Radical Sense
Isolation Reader Volume 8

2022

poetry press release for unrealized show (“The Last Airdancer”)

Foucault definitely loved gloryholes
His bathroom stall scribbles were always illegible
One part of governance is erotics
The erotics of boredom and anxiety
No-one wants negative critique at their opening
How you fog up the mirror just to finger your name onto it
This lube only works on social justice warriors
Your sneakers light up when you’re racist
The constant light guides you
So Europe can continue
Here in its tendrils where you stole nothing
Not even nothing
You can’t even imagine giving it back
Nihilists don’t realize it doesn’t matter that nothing matters
But I have an empathy gap toward white people
And under gender coloniality
The state itself gets latched onto the genital Everything subsumed into holes and pricks This American pornographic Victorianism
Like those Gustonish Lee Lozano tool paintings
Closing your eyes is not the beginning of theory
Some say everyone dreams of fucking the dictator In reality sex is completely illegal
The only kinks are sneeze fetishes and minions
But the only way to say I love you is with fisting
A lie is not only a lie
Trump’s micropenis does not absolve you
Your performative divestment is escapism
I come to you with dreams of a cleaner kind of valve
A value without value
Dick like bonsai
No ghost ever sold away her iPod
We let our stomachs get all full of plastic
White emo band says blood is the last ocean
Foucault rushes in, fresh out the shower
In his bathrobe like on the cover of a book
His bullet head, tweed face
My beard flush with his kisses
Home is not only a disciplinary mechanism, he says
Would you ever order a Real Doll of yourself?

Revolutionary Force:
Connecting Desire to Reality

Our language evolves from a culture that abhors anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person who is speaking or listening. Consequently, there is no passive voice construction possible . . . every sentence insists on the living and active participation of at least two human beings, the speaker and the listener.

June Jordan

It may well be that on the plane of "life," there is but a totality where structures and forms cannot be separated. But science has no use for the ineffable: it must speak about "life" if it wants to transform it.

Roland Barthes

The only way we can [fight oppression] is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting.

Audre Lorde

In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-western aesthetics while critiquing western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and blanked out realities while critiquing rational consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous languages while critiquing the languages of the dominant cultures.

Gloria Anzaldúa

I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing.

Bernice Johnson Reagon

New Citizen-Subjects: Michel Foucault

Many twentieth-century prophets predicted a revolutionary form of human who rises from the ruins of previous social orders: from Fanon and Césaire to Bhabha and Said; from Haraway and de Lauretis to Anzaldúa and Lorde, the list goes on.[1] The vision of this new being in the passage that follows emerges from the 1966 mind of Michel Foucault. The psychic landscape Foucault describes in the following passage images the cultural terminations and beginnings that typify postmodernism globalization, the end of "Western man," the homogenization of difference, and some other, utopian, decolonizing zone as well:

> And yet the impression of fulfillment and of end . . . something we glimpse only as a thin line of light low on the horizon — that feeling and that impression are perhaps not ill founded. . . . It will be said that Hölderlin, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx all felt this certainty that in them a thought and perhaps a culture were coming to a close, and that . . . another was approaching — in the dim light of dawn, in the brilliance of noon, or in the dissension of the falling day. But this close, this perilous imminence whose promise we fear today, whose danger we welcome, is probably not of the same order. . . . In our day . . . it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man . . . man has "come to an end," and that by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him . . . new gods, the same gods, are already swelling the future Ocean; man will disappear.[2]

Ten years later (and one year before his death) Foucault challenged historians, philosophers, and critical and cultural scholars alike by asserting that the "most certain" of all contemporary philosophical problems is "the problem of the present time—of what we are, in this very moment."[3] His suggestion for how the citizen-subject should behave in relation to globalizing cultural dynamics was clear: in order to allow for the emergence of a liberatory "something else," Foucault predicted nothing less than the self-deconstitution of (Western) man.[4] The target of our attention under postmodern cultural conditions, he claimed, is "not to discover what we are, but to *refuse* what we are." At the same time, we must learn how to "promote new forms of subjectivity," he advises. But the generation of new kinds of citizen-subjects can happen only when we become capable of refusing "the kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries."[5] To self-reflexively refuse one's own sense of "individuality," of identity, is not an easy task—but this is the content of the emancipatory work that Foucault believed was necessary.

Such questions of identity have hovered on the academic horizon for decades and determined much scholarly writing in journals and books. Little of this discussion, however, has been accomplished for the sake of bringing about the kind of self-reflexive psychic transformations for which Foucault is agitating.[6] Like Foucault, for example, Fredric Jameson also senses the presence of new subjectivities coalescing under the pressures of postmodern globalizing conditions. Jameson cringes at this new emergence, however, which for him represents another horrifying effect of a world gone mad, a world that produces schizophrenic citizen-subjects who take in every new experience with the exhilaration of difference, but who are not capable of discerning the differences that matter in terms of organizing a more egalitarian and just human order. Jameson's despair is that there is no way to make effective interventions, no way to rechart subjectivity in an advanced capitalist cultural machine that desires our interventions to feed its machinations. Jameson's position is that there are no strategic interventions to be made, only horror to be felt in the recognition of a living cultural pathology—schizophrenic in nature—which we must all partake of eventually, or remain in the netherworld of detachment, unable to feel a part of social life at all. For Jameson, neocolonial postmodernism seduces through a form of insanity appropriate to the twenty-first century that is being generalized to a point of normality. But Foucault at the end of his life is less interested in the desires of the cultural order; his interests are in the desires of the citizen-subject: this shift in focus and interest makes all the difference.

Periodizing Resistance

Resistance is the unspecified term that lies outside the binary configuration of domination and subordination—yet form of resistance is only effective insofar as it is specifically related to the forms of domination and subordination that are currently in place. Foucault and Jameson agree that a new, global decolonizing collective project of resistance can be best advanced through understanding the configurations of power that operated in the historical periods just prior to our own time. According to Jameson, the most important manifestations of power occurred under the two previous moments of capitalism: small-market capitalism and monopoly (or imperialist) capitalism.[7] Jameson considers the transnational, postmodern stage of capitalism we now inhabit as the contemporary and third stage of capitalist development.[8] Crucial to understanding the desperation that drives Jameson's theoretical apparatus is the understanding that the first two stages have culminated in the current sci-fi moment of postmodernism wherein the "underside of culture is death," violence, and horror,[9] and the possibility of resistance lies only as faint hope on the rising "dystopian horizon" of transnational capitalism.[10] For Foucault, alternately, resistance is possible and already present, even if its existence circulates in heretofore unrecognizable forms.

Like Jameson, Michel Foucault situates our present moment in history by outlining its differences from two historical stages that preceded it. But Foucault wants to compare contemporary cultural conditions (which he leaves unnamed) to two more broadly defined previous modes of social organization that matter—feudalism and capitalism. Each of these historical periods expresses its own predominant modes of domination, subordination, and resistance. Today, he believes, citizen-subjects who are interested in generating effective modes of resistance capable of confronting neocolonial postmodernism must first recognize the fact that much of our perceptual apparatuses and tactics for action are based on past, outmoded yet residual conceptions of power and resistance.

The two most previous modes for organizing Western social order—feudalism and capitalism—each generated very different approaches for understanding and resisting power. Under feudalism, for instance, Foucault writes that struggles "against forms of ethnic (religious) or social domination were prevalent."[11] Under capitalism, however, a shift occurs so that "the Marxist struggle against exploitation (e.g., that which separates individuals from what they produce) came into the foreground."[12] In the twentieth century, and primarily in industrialized first world nations, a third form of social organization and its concomitant forms of dom-

inations and subordinations has emerged so that, in Foucault's view, a third form of resistance has necessarily developed. This new predominant mode of resistance occurs, writes Foucault, in the form of a political "struggle against the forms of subjection—against the submission of subjectivity—against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way.[13] Foucault wants us to recognize the revolutionary and unique character of this third mode of resistance.

Every social order structured around domination and subordination releases power relations that crush citizen-subjects into positionalities, escape from which only certain kinds of resistances prove effective.[14] But whether a social order is predominantly feudal, market-capitalist, monopoly-capitalist, or postmodern in function, theorists across disciplinary divides can agree generally that the first world during the late twentieth century experienced a great social, economic, and political divide—a mutation that has transfigured the kinds of powers, dominations, subordinations, and resistances that can be constituted. For Jameson, this mutation resulted in a "cultural pathology" that produces in the citizen-subject a hysterical exhilaration akin to schizophrenia, out of which effective forms of oppositional consciousness are unlikely to rise. Foucault, however, perceives this great new cultural and social mutation that is postmodernism as helping to saturate all citizen-subjects with forms of oppositional consciousness that are capable of confronting the most psychically intrusive forms of domination and subordination yet devised. Both thinkers understand that the forces released by this third-stage transmutation of cultural economics are saturating the psyche of the individual citizen-subject in a new kind of power.

Refusing Fascism with Foucault

This new kind of power, Foucault warns, "applies itself to immediate everyday life, categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him."[15] This is how postmodern powers turn individuals into subjects—citizen-subjects. There are two meanings of the word SUBJECT, Foucault continues, "subject to someone else" by control and dependence, or being "tied" to ones' own identity through "conscience or self-knowledge." Both meanings suggest a form of power that "subjugates and makes subject to." But, unlike Jameson (or Althusser, for that matter), Foucault does not recognize this form of power to be fundamentally *de*humanizing—*de*individualizing. Rather, this immersion of the state's apparatus into every aspect of the individual citizen-subject's life and

into the very structuring of the psyche has allowed, Foucault thinks, the development of a new kind of resistant and "oppositional" individual who could never have been produced under earlier forms of Western social organization.

