute” is “acute” through aphaeresis, a linguistic process “by which words lose initial unstressed syllables to generate shorter and ‘cuter’ versions of themselves.”<sup>12</sup> That “force” (a coming to a sharp edge or point) is fundamentally related to “cute” (the most “objectified of things”) makes clear that the inherent relation of power to cuteness “is thus the name of an encounter with difference—a perceived difference...that does something to everyday communicative speech.”<sup>13</sup> Juridical and judicial advances for LGBTQI people in the U.S. have been a long time coming. Though as it relates to the trans community, there now lurks a kind of cultural fascination we can approximate to the fetish. Here we can truly contemplate the stride from cute to kewt in the fetish's contingent encounter with the cute and its historical relation to discourses on beauty, which is haunted by Immanuel Kant. We can also mark the shift whereas the fetish (especially as it relates to popular culture), with its foundational constitution in power and eccentricities, is equally ghosted by G. W. F. Hegel's total inability to value cultures of Africa.

Much as camp and kitsch negate the typical moral and aesthetic judgments assigned to beauty by philosophers of the *nature* of art, Huxtable's kewt art is an uncontainable expression unconcerned with symmetry, proportion, taste, or any other preordained delineation of what has been deemed beautiful in the historical arc of Western aesthetics. If anything, her work reveals the ways in which the project of aesthetic assessment is challenged, if not found entirely inadequate, when pressed through the vector of her imagination. Perhaps this is most substantially conveyed in the distinction between so-called high and low culture, and Huxtable's disavowal of formalisms in art for the power of quotidian speech and pop culture references—but not the kinds one might expect. For the everyday lexicon of queer communities of color is extra-being, maximal, fifth-dimensional. The overall sensibility is more hieroglyphic, or rather, the hieroglyph as thought image, animating the ways in which minor aesthetics like kewt amplify psychic structures, distorting image, language, and style to such an extent as to emphasize and create emotional responses to feelings, ideas, and moods in the work.

Because the degree of our femininity has always been questioned (at best), black women tend to be spared stereotypical representations as girly girls or swooning women. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “as we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.”<sup>14</sup> She continues, “for each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, ‘beautiful/ and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness and of importance’.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that Huxtable traffics in such motifs lends her work a transgressive sensibility; she plays with these tropes and, in so doing, casts a far darker shadow upon them. In this instance, kewt asserts itself with a confidence, as an “artistic hegemony,” transforming “transgressive subjects into beloved objects... it exaggerates social difference.”<sup>16</sup> Betwixt the affection and aversion to these tropes the tension is heightened not just by the discomfort that comes with recognition of the stereotyped female, but also through the media, for “all art in an age of high tech simulacra and media (performance) spectacles” incites double the response.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, more than speech acts, Huxtable's performance, as we experience it, does not merely hold space and time; it is its own suspended space and anachronistic time.

Huxtable's alter dimension, wavering between the manic and the hypnagogic, is situated in nightlife as much as it is online. In this vein, it is reminiscent of the work of artists such as Alvin Baltrop, Nelson Sullivan, Andy Warhol, and Vaginal Davis, inasmuch



**Figure 2.** Juliana Huxtable. *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*. The Museum of Modern Art, November 2015. Pictured: Juliana Huxtable and Sadaf H Nava. Photograph © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Julieta Cervantes

as these “scenes” are core elements of their everyday lives and are mediated through media of their times, such as photography, video, film, and zines. Nightlife is where community is coalesced and expressed. Indeed, Huxtable met her collaborators on *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*, including Mitch Moore (video), Elysia Crampton (sound), Sadaf H Nava (violin and vocals), Joe Heffernan (drums and piano), and Michael Potvin (laser projection and lights), in nightlife, where she is known for setting the pace as a personality and a DJ.

Since her arrival in New York City, Huxtable has navigated between the downtown art world of the Lower East Side and a “very brown and queer” community. A scene that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in writing about blackness and queer futurity, would recognize as a commons where “recognition across antagonisms within the social such as sex, race, and still other modalities of difference” is possible.<sup>18</sup> This is especially resonant in Huxtable’s relationship with The House of LaDosha, a family in the sense of black and Latino voguing houses and a 21st-century phenomenon that traverses music, visual art, and fashion. It is as part of the LaDosha crew that

Huxtable was given her name—a nod to her intellectual exchanges and bougie aspirations, taken from the family surname on *The Cosby Show*—when she joined six months after arriving in the city. Huxtable has said of Antonio Blair, aka Doshia Devastation, whom she has known since college, “we get each other’s place in the world.”<sup>19</sup>