Before the citizen-subject's birth into the social world, the intersections of race, culture, sex, gender, class, and social powers are already locating in order to provide a particular space to hold that individual, to pattern the kind of subjectivity it will be permitted. From the moment of its birth, the citizen-subject becomes regulated, branded, and shaped, the first world ideological apparatus imbricated through its subjectivity in a novel and, we might say, more total way than ever before. First world citizen-subjects take pride in their "freedom" of movement and speech, their activities trusted—as "good citizens"—to replicate the social order and its hierarchizations, usually without the necessary imposition of directly brutal state force. From the vantage point of Foucault's analysis, the first world citizen-subject who is wholly incorporated in the (post)modern state might well envy the largely unincorporated subjective spaces that still survive around certain populations living under more feudal or earlier capitalist forms of domination, who, in spite of the subordinations under which they live, are still "free" from the overwhelming determinations that influence the subjective spaces of neocolonized postmodern first world citizen-subjects. The problematics of postmodern transnational globalization are of a special nature in relation to consciousness and the status of first world citizen-subjects, Foucault thinks. That is why he advises such citizen-subjects to recognize that the "political, ethical, social, and philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us . . . from the type of individualization which is linked to the state."

This nature of this "liberation" must be of a different order than that struggled for under previous modes of social organization. It will require, Foucault insists, that we "promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the kind of individuality which has been imposed on us."[16] Citizen-subjects have become so surrounded and "trapped" in our own histories of domination, fear, pain, hatred, and hierarchy that the strategic adversary under postmodern times has become our own sense of self.[17] Unlike "enemies" under feudal or capitalist eras, the major enemy to face during our own time has infiltrated every citizen-subject's body. What we must face, writes Foucault, is that the structure of this internalized form of everyday being is fascist. And there is "fascism in us all," he continues, "in our heads and in our everyday behavior." It is this internalized fascism that "causes us to love power," so that we now "desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us." Foucault challenges all citizen-subjects of every social class who live under neo-colonial post-

modernism to answer the following questions: "How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior?"[18]

Principles of Politically Revolutionary Love and Desire: Anti-Postmodernism, Deindividualization

These questions can be answered through understanding and applying the principles below, which, in Foucault's view generate access to politically revolutionary love, desire, and resistance. Taken together, these principles represent a new model for political action in resistance that is effective under postmodern cultural conditions: their enactment creates an oppositional and differential form of consciousness. The kinds of affinities and coalition building that these principles promote undo fascism by grounding identity differently than ever before. Foucault was concerned to point out that the forces of transnational capitalism inspired this "developing movement toward political struggle" which "no longer conforms" to any previous struggle for emancipation in history—Marxist or otherwise (xii). This social and identity movement is generating a new form of oppositional consciousness that inspires in its practitioners what Foucault describes as an unprecedented "experience and a technology of desire" (ibid.). Even though today, he continues, "old banners" of political resistance and identity are still "raised," ideological combat has already "shifted and spread" into "new zones" that can undo fascism—new zones of oppositional consciousness (ibid.). The principles below of political desire, love, and resistance should "motivate us to go further," Foucault hopes, in developing this new, "anti-postmodern," antifascist, and anticolonial oppositional consciousness and praxis (xiii). These principles puncture through the contingencies of everyday life, and provide access to that other reality with so many names and technologies, the differential place of consciousness.

This new social movement is infused with what Foucault calls a "desire" capable of driving the body and the will beyond their limits. Desire permeates being of all kinds, he writes, being-in-resistance as well as being in-domination. Indeed, it is desire, Foucault thinks, that drives, focuses, and permeates all human activity. What is required, then, is to reinforce an experience and technology of *desire-in-resistance* that can permit oppositional actors to move—as Audre Lorde puts it—"erotically" through power.[19] Foucault adds this ingredient to the hermeneutic of love we are constructing by asking, and answering, the following question: "How can and must desire deploy its forces within the political domain, and grow more intense in the process of overturning the established order? *Ars erotica, ars theoretica*,

ars politica" (xii). He provides the following schema to permit this unprecedented politics of desire, a schema focused and driven by concrete principles that can "guide" oppositional agents in "the art" of countering "all forms" of fascism: "the fascism in our behavior, the fascism in our hearts" (xiii). These principles are Foucault's contribution to a uniquely politicized (and "differential") form of social and psychic opposition to authoritarian postmodern global powers. They cut right to the chase, and are "less concerned with *why* this or that than with *how*" to proceed (xii):

- Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia.
- Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization.
- Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flow over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
- Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.
- Do not use thought to ground a political practice in Truth; nor political action to discredit, as mere speculation, a line of thought. Use political practice as an intensifier of thought, and analysis as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action.
- Do not demand of politics that it restore the "rights" of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to "deindividualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals but a constant generator of *deindividualization*.
- Do not become enamored of power. (xiii; my emphasis)

Oppositional Cyber-Consciousness, Feminists of Color, and Revolutionary Politics: Donna Haraway

This book ends in its own chiasmus by examining the connections of feminist theory to U.S. third world feminism, theories of globalization, de- and postcoloniality, and all of these are related to the methodology of the oppressed. This chapter studies these theoretical sites as they influence the work by a contemporary philosopher of science. Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" is one of the most highly circulated essays written in the late twentieth century on the relations between science, technology, and revolutionary feminist politics. The manifesto might best be described its own terms—it is a "theorized and fabricated hybrid," a textual "machine," and a "fiction" that maps and locates "our social and bodily reality." But make no mistake, these are also the terms that Haraway uses in order to describe and ensure the development of a revolutionary form of human being, a creature who lives in both "social reality" and "fiction," and who performs and speaks in a "middle voice" that is forged in the amalgam of technology and biology—a cyborg-poet.[20]

This vision standing at the center of Haraway's imaginary is a "monstrous" image; for this new creature is the "illegitimate" child of human and machine, science and technology, dominant society and oppositional social movement, male and female, "first" and "third" worlds—indeed, of every binary. It is a being whose hybridity challenges all binary oppositions and every desire for wholeness, she claims, in the very way "blasphemy" challenges the body of religion (149). Haraway's blasphemy is a twenty-first-century being that reproaches, challenges, transforms, and shocks. But perhaps the greatest shock in this feminist theory of cyborg politics has taken place in the corridors of women's studies, where Haraway's model has acted as a transcoding device, a technology that has translated the fundamental precepts of differential U.S. third world feminist criticism into categories comprehensible under the jurisdictions of feminist, cultural, and critical theory.

Haraway has been very clear about the intellectual lineages and alliances of the propositions she named "cyborg theory." As she writes in her introduction to *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), one primary aim of her work is equivalent to a central aim of U.S. third world feminist criticism, which is the "breakup of versions of Euro-American feminist humanism in their devastating assumptions of master narratives deeply indebted to racism and colonialism."[21] Her second aim is to propose a new technopolitics and form of being. Cyborg feminism will be "more able" than racist feminisms of earlier times, she writes, to "remain attuned to specific historical and political positionings and permanent partialities without abandoning

the search for potent connections."[22] Through these aims, the structures of cyborg feminism become one with those of differential U.S. third world feminism.

Indeed, Haraway's cyborg feminism was conceived as a way to join the efforts of U.S. feminists of color in challenging what Haraway herself has identified as hegemonic feminism's "unreflective participation in the logics, languages, and practices of white humanism," insofar as white feminism tended to search "for a single ground of domination" by which to "secure our revolutionary voice" as women (160). The feminist theory produced since 1968 "by women of color," Haraway asserts, has developed "alternative discourses of womanhood," and these discourses have disrupted "the humanisms of many Western discursive traditions."[23] Haraway's statements demonstrate her strong political alliances with feminists of color, so it makes sense that Haraway should turn to differential U.S. third world feminism for help in modeling a revolutionary form of human body and consciousness capable of challenging "the networks" and "informatics" of postmodern social realities.

As she lays the foundations for her theory of science, technology, and oppositional politics in the postmodern world, Haraway thus recognizes and reckons with differential U.S. third world feminist criticism in ways that other scholars have been unable to. Remaining clear on the issue of cyborg feminist theory's intellectual lineages and alliances, Haraway writes:

> White women, including socialist feminists, discovered (that is, were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category "woman." That consciousness changes the geography of all previous categories; it denatures them as heat denatures a fragile protein. Cyborg feminists have to argue that "we" do not want any more natural matrix of unity, and that no construction is whole. (157)[24]

But to recognize that "no construction is whole" is not enough to stop internalized and externalized forms of authoritarianism—of fascism. Much of Haraway's work thus has been to identify the technical *skills* required for producing a dissident global movement and human being that are capable of generating egalitarian and just social relations. The skills she identifies are equivalent to the technologies I have identified in this book as the methodology of the oppressed.

Radical *Mestizaje*

It is no accident of metaphor that Haraway's theoretical formulations are woven through with terminologies and techniques from U.S. third world cultural forms, from Native American categories of "trickster" and "coyote" being (199), to *mestizaje*,

through to the category of "women of color" itself, until the body of the oppositional cyborg becomes wholly articulated with the material and psychic positionings of differential U.S. third world feminism.[25] Like the "mestiza consciousness" described and defined under U.S. third world feminism, which, as Anzaldúa explains, arises "on borders and in margins" where feminists of color keep "intact shifting and multiple identities" with "integrity" and "love," the cyborg of Haraway's manifesto is also "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity" (151). In this equivalent alignment, Haraway's feminist cyborgs can be recognized (like agents of U.S. third world feminism) as the "illegitimate offspring" of militaristic "patriarchal capitalism" (ibid.). So too are feminist cyborg weapons and the weapons of U.S. third world feminism similar: "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities" (154). Indeed, Haraway's cyborg textual machine generates a methodology that runs parallel to that of differential U.S. third world feminist criticism. Thus, insofar as Haraway's work became influential in feminist studies, her oppositional cyborgology helped to bring hegemonic feminist theory into alignment with theories of indigenous resistance, *mestizaje* understood as a critical apparatus, the differential form of U.S. third world feminism, and the methodology of the oppressed.[26]

The alignment between U.S. hegemonic feminism and U.S. third world feminism clicks into place at the point when Haraway provides a doubled vision of a "cyborg world," as seen in the passage below. The "cyborg" world of neocolonial postmodernism, she believes, can be understood either as the culmination of a Euro-American "white," masculinist society in its drive for mastery, on the one side, or, on the other, as the material manifestation of such resistant "indigenous" worldviews as *mestizaje*, U.S. third world feminism, or cyborg feminism.[27] Haraway writes:

> A cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. *From another perspective* a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their *joint kinship* with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. (154; my emphasis)

The important notion of "joint kinship" here is analogous to that called for in contemporary indigenous writings in which tribes or lineages are identified out of those who share, not bloodlines, but rather lines of affinity. Such lines of affinity occur through attraction, combination, and relation carved out of and in spite of

difference. They are what comprise the mode of radical *mestizaje* called for in the works of U.S. scholars of color, as in the following 1982 example. Here Alice Walker asks U.S. black liberationists to recognize themselves as mestizos:

> We are the African *and* the trader. We are the Indian *and* the Settler. We are oppressor *and* oppressed . . . we are the *mestizos* of North America. We are black, yes, but we are "white," too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness: "white" people have shown us the madness of that.[28]

The kind of radical *mestizaje* referred to in this passage and elsewhere can be understood as a complex kind of love in the postmodern world, where love is understood as affinity—alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body. Walker understands "psychic illness" as the attempt to be "one"—like the singularity of Barthes's narrative love that controls all meanings through the medium of the couple in love. The function of *mestizaje* in Walker's vision is more like that of Barthes's "prophetic love," where subjectivity becomes freed from ideology as it ties and binds reality. Prophetic love undoes the "one" that gathers the narrative, the couple, the race, into a singularity. Instead, prophetic love gathers up the *mezcla*, the mixture that lives through *differential movement* between possibilities of being. This is the kind of "love" that motivates U.S. third world feminist *mestizaje* understood as the differential theory and method of oppositional consciousness, what Anzaldúa has theorized as *la conciencia de la mestiza*, or the consciousness of the "Borderlands."[29]

Haraway weaves these U.S. third world feminist commitments to affinity through difference into her model for an oppositional cyborg feminism. In so doing, she provides yet another mapping of the differential theory and method of oppositional consciousness that is comprised of the technologies of the methodology of the oppressed.[30] In Haraway's version, oppositional cyborgism does not view differences and their corresponding "pictures of the world" relativistically (190), that is, as "allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability."[31] Such anarchistic mobility is not enough. Instead, Haraway believes, differences should be seen as instances of the "elaborate specificity" and the "loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another point of view" (ibid.). Haraway's example is provided in the differential writings by U.S. feminists of color whose hope and vision is not grounded on their own belief in some "original innocence (or the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness" or oneness). The power of their writings, she continues, is derived from their insistence on the possibilities of affinity through

difference—of differential consciousness enacted as a method of racial *mestizaje*—which allows for the guided use of any tool at one's disposal in order to ensure survival and to remake the world. Put differently, translates Haraway, the task of an oppositional cyborg feminism should be to "recode" all tools of "communication and intelligence" with one's aim being the subversion of "command and control" (175). Haraway's analysis of the written work by Chicana activist/intellectual Cherríe Moraga's provides her a primary example.

Women of Color

The passage below reflects the way in which Haraway understands the identities of "women of color" to operate in the same manner as her theory and politics of oppositional cyborgism. It is in this conflation between women of color as identity, and cyborg feminism as theory, that a peculiar elision occurs, as we shall see. Haraway rightly describes Cherríe Moraga's language as one that is not "whole":

> it is self-consciously *spliced*, a chimera of English and Spanish, both conqueror's languages. But it is this *chimeric monster*, without claim to an original language before violation, that crafts the erotic, competent, potent identities of women of color. Sister Outsider hints at the possibility of world survival not because of her innocence, but because of her ability to live on the boundaries, to write without the founding myth of original wholeness, with its inescapable apocalypse of final return to a deathly oneness. . . . Stripped of identity, the bastard race teaches about the power of the margins and the importance of a mother like *Malinche*. Women of color have transformed her from the evil mother of masculinist fear into the originally literate mother who teaches survival. (175–76)

Unfortunately, differential U.S. third world feminist criticism (which is a set of theoretical and methodological strategies) is often misrecognized and underanalyzed by readers when it is translated as a demographic constituency only (women of color), and not as a theoretical and methodological approach in its own right.[32] The textual problem that becomes a philosophical problem and, indeed, a political problem, is the conflation of U.S. third world feminist criticism—understood as a theory and method of oppositional consciousness—with the demographic or "descriptive" and generalized category of "women of color," thus depoliticizing and repressing the specificity of the politics and form of consciousness developed by "U.S. women of color," or "feminists of color," and erasing the specificity of what is a *particular* form of these: "differential U.S. third world feminism."

Haraway recognizes these problematics, however, and how by gathering up the category "women of color" and identifying it as a "cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (i.e., "Sister Outsider"), her work inadvertently contributes to the elision of differential U.S. third world feminism by turning its approaches, methods, forms, and skills into examples of cyborg feminism (174). In 1991 she thus amended her position, by saying that today "I would be much more careful about describing who counts as a 'we' in the statement 'we are all cyborgs.' " Indeed, she suggests that the centrality of cyborg theory might be replaced with something else capable of bridging the apartheid of theoretical domains. Why not find a name or concept that can signify "a family of displaced figures, of which the cyborg" is only one, she suggests, and then "ask how the cyborg" can make connections with other nonoriginal people who are also "multiply displaced."[33] Let us imagine a new "family of figures," she continues, who can "populate our imaginations" of "postcolonial, postmodern worlds that will not be quite as imperializing in terms of a single figuration of identity.[34]

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, such aims remain unresolved across the terrain of oppositional discourse, or rather, they remain *multiply answered and divided by academic terrain.* Even within feminist theory, Haraway's cyborg feminism and her later development of the technology of "situated knowledges" (though they come close), cannot bridge the gaps that create the apartheid of theoretical domains identified earlier. So Haraway tries another approach in her argument from a chapter in the Butler and Scott anthology *Feminists Theorize the Political.* Her essay begins by stating that those women who were "subjected to the conquest of the new world faced a broader social field of reproductive unfreedom, in which their children did not inherit the status of human in the founding hegemonic discourses of U.S. society."[35] This is the reason that "feminist theory produced by women of color" in the United States generates "discourses that confute or confound traditional Western standpoints." If dominant feminist theory is to incorporate differential U.S. third world feminist theory and criticism, she asserts, then the focus of feminist theory and politics must shift to that of making "*a place for the different social subject.*"[36] This shift could bring women's studies into affinity with theoretical terrains such as postcolonial discourse theory, U.S. third world feminism, postmodernism, global studies, and queer theory, she thinks, and would thus begin to bridge the apartheid of theoretical domains. Here, Haraway's work introduces the cross-disciplinary method I have identified in this book as the methodology of the oppressed.

How can such a shift in feminist theory be accomplished? Haraway proposes this: that feminists become "less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness," to instead become focused on "gaining the INSURGENT ground as female social subject" (95).[37] This means that the focus of "women's studies" must be relocated to examining how power moves through, between, and *outside* the binary divide male/female. Haraway's challenge is that only in this way will feminist theories concerned with sexed and "gendered racial subjectivities" be able to take "affirmative *and* critical account of emergent, differentiating, self-representing, contradictory social subjectivities, with their claims on action, knowledge, and belief."[38] What we are talking about is the development of a new form of "antiracist"—indeed, even antigender—feminism where there will be "no place for women," Haraway asserts, only "geometrics of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities" (171). How does one enact this new kind of "feminism"—or oppositional consciousness?

The Science, Technics, and Erotics of the Methodology of the Oppressed

A new feminist oppositional consciousness, Haraway thinks, will require the development of "technologies" that can disalienate and realign the human joint that connects our "technics" (material and technical details, rules, machines, and methods) with our "erotics" (the sensuous apprehension and expression of love as affinity).[39] This new joining can only occur through the methodology of the oppressed, what she calls a "politics of articulation,"[40] which is capable of creating "more powerful collectives in dangerously unpromising times."[41] Haraway's politics of articulation is comprised of "skilled practices," she writes, that are honed and developed within oppressed, or subordinated, classes. Haraway's position is that all peoples who now live under postmodern cultural conditions must learn to act from what she (along with Foucault) calls these "standpoints of the subjugated." Subjugated standpoints are described as being

> savvy to [dominant] modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to this god-trick and all its dazzling—and therefore, blinding—illuminations. "Subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. *But HOW to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the "highest" techno-scientific visualizations.* (191; my emphasis)

The key to finding a dissident form of globalization is to develop technologies to "see from below," and, as Haraway points out, learning to do so requires "as much skill" with bodies, language, and vision as learning the most sophisticated forms of "technoscientific" visualization. Haraway's answer is to provide readers her own version of the technologies of the methodology of the oppressed, which, in her view, are the very skills necessary to "see from below." It is these skills that permit the constant, differential repositioning necessary for perception from "subjugated standpoints." Haraway's work develops its own vocabulary for identifying the five technologies of the methodology of the oppressed ("semiotics," "deconstruction," "meta-ideologizing," "democratics," and "differential movement"). In her view, these technologies together comprise the politics of articulation that are necessary for forging an unprecedented mode of feminist methodology.