While I have been interchangeably using *kewt* and *cute* up to this point, remarking through Ngai the instances in which they are mutually constituted in Huxtable’s art, it is also necessary to elucidate the characteristics that extend beyond their commonalities in order to somehow grasp this “place in the world” on which Huxtable remarks. If *cute* is in a minor aesthetic register, one can think of *kewt* as a kind of micro- or minor-minor aesthetic. Which is not to say “less than”—in this sense it approximates what German Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch, in writing on art and utopia, described as “an intensification of small things.”<sup>20</sup> Huxtable’s *small* is to be understood not in terms of scale but in the context of a set of relations to power, as perceived and experienced from the vantage point of what Lorde called “the shadows.” In this sense, the minor addresses a black and queer

artist, a scene situated in nightlife, a promiscuous culling from popular, digital, and underworld cultures that is intensified through the assembly of a range of forces put to work to express a way of being of the world. Namely, the minor-scene is a community that fortifies such a reality, mining and (re)assemblage-ing images and language from overlooked corridors of history, employing fantasy (online and live) to highlight the absurd aspects of everyday life and to reveal some possibilities for one's escape.

This minor-scene intersects, with cute/kewt along one axis and the fetish/ornament on the other. There is an extensive art-historical discourse on the ornament that is impossible to fully outline here, but I do want to point to the set of circumstances involving performances of power through which it evolves. The ornament is an accumulation of refractions from myriad cultures, and these "borrowings" are possible because of encounters that have occurred as a result of demonstrations of social and cultural power.<sup>21</sup>

Huxtable's creative process for the performance approaches the very tenets of the ornamental as a form, inasmuch as it "rarely undergoes development to the point at which it loses resemblance to its original in nature so long as the latter has a magic or traditional significance or symbolism, or is common and familiar in fact."<sup>22</sup> Further, her approach follows the ways in which "an originally natural form undergoes such ornamental development as to lose its objective resemblance, it is an indication either that the original significance and symbolism have been lost or that the form is a foreign one which has been borrowed in fashionable emulation by a people for whom it has no significance or existence other than as a purely ornamental motive."<sup>23</sup> This move to displace the certitude of history and cultural references, notably in Huxtable's tracing of humankind, national historical icons and symbols, as well as their afterlife in the digital realm, mimics the ornament's abstraction in its general usage and visual and textual qualities. The artist traverses one epoch to the next, divulging how the ornamental, in its proliferation and circulation, becomes a generalization of its earliest incarnation, which is not to say that it is a reduction of the "original." However, the ornament's performance, and by extension Huxtable's as well, is one of luxuriant excess, lavish surplus, and exorbitant nimiety—kewt.

While the fetish, like the ornament, arises from the intermingling of societies and their culture (and also has an extensive and diverse discourse), it is most useful to turn to the historical paradigm in which the fetish emerged. Anthropologist William Pietz describes the origins of the fetish, which evolved in "the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth century."<sup>24</sup> What is appropriated in the ornament and abstracted over time is a result of political and military dominance of one culture over

another. While the fetish circulates within a similar power dynamic, it does so differently, which in Huxtable's commission manifests in references to queer life, Egyptology, and black nationalism. The fetish is a perception, a manufactured projection of extreme otherness, which, rather than subsume an image or object, is a profound negation of it. The fetish is of a "sinister pedigree," deriving from the encounter between "radically heterogeneous worlds...triangulated among Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems."<sup>25</sup> Huxtable's art is imbued with and expresses its own internal power, a radical, vibrant matter. The performance is a container for her will, motives, and aesthetic choices.

In the context of psychoanalysis, Huxtable departs from Sigmund Freud's analysis of fetishism<sup>26</sup> through Elizabeth Grosz's writings on lesbian fetishism. In this instance, disavowal works as a refusal to accept a subordinated status such that social change becomes possible because of a negation of social reality through the subversion of play.

For example, *There Are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed* directly mirrors the very mode and means through which we incessantly use the digital. It is the scene/screen portal for our self-indulgent will. We navigate and access the live event with the same individually directed, solipsistic desire. In this private-yet-public encounter, the performance becomes more than an extension of the self, it is relished and beheld as of the self, a self-producing, self-affirming armature that works both ways for the artist and for the viewer/consumer.