Haraway describes the first skill of the subjugated/oppressed when she writes that "self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology." This initial technology, she states, links "meanings and bodies" in order to open "non-isomorphic subjects, agents, and territories to stories" that are "unimaginable from the vantage point of the cyclopian, self-satiated eye of the master subject" (192). The second and third technologies of concern here, deconstruction and meta-ideologizing, are interventionary vectors that are primary means, asserts Haraway, for "understanding and intervening in the patterns of objectification in the world." In the effort to transform this objectification, "decoding and transcoding plus translation and criticism: all are necessary." The fourth technology, democratics, is that which guides the others. The moral force of this technology is indicated in Haraway's assertion that in all oppositional activity "*we must be accountable*" for the "patterns of objectification in the world" that have become the real. To rise to the level of this accountability, the practitioner of cyborg feminism cannot be "about fixed locations in a reified body." Rather, the practitioner must deploy a fifth and final technology, to move differentially in, with, and about "nodes in fields" and "inflections in orientations." Through such differential mobilities the practitioner engages her and his own ethical approach and "responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning," she writes (195). Haraway's cyborg feminism recognizes that all innocent "identity" politics and epistemologies are impossible as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated. Thus, in relation to differential consciousness itself, Haraway's cyborg feminism is "committed" in the enactment of all its skills to "mobile positioning," "passionate detachment," and the "kinship" generated by affinity through difference (192). These six locations are the "cyborg skills" that Haraway believes are necessary for developing a feminism for the twenty-first century. They represent

another transcodation of the differential consciousness and the five "subjugated standpoints" that are the technologies I have identified in this book as the methodology of the oppressed.

Whether figured in the terms of cyborg feminism, as Foucault's principles for political desire, as Barthes's punctum to political being, as White's power of the middle voice, as Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, or as the methodology of the oppressed, these skills, born of de-colonial processes, similarly insist on new kinds of human and social exchange that have the power to forge a dissident transnational coalitional consciousness, or what Haraway calls an "earthwide network of connections." These skills enable a coalitional consciousness that permits its practitioner to "translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities" (187). They thus comprise the grounds for a different kind of "objectivity"—of science itself—Haraway continues.

New Sciences: Objectivity and Differential Consciousness

Haraway's science for the twenty-first century is one of "interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood." It is being welded by an oppositional practitioner she calls the "multiple subject with at least double vision." From the viewpoint of this unprecedented science, objectivity becomes transformed into a process Haraway calls "situated knowledges" (188). When scholars transform their consciousness of objectivity into a consciousness of situated knowledges, they develop a different kind of relation to perception, objectivity, understanding, and production that is akin to White's and Derrida's descriptions of the middle voice; for this consciousness demands the practitioner's "situatedness," writes Haraway, "in an ungraspable middle space" (111).[42] Like the mechanism of the middle voice of the verb, Haraway's situated knowledges require that what is an "object of knowledge" also be "pictured as an actor and agent" (198), transformative of itself and its own situation while also being acted upon. Haraway's development of the concept of situated knowledges demands the ability of consciousness to perceive, move, and perform according to a process that is becoming more easily identifiable and nameable: this is the differential form of oppositional consciousness that, through political and technical necessity, depends on the methodology of the oppressed.

Thus it is no accident that the third chapter of Haraway's book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* is named "differential politics for inappropriate/d others." Her chapter defines a coalescing and ever more articulated form of decolonizing global social movement from where, as Haraway puts it, "feminist embodiment" re-

sists "fixation" in order to better ride the "webs of differential positioning" (196). Haraway's thesis is this: theorists who subscribe to this decolonizing postmodern mode of oppositional consciousness must learn to be "more generous and more suspicious—both generous *and* suspicious, exactly the receptive posture" we must all seek in "political semiosis generally." This strategy for identity and social construction is "closely aligned with the oppositional and differential consciousness"[43] of U.S. third world feminism, she writes, that is, with the *theory and method of oppositional consciousness in its differential form* that is outlined in *Methodology of the Oppressed*. The differential politics of 1980s U.S. third world feminism thus was not only a cultural politics. It also represented a technoscience politics sufficient for the next phase of resistance.[44]

Technoscience Politics: The Methodology of the Oppressed Creates a *Decolonizing Cyberspace*

The oppositional and differential politics outlined in this book occur in a realm I first defined in the preceding chapters on the methodology of the oppressed as a "cyberspace." Haraway provides the definition for a neocolonizing postmodern version of cyberspace as follows:

> Cyberspace seems to be the consensual hallucination of too much complexity, too much articulation. It is the virtual reality of paranoia. Paranoia is the belief in the unrelieved density of connection, requiring, if one is to survive, withdrawal and defense unto death. The defended self re-emerges at the heart of relationality. Paradoxically, paranoia is the condition of the impossibility of remaining articulate. In virtual space, the virtue of articulation, the power to produce connection threatens to overwhelm and finally engulf all possibility of effective action to change the world.[45]

This is a harsh, unrelenting, and ruthless cyberspace of infinite dispersion and interfacing. But how does cyberspace alternately come to be understood as the generous and compassionate zone of the zero degree of meaning, prophetic love, or of the form of differential consciousness that is accessed by the methodology of the oppressed?

It has been assumed that the oppressed will behave without recourse to any *particular* method, or rather, that their behavior consists of whatever acts one must commit in order to survive, whether physically or psychically. This is exactly why the methodology of the oppressed can now be recognized as the mode of being best suited to life under neocolonizing postmodern and highly technologized conditions in the first world; for to enter a world where any activity is possible in

order to ensure survival is to enter a cyberspace of being. In the past this space was accessible only to those forced into its terrain. As in Haraway's definition above, this cyberspace can be a place of boundless and merciless destruction—for it is a zone where meanings are only cursorily attached and thus capable of reattaching to others depending on the situation to be confronted. Yet this very activity also provides cyberspace its decolonizing powers, making it a zone of limitless possibility, as in the examples of the "gentle abyss" in Barthes's formulation, the realm of *différance*, the processes of the "middle voice," or in Fanon's "open door of every consciousness," and Anzaldúa's "*coatlicue* state." Its processes are closely linked with those of differential consciousness.

This benevolent version of cyberspace is analogous to the harsh cyberspace of computer and even social life under conditions of globalization in Haraway's pessimistic vision. Through the viewpoint of differential oppositional consciousness, the technologies developed by subjugated populations to negotiate this realm of shifting meanings can be recognized as the very technologies necessary to all first world citizens who are interested in renegotiating postmodern first world cultures, with what we might call a sense of their own power and integrity intact. But power, integrity—and morality—as Anzaldúa suggests,[46] will be based on entirely different terms than those identified in the past when, as Jameson writes, individuals could glean a sense of self in opposition to a centralizing dominant power that oppressed them, and then determine how to act. Under global postmodern disobediencies the self blurs around the edges, shifts in order to ensure survival, transforms according to the requisites of power, all the while (under the guiding force of the methodology of the oppressed as articulated by Fanon and the rest) carrying with it the integrity of a self-conscious awareness of the transformations desired, and above all, a sense of the impending ethical and political impact that such transformations will perform.

Haraway's theory of cyborg feminism, her recognition of "subjugated standpoints," her articulation of the skills that comprise these standpoints, and her theory of objectivity as "situated knowledges" constitute a politically articulate and this time feminist version (and another affirmation of the presence across disciplines) of what I refer to as the differential form of social movement and consciousness. When she writes that cyborg feminism is about "nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, a responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning" (195), her cyborg feminism calls up the same nexus of affinity, the same technologies of resistance, the same "love" in the postmodern world called up not only by contemporary theorists

who have written their way out of dominant first world status, including Barthes, Fanon, Derrida, Foucault, Hayden White, and many others, but also by those who insisted on an internally dissident country within their own nation-state, U.S. "third world" feminists[47] such as (to name only a few) Paula Gunn Allen, Nellie Wong, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Trin Minh-ha, Joy Harjo, and Janice Gould.

Haraway's theory challenges and weds first world postmodern politics on a transnational world scale with the decolonizing apparatus for global survival I call the methodology of the oppressed. It is in these couplings (where "race, gender, and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts" [181]) that Haraway's work contributes to bridging the gaps between disciplines that create the apartheid of theoretical domains, outlined in chapter 3. What is being suggested here is that the coding necessary to remap the "disassembled and reassembled" postmodern "collective and personal self" (163) must occur according to a guide that is capable of aligning feminist theory with other locations for thought and politics that are aimed at egalitarian social change. This alignment can happen when being and action, knowledge and science, are self-consciously encoded through what Haraway calls subjugated and situated knowledges, and what I call the methodology of the oppressed. This methodology is arising globally from varying locations, through a multiplicity of terminologies and forms,[48] and indomitably from the minds, bodies and spirits of U.S. feminists of color who demanded the recognition of *la conciencia de la mestiza*, womanism, indigenous resistance, and identification with the colonized. Only when feminist theory self-consciously recognizes and applies this methodology can feminist politics become fully synonymous with antiracism; only when global theory, cultural theory, critical theory, and ethnic theory recognize this methodology can they become synchronous with feminism and each other.

By the twentieth century's end, oppositional activists and thinkers had invented new names, indeed, new languages, for what is the purview of the methodology of the oppressed and the *coatlicue*, differential consciousness it demands. Some of these terminologies and technologies, from "signifyin'" to *la facultad*, from U.S. third world feminism to cyborg feminism, from Foucault's principles for political desire to the apparatus of the middle voice, from situated knowledges to strategic feminism, from the abyss to *différance*, have been variously identified. The methodology of the oppressed provides a schema for the cognitive map of power-laden social reality under global postmodern conditions for which oppositional actors and theorists across disciplines, from Fanon to Jameson, from Barthes to Anzaldúa, from Lorde to Haraway, are longing.

Dolores Dorantes

COPIA (fragmento)

It’s produced in the margins. You are you and your disappointment. The decomposition of the light. Copiously. You and your shadow. You and your setting-free. You are you and your shamelessness, from which you give orders. You and the construction of the tower where you point to me or watch me. It’s produced in the margins. The act of decompressing, slovenliness. You are you and the speed at which you shift from one thought to the next. To do is to undo. You and your repetition in someone else’s mouth. In the mouth of the society that opens itself to adore you. You are you and your mask. To lose. To lose all of it.

Gina Athena Ulysse
Wesleyan University

Papa, Patriarchy, and Power: Snapshots of a Good Haitian Girl, Feminism, & Dyasporic Dreams

Decked Out with an Attitude

On my writing desk, there is a picture of myself standing on sundried grass at what was then called the Duvalier Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I am dressed in a red sleeveless leisure suit that Mother, a couturière, had created—she always made some of our clothes. A long brown sling purse rests against my right hip. Both hands are folded gingerly on top of the hard leather in front of one of the four white lace trimmed pockets that decorate the tunic. My visible white socks are encased in a pair of sturdy brown leather shoes that Papa brought from Evanston, IL. There are three of us siblings. All girls. Whenever Father visited, he returned with gifts (especially shoes and jewelry) that soon became symbols of differentiation among our peers. Around my neck, a thin gold chain with a small medallion falls in between the unevenly starched Peter Pan collar. Father had also brought that for me. Except for the time when he forgot, he always brings three of everything, one for each of us. My hair is neatly coiffed, separated in sections that form three large braids: one on each side and a big one on top. Two fluffy white double bows and colorful barrettes hold my hair down on each side. The emotions on my face are a combination of undeniable disinterest and suspicion. On the back of the photo, his elongated script reads:

> *Très bien Gina... Mais il faux que tu parles avec ton papa sur la cassette. Ok. Ton papa.*
>
> Well done Gina... but you must speak to your father on the tape. Ok. Your father.

I keep the photograph there on my desk because it contains the earliest family documentation of my confrontations with Papa's patriarchal power.

Over the years, I have fought to reclaim memories that verify my defiance, as these make me even more cognizant of the hidden transcripts that underlie what I would later recognize as my staunch feminist practices and ideals. However, it is the photos (we have tons), letters (written by Father to his mother) which my older sister found years ago, and nostalgic remembrances among the siblings that are indisputable evidence of how we grew up in Haiti, a patriarchal republic, outmaneuvered by masculine power, despite an "absentee" father who had migrated to the U.S.[1] Indeed, his presence was always felt. His remittances paid for our education, our clothes, food, and healthcare. His inconsistency and especially our numerous illnesses contributed to our wavering social standing.

After several failed attempts on Father's part to gain permanent residency for us as a family, we all received residency status. As is customary of U.S. Immigration, on occasions Mother had been offered a green card that she rejected as she refused to leave us behind. On March 3, 1978, we boarded an American Airlines jet and finally landed at JFK Airport. We arrived in NYC to live with a man who had not been physically present in our daily lives for nearly a decade. Needless to say, there would be confrontations. Indeed, the power battles were frequent and exaggerated by the language barrier and other intergenerational culture clashes.

While this piece concerns the lives of five individuals (my mother, father, two sisters, and me), I focus on my experience and consciously avoid commenting on theirs; they have their own perspective on these events. In spite of my aversion to discussing their viewpoints and feelings, I am only too aware that I will be (re)constructing all of our lives. Yet, I write this in my father's name knowing the broader complications that this entails.[2] I take full responsibility for the views I present here and acknowledge them solely as mine.

In this auto-ethnographic montage, I revisit the development of my feminist consciousness as a young Haitian teen in the United States in the aftermath of migration. I interpret my struggles with my parents' patriarchal authority as oppositional to their attempt to protect their investments in us as their social capital. Indeed, it was through some of my earliest confrontations with both parents that I first learned how power is configured and the limits of gendered opposition. My responses to some of these constraints serve to highlight the significance of self-definition as a primary tenet of U.S. black feminism. In using auto-ethnography, I also show how tales of migration could benefit from feminist approaches such as reflexivity. As the latter seeks to deconstruct the visceral, which is usually relegated to the arts, yet remains embedded in the structural, I use it here to create what I call an "*alter(ed)native*" form of inquiry that considers a fuller subject.[3]

As I have done elsewhere (1999, 2002a, 2007), my approach here is influenced by reflexive and experimental feminist anthropologists (Behar 1990, 1993, Reed-Danahay 1997, Hurston 1990, Trinh 1989) whose ethnographic storytelling criss-crosses the boundaries of the personal and the social. Such an approach is of significance to Haitian studies in general and gender studies within the field in particular as dominant narratives tend to follow strict disciplinary lines and claim universal subjects and totalizing paradigms.[4] For that reason, more interdisciplinary work is needed to capture the nuances that have historically characterized Haiti's conditions and its peoples' experiences. Thus, in content and in form, I shift back and forth through time and space to inconsistently write in the present and the past. I use snapshots of ethnographically charged moments to create a montage that raises numerous theoretically rich issues that remain unexplored as this is part of a much larger project[5] and my goal here is to use narrative analysis to reveal the contradictions and convergences in subjectivities and sentiments that are germane to occupying the cusps or borderzones (Anzaldua 1987) of displacement.

I focus on home because it is where the most primary of social institutions are organized (Straight 2005). As the domestic realm remains a site of struggle for females, it is an important setting in which to consider how subjectivity is made. My decision to re-examine this space is also inspired by U.S. black feminists Joy James and Tricia Rose. In *Longing to Tell*, Rose presents oral narratives by a number of black women, "in such a way that they illuminate the lives and social forces that shape them" (2005:9). Rose insists on telling different stories precisely "to prevent a monolithic objectifying reading of all black women" (ibid.). In the same vein, I deploy the personal to write against a monolithic Haitian woman. For James, such disclosure is inherently ambiguous as it holds both the potential danger of becoming a commodity and being turned into public spectacle while providing "an essential narrative, an ethical text that deprivatizes pain to border-cross into public activism" (1996:153).

The work of Haitian scholar and novelist Myriam Chancy intersects with the above theorists and brings a culturally specific component to my thinking with her framing of the purported silence of Haitian women. Chancy has argued that Haitian women's lives have been defined by fear. That fear, she writes, "is born not only through violence but through all possible forms of repression... [in the novels she analyzed] women writers expose the source of those fears, putting an end to the silencing that has shaped their lives in order to give voice to their various oppressions" (1997:167). Since all fears and oppressions are not equal, the struggles of women in city slums in Haiti must be distinguished from those who

are sequestered in battles behind wrought iron gates. Further comparison simply cannot be made with others who have made new homes *lòtbò dlo*, on the other side of the water. Differences in class, color, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other indices of location and position influence context to produce multiplicities of lived experience. Many of these have hardly been recognized since access to expression is classed. Yet such differences beg for recognition so we do not fall into the pretense that they do not exist, as feminist poet Audre Lorde stresses (1984:112). Indeed, many of our stories have been disavowed (Fischer 2004). Others have been told though not within theoretical frameworks of our choosing. The consequences of such dissonance are perhaps best expressed by Czech novelist and essayist Milan Kundera, who writes that finding himself compared to Russian writers once produced a "strange anguish [that] stirred in me: that displacement into a context that was not mine felt like a deportation" (2007:32).

On What Not to Wear to Church

It is not surprising that my break with the church as an institution came about as a result of a battle over what to wear. I was baptized, attended Anne Marie Javouhey, a Catholic school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny. The order came to Haiti and established schools in 1864, when France finally officially recognized the first black republic sixty years after the revolution. At Anne Marie Javouhey, motivated by the nuns' creative punishments, I learned to perfect my script as well as how to needlepoint. The three Ulysse sisters were particularly intellectually motivated. In our respective classes, we were always ranked first or second. This was the school where I prepared for and had my first communion and confirmation. I was just another fanatical Catholic who dreamt of joining the nunnery. My eagerness at catechism and dedication gave me the much coveted position of actually carrying the chalice to the priest during my communion service. I hardly remember this, of course, but there are numerous photos.

Until migration, attending church was a weekly event that I scarcely reflected on. We had a uniform to wear, a navy blue skirt and white cotton blouse that became more decorative as we grew older. Church was simply where we went every Sunday morning as a family. This included mother, sisters, cousins, and my youngest uncle who acted as our surrogate father. In the U.S., this ritual continued until I hit my mid-teens. These rebellious years were quite frustrating on multiple levels for us (the children) as well as the parents who both feared and were losing control over us. They were competing against a cultural context that was much bigger than they were in our small Haitian community in Montclair, New Jersey.[6] Church became just another arena where our behavior was heavily policed. While I scarcely

recall exactly when the rift began, I do have a sense of the context. More Haitians from neighboring towns of East Orange, Newark and others began to attend the same morning service. The congregation increased in such volume that we had a white priest who did sermons in Kreyol. I was losing interest more and more in attending church.

One Sunday, I was late getting prepared. This, of course, annoyed Mother who wanted us to look like proper young girls at church. While the other sisters liked dressing up, I simply hated it and often refused. I remember a verbal match with Mother over what I should wear. I wanted to dress for comfort (pants and a shirt) and Mother expected me to follow her example. I did not care what other people thought of me and said so. This did not please her at all. She proceeded to chastise me for acting out and talking back. As it had become customary, my sassiness was blamed on our migration and the fact that in the U.S. children no longer respected their parents. They no longer did as they were told because parents could not discipline them in the same way they could in Haiti. I must add that it's not that I wasn't stubborn in Haiti. Indeed, as I have written in my poetry, my recollections of childhood are full of rememories of punishment (Ulysse 2002b). But in the U.S., my opposition took on a particular character. I was bolder, especially since their disciplinary methods were no longer physically severe. The battle ended with me saying, "Since God has seen me naked, I don't understand why I have to dress up for Him." To understand the significance of my talking back, it is important to note that I grew up in a household and broader social environment where obedience was understood in terms of acquiescence. "Oui papa," and "oui maman" were the appropriate responses to parental directives.

The pressure to dress up was not about God but about our social standing in a community that thrived on what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as distinction—that is, the practice of demarcating and performing difference [precisely] to reject being identified with what represents the greatest threat (1984:479-480). Thus, the aim is to not be like everyone else, especially within a predominantly black society where as a dark-skinned young female, my clothing and comportment are essential indicators of my position. As I have argued elsewhere, for black females, self-presentation is predicated upon "the mediation of historical class and color codes that are based upon and understood primarily within the context of what is most visible, one's phenotype and appearance" (Ulysse 2007). That said, Mother's concerns were with safeguarding our position. Like her contemporaries, she was responding to the fear of what others might say if I showed up looking like *ti moun san fanmi, ti moun san manman*, a child without family, a child without a mother. The fact is that people talk, and how a child presents

herself is viewed as a direct reflection of her parents. In our small circle, my parents wanted to maintain some modicum of control over a process that had resulted in eroding their sense of power over us and displaced us all, albeit unevenly. Their anxiety was about our status within this new community; hence their attempts to reign in our behavior. While I was behaving rather badly, waging my own little war abroad, women were making changes in Haiti.