The ornament, though having a sexual dimension like the fetish (in psychological discourse, at least), lacks the overtly sinister, deviant characteristics attributed to "fetish." However, the ways in which the ornament functions as a visual reproduction of power and dominance, through an absolute absorption and incessant circulation of the image, both articulates and enacts social and cultural norms. In this configuration, the vexing evolution of décor approximates itself more closely to the fetish, seeming and being made to seem malevolent because its reproductive quality is embedded with the potential, and therefore the capacity, to circulate norms and accumulate their impressions.

Huxtable reveals how the ornament and the fetish indicate an inherent magical power in their images and objects. However, in the context of its performance in relation to "traditional significance and symbolism," the ornament can have it both ways. On the one hand, as I have already mentioned, the ornament's accumulation of "magical power" is possible only to extent that it remains relevant to a society. On the other, the ornament, which has fallen out of favor or retains no use value as a magic object, becomes an abstraction. This is the quality that gives Huxtable's performance incredible levity. It is an assertion of

power, or more precisely a Nietzschean will to power, that asserts a claim through complex asymmetries and violent ruptures, swerving history into the contemporary moment in a tale of sublime recognition. The performance is the moment when vulnerability or an offering up of the self makes such recognition possible, if only to foreclose the possibility of destruction, a likely outcome of unchecked consumption. This is especially imperative in a space/time where blackness and queerness embrace, and their amalgamation necessitates unbound imagination, determined perseverance, and unlimited support for someone who has been sent by history to stake a claim of her own in the now.

For José Esteban Muñoz.

*Adrienne Edwards is a curator, scholar, and writer with a focus on artists of the African diaspora and the global South. She is Curator at Performa and also a PhD candidate in performance studies at New York University, where she is a Corrigan Doctoral Fellow. Edwards's research incorporates visual and time-based art, experimental dance, critical race theory, feminist theory, and post-structuralist philosophy. She has curated and co-organized performances and exhibitions with numerous artists, including Rashid Johnson, Dave McKenzie, Senga Nengudi, Clifford Owens, Benjamin Patterson, Carrie Mae Weems, Edgar Arceneaux, Jonathas de Andrade, Derrick Adams, Laura Lima, Chimurenga, Terry Adkins, Ahmet Öğüt, Juliana Huxtable, Will Rawls, Zheng Mahler, and Pope.L, among others. Edwards is a contributor to many monographic and thematic exhibition catalogues, writing on the work of Ralph Lemon, Wangechi Mutu, Carrie Mae Weems, and Adam Pendleton, and for The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Museum of Modern Art, High Line Art, and Performa, as well as the art journals Artforum, Art in America, Aperture, SeLect Brazil, and Spike Art Quarterly.*

*Edited by Martha Joseph and Jason Persse.*

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*Organized by Stuart Comer, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art, MoMA, and Adrienne Edwards, Curator, Performa, with Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art, MoMA.*

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- 1 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 38
- 2 "Minor aesthetics" references principles that concern, guide, and operate differently, meaning often outside of, the normative formulation of beauty in philosophical discourse on art. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming-minority, which reveals its emergence through affect, "minor" marks, first, the will to identify with, or more precisely, to be in relation with, a particular collective of beings, and, second, an ethical imperative to possess and exert the right to create expressions capable of marking such relations and the conditions through which they evolve and with which they must contend in asserting their value. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 469-471.
- 3 Juliana Huxtable, interview by author, Brooklyn, New York, October 12, 2015
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54
- 9 Ibid., 67
- 10 American scholar Joseph Nye's political analysis defines the concept of soft power as a method of persuasion that leverages allure, attraction, and appeal rather than force, violence, and coercion.
- 11 Ngai, 67
- 12 Ibid., 87
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Lorde, 36
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ngai, 58, 60
- 17 Ibid., 59
- 18 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 93
- 19 Juliana Huxtable, interview by author, Brooklyn, New York, October 12, 2015
- 20 Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 102
- 21 William M. Ivins, Jr., "The Philosophy of the Ornament" in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 5, May 1933, 94
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 William Pietz, "The problem of the fetish, I," *RES* 9, Spring 1985, 5
- 25 Ibid., 6
- 26 Freud formulates the concept of the sexual fetish as a distinctly male phenomenon that arises at the moment of recognition of the mother's lack of a penis, and thus the recognition of the possibility of castration. The male who does not adjust—that is, does not overcome the fear of female genitalia and make it an object of desire—seeks substitutes, a repetitive act that marks the desire to overcome the threat of castration and protection from it, as well as a memorial for the perceived loss of the mother's penis.