Without question, women's collective grassroots action was instrumental in the eventual ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. They were at the forefront of social movements and their organic political activities caused changes that led to the first democratic election held in Haiti in 1990. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith elaborates. He writes, "On April 3, 1986, two days after the creation of several women's organizations, 30,000 women demonstrated in Port-au-Prince to memorialize the thousands of female victims of the Duvalier dictatorship. Chanting Justice! Justice! Justice!..."(1990:23). According to Carolle Charles, women had organized food riots, school stoppages and mobilized grassroots movements. Their demands ensured their inclusion in the State's political agenda (1995). While they made these gains, however, they also suffered from tremendous backlash. In too many instances, they were severely punished, as rape became a preferred method of "discipline and punishment" (Bell 2001; Rey 1999). Many of those who could undertook crossing the Caribbean Sea in all sorts of dangerous ways in search of refuge that was too often denied.

Talking About Sex in English

Back then—and in some cases, still now—the worst thing that a good unmarried Haitian girl could do to lower middle class parents was to come home pregnant. When I first brought a boyfriend home who was visiting from abroad—I was fighting my own battles with the boyfriend—he wanted me to have his babies and could not comprehend why I desired a doctorate. He didn't last. I was most astounded, however, by my father's anxieties around the fact that we were having sex. My father was most concerned about me causing "the family" any embarrassment. We were in the car driving to the train station to pick up the boyfriend. We left the house together not having said very much. We were on the highway when Father began to speak. Severe lines strained his forehead as he began:

> *Gina gen de bagay.... Ou konprann.... Le yo pase... yo... axiden... men si gen lot bagay ki deja la lan plas.... Bagay sa yo pa axiden.*

> Gina... there are things... you know... that when they happen... they are accidents... but... if other things are already in place, these things are not accidents.

Father's words were so restrained that they were coming out in staccato. I turned my body to face him. My mouth dropped when I quickly realized what he was actually saying to me. I was so angry that my words flew out of my mouth in synch. "Oh no!" I cried out, "This is not and cannot be the safe sex talk...." Indeed, we never had such a conversation. "What, are you kidding me... you cannot be serious... you think I should get married... just so I don't get pregnant and make you look bad... don't you?" "There is the pill... you know." With every comment, my voice rose several decibels higher. Part of my excitement was the sheer shock that we were actually having this conversation. Yet, the gentleness in his voice did not obscure the fact that there was manipulation going on aimed at satisfying a particular end.[7] "This is a joke right.... This has got to be a joke," I finally blurted out. Astounded by my reaction, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Ok. Don't say I did not warn you." For him that was the end of the conversation. Nothing else was said on this matter. In the car, I reminded him of my desire to earn a doctorate before anything else—that included children.

While this interaction was packed with copious socio-cultural dynamics, I wish to focus on two specific areas. The first concerns the significance of and value ascribed to female sexuality in Haiti. This is to provide a broader point of reference to understand my father's concerns with my having sex outside of marriage. The second is what this conversation reveals about the role of the English language as my new source of power.

In the Haiti where I grew up, female sexuality was treated mostly as the property of men and the women who upheld this system by policing other women. Its value varied according to class and other factors. Among the urban elites, daughters were often commodities traded in strategic marriages or familial mergers (Burnham 2006; Trouillot 1990). In our liminal class position, the sexual codes we were taught to live by were quite simple and were never spoken directly. But we knew the comments that differentiated good girls who were pure and bad ones who were not. Even worse were the women who became long-term mistresses of married men who would not leave their wives. As in many families, we too had secret tales of such *plasaj* or *metres atitre*—that is, common law unions or mistresses depending on the man's marital status. Such stories were hardly passed on to us, the young. They were only shared in whispers on those long nights of family storytelling that usually start with the current moment and go all the way back to the days when Pétion-Ville and Port-au-Prince ---

destinations of Hollywood greats such a Gina Lollabrigita, Elizabeth Taylor, and Richard Burton during the 1950s. That is when we found out who had been after whom and who had stolen who from whom (Ulysse 2006).

Back then and until we migrated, the worst thing a woman could be called is a *bouzen* (prostitute/whore).[8] The connotation of this term was of looseness, unbridled sexuality, and possibilities for barter. Nonetheless, stories could be told about an individual that took on a life of their own and how one came to have a label was hardly an issue. Reputations were made and destroyed. The more fragile one's social position, the less likely she was to rise above such talk. Parents did their part to ensure that their names were not stained. Methods varied depending on one's social milieu. In urban settings, girls were often kept under scrutiny. In rural areas, virginity testing served as a protective mechanism, while at the same time budding romances were encouraged to ensure family mergers would be successful. The most vulnerable of women were those with the greatest economic need and whose performance of silence (Ulysse 2007) was crucial to their survival.

The political economy of sexuality is a tale of the power of class privilege. With unemployment at about seventy-five percent and the egregious ratio of male to female employment, the situation is dire in the formal sector. For women, jobs can scarcely be obtained without exchange of sexual favors. Sexual harassment is unrecognized and goes unpunished. The first case brought to a Haitian court occurred in 1999. Madame Edouard Alexis, the wife of the Prime Minister, insisted on bringing the suit to make the point of indicating that there is no such justice for women.[9] Therefore, financial security—being able to afford not to work—is key to one's ability to safeguard one's sexual availability. Women who can afford not to work remain commodities in their coveted marriage market. Many desperately need these interactions. Charles writes, "many poor Haitian women define their bodies as a resource, an asset, a form of capital that can reap benefits if well invested. Hence their assertion "*kom se kawo tem*"—my body is my piece of land (2001:170). *Restaveks* (children domestic servants) are also often unnoticed victims. Such sexual exploitation rarely warrants questions since blame is always placed on the female (Hatloy 2005, Racine-Toussaint 1999). While men are free to roam and spread their seed, women are expected to observe stricter codes of conduct.

The double standard informed our greater cultural context. Thus, it is not surprising that Father was "concerned" about my deviation from the rules. All three of us girls had managed not to disappoint our parents. Although I was well over legal age, he still hoped to be spared embarrassment. This was clear to me. My raging response was precisely because his concern

was not whether or not I loved the boyfriend but that I would stain Father's name. In a way, we were engaged in a sparring match. This was a test of his waning power to influence me as the dutiful daughter. Knowing this, I responded with the only power I possessed: the language that assured the cultural divide we would now permanently occupy. This was my way of saying, I may be your child but you can no longer tell me what to do. And he knew it.

Indeed, language was critical in creating a space that cultivated my self-making as a feminist. More context is necessary to explicate the significance of this moment. First, it must be noted that while father spoke to me in Kreyol, my entire response to him was in English. This is worthy of further exploration. Twenty years later, as I write this, I am certain that back then and even now I could not have responded to him the way I did then in Kreyol or in French, as those have always been languages of my subordination. They were the tongues through which I learned to perform silence. In the aftermath of migration, I made a radical departure from most things Haitian and certainly all things French. The latter came from a black nationalist phase. I was able to sustain this as I had vowed to myself at the age of eleven that I would not return to Haiti until things changed. While family members returned for visits to Haiti, I abstained. In between trips, their longings for home were satisfied through various forms of consumption, especially music. In addition, weekly trips to Brooklyn to connect with extended family members and friends kept these bonds vibrant.

When we first moved to New Jersey, our English as a Second Language (ESL) schoolteacher encouraged us to practice total immersion in all things "American." An English-speaking world, they insisted, would foster our mastery of the language and open more aspects of the culture to us. While the parents panicked, I threw myself into various parts of the new culture wholeheartedly, especially when it came to the arts. I was particularly responsive to the second British music invasion of the 1980s. We were more fluent than both parents. English simply became a source of power over the years. While I did and still do math in French, everything else is in English. This would prove to be a hindrance years later when I acted as translator for a Haitian Refugee Asylum Project. My limits reflected my distance from Haiti. In dialogues with would-be refugees where accurate translation actually determined what happened to young lives, my limited fluency revealed many aspects of this country that I did not know and never knew (Ulysse 2005:175-180). English was empowering precisely because the parents could not claim it the same way I did. It was a tool to be used as I tried to find my way here while their hearts were fixed on returning there sometime in the distant future. I did not have the same connection

and held no such longing to return. In that sense, English was not only my present but also my future. It was also the language through which I could not only talk back and act grown, which bell hooks (1989) argues is central to U.S. black feminism, but gain mastery that facilitated a break from their ways and undermined their sense of control. That linguistic lacuna was a space where I could re-make myself.

On my quest for self-definition, the communities open to me, however, were few. Like other Caribbean immigrants to the United States, my parents feared we would eschew our education and become derelicts. We were routinely monitored (especially our speech, comportment, dress and music) to be model black citizens (i.e. not like, but better than the "Black Americans").[10] Indeed, historically Caribbean immigrants have sought to distinguish themselves from African-Americans. They cultivate their "West Indianness" or Caribbean identities in ways to position themselves as model minorities in the U.S. (Robotham 2002; Rahier and Hintzen 2003). This process is difficult for non-English speakers whose negotiations are limited until they master the language.

As Alex Stepick writes, in the early 1980s, Haitians in the United States encountered tremendous prejudice and suffered accusations that became synonymous with their identities. He documents stories of shame and even suicide by students in Miami recognized as Haitian (1998). Zéphir, on the other hand, found that upper class Haitians tended to overemphasize their French identity. She writes, "From being members of a privileged segment of Haitian society, they have involuntarily joined the ranks of America's most poorly regarded groups, namely the Blacks, with whom negative attributes have been traditionally associated. Therefore, bilingual Haitians seek strategies to remedy this situation, which is, in their view, untenable. One such a strategy is to emphatically utilize a resource that is held in high esteem by Americans: their 'Frenchness'" (1997:397-8). In recent years, however, especially among the youth, there has been a shift away from French to more African elements in Haitian culture that resulted in a new narrative of Haitian pride.

In her book *Rara*, Elizabeth McAlister tracks this development in popular culture movements including *mizik rasin* (roots music) in Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora. She argues that the growing acceptance for this new *mizik rasin* must be viewed within the context of new musical trends that occurred in the black Diaspora. This was evident in the globalization of hip-hop, reggae, dancehall, and zouk music. According to her, the *mizik* rasin that took off in the mid 1980s reflected a "return to roots" and was a reclamation of the very Africanness that is often repudiated by Haitians

seeking to distance themselves from "Haiti as a subordinate and primitive culture"(2002:190-191). For Haitian-Americans in the United States, McAlister stresses this embrace of blackness through Africa also signified a rejection of U.S.-specific racializations (2002:203). With the advent of the hip-hop trio The Fugees and Wyclef Jean, young Haitians in New York and Miami were proudly displaying Haitian flags and reclaiming the same identity they were taught to despise, as Jamaican poet Michelle Cliff (1980) writes regarding her blackness.

Indeed, throughout the years, Wyclef Jean has single handedly worked to foster Haitian pride with his unabashed waving of the flag, consistent shout outs to his nation in international settings including award shows, and his new not-for-profit foundation. His solitary impact on re-making a *dyas* Haitianness is best expressed by young Haitians who now speak of their identities in terms of *avan ou apre* Wyclef, that is before or after Jean hit the scene. As students in my "Haiti: Myth and Realities 06" course pointed out, they know Haiti only through stereotypes. They have been so inundated with Hollywood's voodoo that they could not distinguish it from Haiti's vodou. They viewed the island mainly as a site of political instability and abject poverty. Claude Moise, a young Haitian-American student, stressed that North American popular culture is bereft of positive images of Haiti. All the students agreed that Wyclef Jean was the sole individual with constructive views of Haiti in the U.S. popular imagination. Jean's message, however, is not without its contradictions. The paradox in his pride is a consistent ahistoricity that ignores the impact of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1996) refers to as past in the present. In Dave Chappelle's *Block Party* (2006), he brings the comedian's attempt to create a space of positive blackness to an arresting point. After a rendition of his single "If I Were President" with students from the Central State University marching band, Jean shares his brand of bootstrap philosophy: "It's good to see so many black people in college. You know what I am saying.... Don't blame the white man for nothing. Get yours. I came to this country, I ain't know how to speak English, I made something of myself. I went to the library.... The white man ain't responsible for shit. They got libraries in the hood...if they don't, contact your Congressman..." (Chappelle 2006). His message echoes the ideology of many black immigrants who seek distinction as model citizens to emphasize their difference from U.S. born blacks.[11]

While in high school, I was well versed in this belief as I had learned to practice this distance. There were multiple reasons for this. Being a good girl was one of them. In addition, my years in middle school and in high school were brutal as I was teased, pushed, mocked for my accent, and constantly bullied by my African American peers who critiqued my performance of

blackness.[12] My friends were mostly misfits, others who did not fit in. They were hippies, performing arts students, and other immigrants. My taste in music also reflected this choice. Yet, within these groups, I was often an anomaly: a shy black Haitian girl who was not black enough by urban standards, not cool enough by suburban standards, and not French enough by Haitian standards. And I nursed public dreams of being a rock'n'roll singer. While no one, certainly not my immediate family and communities, had a point of reference for me, in this liminality, I had found a space for opposition that allowed me to consider another ideal.

Localizing my Feminism

In claiming a feminist identity, I consider how my trajectories informed who I have become. In making this reference to movement, I evoke Stuart Hall's call to de-essentialize cultural identity in general and diasporic identity in particular, which is too often perceived as fixed and unchanging. Hall argues that "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are constituted within, not outside representation" (1996:4). Indeed, images of tough women (such as Tina Turner, Pat Benatar and Joan Jett on MTV) standing up to men offered me a model, albeit one infused with limits as the prominence of the value ascribed to whiteness and class based privileges was a constant reminder that we all can't be rock stars. Yet these symbols of freedom were instrumental to my recognizing that there were other ways to be a non-compliant woman. I grew up with the knowledge that women in my culture were the poto-mitan of their families (N'Zengou-Tayo 1998). I was choosing another way. To localize my feminism, I appropriate Paul Gilroy's concept of roots/routes to refrain from making a simple return to my "so-called roots and come-to-terms-with-my routes" (quoted in Hall).

Undeniably, it is not that I could not have emerged a feminist in Haiti, rather migration and the challenges that later ensued as I came of age tackling cultural conflicts in attempts to adapt to a new culture caused frictions that culminated in a particular entry into feminism. Indeed, as I became a feminist in the U.S., feminist movements were re-emerging in Haiti out of a specific set of concerns. While my political interests initially evolved out of the personal, the domestic realm from which they stemmed no longer dictated the parameters of my activism. Nonetheless, my daily struggles were quite distant from that of my former compatriots. We lived in different societies and occupied various socio-economic spaces that

determined our realities. Perhaps no better story exemplifies this than a brief encounter between a street waif and myself during one of my trips to Haiti in the mid 1990s. This anecdote allows me to locate specific characteristics of my feminism, particularly as these relate to my identity as a *dyaspora* Haitian. Furthermore, they show how my positioning is tightly bound with, and is ultimately informed by, class and other privileges of living abroad.

We were walking around *Palais National*, the presidential palace area. I insisted on seeing for myself what was happening on the streets in the capital. As is always the case when I visit Haiti, different rules applied. In her essay "Going Home," Katia Ulysse writes: "In Haiti, I would not surrender to the habits I practiced on U.S. soil: I would never smoke in public; I would not look my elders in the eyes; I would not laugh too loud"(2003:132). Additionally, outside of our family's compound, I did not dare to venture out alone. Everyone always made sure that male cousins accompanied the girls when we went out. This infuriated me as I have conducted research in areas of Kingston, Jamaica where safety is just as, if not even more, in jeopardy. Yet, I admit I was not culturally sensitized to negotiate Port-au-Prince since I had not lived in Haiti for over twenty years.

"*Ti gason!*" a little voice piped. "Little boy." I heard the words even before my foot hit the sidewalk. Two of my cousins were walking ahead of me, one with his swagger, the other one much more relaxed. I was behind them following. The third cousin was behind me. I slowed down. The cousins noticed. We stopped. "*Gina ou vle anyen?* Gina, do you want anything?" The oldest one asked. "Yes!" I replied quickly. On these outings, which I always looked forward to, I welcomed any opportunity to be out there. I got to enjoy things I would not find when I returned home such as street food, candies, arts and crafts. This time we stopped for sugar cane.

"*Ti gason!*" the small voice said again. The men hanging around began to add their comments about different concepts of beauty. The discussion was on girls without hair. I was not interested. I had been there before and have written rather extensively about the policing of gendered ideals and the social meaning of short hair especially for dark skinned black females (Ulysse 1999, 2002a). As I have discussed elsewhere, in the streets in other Caribbean contexts, females who confound gendered class and color codes or attempt to disrupt social orders become open for any and every one to comment on (Ulysse 2007). For example, a couple of days earlier, I was sent on an errand with a cousin. I jumped out of the car and was about to enter the supermarket when a departing customer began to shake his head upon seeing me. His disapproval of my hairstyle was confirmed when he shockingly asked me, "Why did you go and do something like that?" Regretfully, he

added, "You would have been a pretty girl." I shot him a smile and retorted without even thinking, "I am still prettier than you will ever be." By then, his audacity and that of other men preoccupied with my short hair in Haiti and in Jamaica over the years had rendered me indifferent. But on this day, I was perplexed as I looked directly at my unexpected adversary.

Leaning on a wagon filled with piles of unpeeled cane and peels was a young girl in a dress several sizes too small. Her parted plaits were held down by multi-colored kissing doves barrettes.

"*Pou ki sa ou di sa*?" Why did you say that? I asked her.

"Because you have no hair." She said with a timid smile.

"No that can't be the reason... you mean because I shaved off my hair?"

"Yes! You are a little boy." She insisted.

"We told you!" My cousins piped in. "You should have seen how long her hair was." They both began to speak simultaneously in defense of my femininity and womanhood. "We don't understand why she did it." By now they were all standing together posturing and engaging in conversation with the other young men who were hanging about. The vendor handed me a plastic bag with small pieces of stripped cane. I said thank you, then turned back to my interlocutor. "Let me tell you something." I handed her the sugar cane. She said thank you and began to chew.

"It is my hair and I can do whatever I want with it."

She looked at me intently, paying attention to every single word. I was handed another bag. I held on to it and began my sermon.

"Girls can do whatever they want to do. If they want to wear their hair short, that is their choice. I did not like the hair I had so I cut it off. I use less shampoo and I don't have to comb it and have less to wash in the morning. You know that you can do what you want with yourself... right?"

"Yes!" she said.

"Ok!" I said and began to walk away.

Both of my feet were on the sidewalk. I had not taken a full step when she loudly crooned with more sass than I ever mustered to my father: "*D-y-a-s-p-o-r-a*" then quickly dashed out of sight. I smiled especially for the way she had enunciated every single letter of this word. Her delivery in slow motion, like a *stupe* or kiss of the teeth, intended to leave me with an impression. It was meant to mark me anew. It was a necessary reminder. She succeeded in re-inscribing me with this term that reflects our realities. She was right. In terms of the sheer amount of social contact, I have spent

more time in my country of residence than my birth country. While I may want to claim a Haitian identity, the fact is that I now belong to its diaspora.[13] To use local vernacular, I am a *dyaspora*, as they say in Haiti. More importantly, in calling me so, she sought to remind me first of our class differences that renders me the privilege of performing my gender *à la garçonne* as they say in a country where gender discrimination laws are not applied and crimes not prosecuted. My failure to consider this was just an example of *dyas* oblivion.

Dyasporic Dilemmas and Dreams

Dyaspora or *dyas* for short is used to describe anyone who is recognized as Haitian but who obviously currently lives abroad. Indeed, we are so easily identifiable. Our foreignness is visible, especially to those who live on the island, who can quickly decipher it as it is writ large in our bodies, our styles, our comportment, and the ways that we generally behave. It is also there in our too frequent insistence that we know just what is best for the country, as is evident in the 2005 presidential election and its aftermath.

In Haiti, the term *dyas* has some negative connotations as it is used to establish distinction between those who live on the island and those who make their lives elsewhere (whether Africa, Europe or North America). Until U.S. East Coast Haitians reclaimed the word, it was laden with shame for those onto which it had been ascribed. Indeed, in too many instances, *dyaspora* was used as capital not only to demarcate distance but also to qualify those on the island as more authentic. In the introduction to the *Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora*, Edwidge Danticat (1999) writes about this tension. She recalls personal experiences of expressing opposing political views and being called *dyaspora* by family members living in Haiti. This quickly silenced her as it was a way of saying, "What do you know? You don't live here." She further elaborates that members of the diaspora "would be classified—justifiably or not—as arrogant, insensitive, overbearing and pretentious people who were eager to reap the benefits of good jobs[14] and political positions in times of stability in a country that they fled during difficult times"(1999:XV). The charge of dilettantism is not without merit as permanent residency and citizenship allows the *dyas* freedom of movement, for there is always a place to go back to if things don't work out. Individuals have gone back only to find that not only have they changed, but Haiti also has changed. Nothing is the same.

In the anthology, Danticat continues to explain how journalist Jean Dominique (himself exiled from his beloved homeland multiple times until his assassination in Haiti) eventually squelched her *dyaspora* dilemma.

He comforted her, "There is no reason to be ashamed of being *dyaspora*. There are more than a million of you. You are not alone" (1999:XV). In reverent acknowledgement of Dominique's own situation, Danticat extended the definition to include "exiles, émigrés, refugees, migrants, immigrants, naturalized citizens, half-generation, first generation, American, Haitian, Haitian-American... living in the U.S. and elsewhere" (1999:XV). The fact that over a million Haitians reside outside the island led to the virtual formation and official creation of Haiti's Tenth Department. Haiti's nine geographical districts were augmented to include an additional space that stretched the physical parameters of the nation.

This new department was designated in 1991 when then president Jean-Bertrand Aristide recognized the persistent role and impact of Haitians abroad in the lives of those on the island. Aristide sought to give to those of us abroad an official claim on our native country. Over the years, this quasi-connection to what Salman Rushdie (1992) aptly refers to as "an imaginary homeland" has been a lifeline as a well as a noose. And, as anthropologist Michel Laguerre has rightly argued, the Haitian Diaspora has played notable roles in dealings both at home and abroad. Indeed, agitation on the part of diasporic Haitians has had ripple effects on what happens on the island.[15] This presents a dilemma that warrants further inquiry into how to define Diaspora transnational citizenship, what exactly is a *dyas*' claim on the nation, and perhaps most importantly, how do we reconcile it with the complexities in our *dyasporic* dreams, especially for the presidency.

A Slight Detour: Public Laments for the Presidency

The longings for home that did not cease when we willingly sought to or were forced into exile have manifested in various attempts to (re)connect. The Diaspora's role in political affairs and elections remains a point of contention. The presidential elections of February 2005 brought this issue to the fore once again. This is worthy of discussion as it forces us to engage Schiller and Fouron's concept of long distance nationalism (2001) and definitions of citizenship. This moment also highlighted the persistence of patriarchy in governmental politics, the continuous invisibility of women, and erasures of class-based differences at home and abroad.

In the aftermath of the 2004 coup that displaced Jean Bertrand Aristide again and sent him into exile, this time in South Africa, the interim Prime Minister of Haiti was none other than a *dyas* who had been living in Florida. Backed by the United States, Gerald Latortue arrived in Port-au-Prince, a "transnational puppet" according to many, without any local credibility.[16] His imposition onto the nation was but one more in a series of instances

when the U.S. has played a hands-on role in Haitian political affairs. How did this come to be? Laguerre offers analysis that highlights the historical function of the *dyaspora* in homeland politics. According to him, one of the fundamental features of the Haitian political system is the central role of the *dyaspora* "in engineering coups d'etat—with the help of one or more foreign governments—in overthrowing the sitting government.... This historical feature of the political system continues to this day to feed the mechanisms of governmental succession" (2005:207). Indeed, to date, only two Haitian presidents (Pascale Ertha Trouillot and René Preval) have left office through the electoral process. Others have either been forcibly removed or chose self-exile. Diasporic capital of one form or another usually supports their departure. Forms of this capital vary to include the funds necessary to stage the coup and/or the armed rebels who actually participate in their making. What is clear is that the Diaspora has historically had a say in homeland politics, especially covertly.

Recent attempts at more overt and legitimate participation became an issue that played out in what Laguerre calls the virtual diasporic public sphere.[17] In the 2005 elections aimed at legitimizing the displacement of Aristide, several *dyas* actively campaigned for the presidency. The number of would be candidates eventually dwindled to 54 and was reduced to 35 as election date drew closer. Among the final candidates there was one female, Judith Roy (Democratic Convergence), a former mayoral candidate for Port-au-Prince whose slogan read, "*Vote fanm nan*" (vote for the woman). The two *dyas* candidates were Samir Mourra, a businessman who headed the Mobilization for Haiti's Progress (MPH), and Dumarsais Simeus (Tet Ensanm), a Texas billionaire with close ties to the George Bush administration. His slogan urged the populace to consider "*yon lòt chemen ak milyonè a*" (another path with the millionaire). Both Mourra and Simeus are naturalized U.S. citizens.

According to article 13 of the Haitian Constitution, Haitian nationality is lost once an individual is naturalized as a citizen of another nation. Article 135 stresses that presidential candidates must never have renounced their nationality. Constitutionally, as foreign nationals, Mourra and Simeus were barred from seeking the presidency. Yet they persisted in their right as Haitians to participate in elections in spite of the Constitution. Outrage and demand for respect of the Constitution fueled debates and pitted the current government against the state. In a ping-pong match of decisions from the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) and the Supreme Court, both Simeus and Mourra found themselves off and on and off the ballot again. The Supreme Court became involved when Simeus sued the government to recognize his candidacy, claiming they could not prove he had renounced

his Haitian nationality. Haitian journalist and Reuters reporter Joseph Guyler Delva wrote, "Two Haitian-born U.S. citizens should be barred from presidential elections expected next month, a panel appointed by Haiti's interim government said. The recommendation, which clashes with a ruling by Haiti's highest court, said candidates Dumarsais Simeus and Samir Mourra should not be allowed to run for the Haitian presidency because they hold U.S. passports" (2005). This issue took on an especially contentious tone on email lists and listservs, including the well-known Corbett list where *dyaspora* and local Haitians and Haitianists participate in dialogue incognito. The attempts to get on the ballot could be read as another example of *dyas* power flexing its material capital in the homeland. It appears that local constituencies not only fought back, but won.

And then there were 33 candidates.

Following the elections held in February 2006, René Preval (LESPWA) was eventually declared president even after explicit attempts from the opposition to sabotage the primary results (Dupuy 2006). Simeus began a series of summits focusing on the Haitian Diaspora's role in Haiti. One was held in Port-au-Prince. Another was hosted by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) in Washington D.C. on July 25, 2006 under the title "Haiti's Diaspora: Can it solve Haiti's enduring social conflict?"[18] Description of the event on the website read as follows: "Haiti's Diaspora represents a rich resource of human energy and talent. Last year [2005], remittances from Haitians living abroad exceeded $1 billion dollars and constituted 24 percent of Haiti's GDP. In addition to promoting the economy, could the Diaspora also assist the Preval government in resolving Haiti's enduring social conflict?" Speakers included Dumas Simeus, François Pierre Louis, a sociologist from CUNY and Jean Claude Martineau, poet, author and historian. The gender imbalance at the summit was due to the fact that the female expert invited, a representative of CARE, had an "important meeting" in Haiti. The dominant theme of this event was best expressed by Mr. Simeus' recurring mantra that Haiti's way out of poverty is "Access, access, access to venture capital and open markets!" He is also the founder of Haiti's only investment bank, PromoCapital, a joint Haitian-American venture. Another issue placed on the table was the Haitian Constitution, especially article 13, which concerns voting rights and representation of Diaspora Haitians.

After attending this dialogue, I learned that in Port-au-Prince the same day, Preval's government was convening with international donors to discuss Haiti's fate. The irony or coincidence of the timing of these concurrrent events, as Laguerre noted above, beg further meditation. Indeed, what

exactly should a *dyas*' role be in Haiti? What is it about this "repeating island," to borrow Benitez-Rojo's term (1997), that keeps so many of its "displaced" so desperate to maintain ties?

In her short story "A Girl Named Esperance," about an essay contest winner who gets to sing the national anthem at the *Palais National* on Independence Day, Katia Ulysse adds to the perplexity. She writes, "They had gathered at the Palace to remember what no one could forget anyhow: the Independence of a nation the size of an oyster's pearl, which in spite of numerous scrapes and lacerations continued to emit a certain luster so immutable that its harshest critics cannot stop wondering what it is about the tiny, scuffed-up little place that makes it so irresistible" (2006:5).

In our younger years, Father used to lament the fact that he did not have a son. "*Gad sa bondye fem*? Look what God has done to me!" He expressed betrayal by the Almighty. His disappointment is part of our family's lore so much that stories about his reaction to our births indicate the value he, then, ascribed to girls. He wanted male heirs to inherit his family's responsibilities and to carry on his name. Luckily, he did not harbor any secret political aspirations for his girls. We certainly do not want to or could not even be president.

I, for one, took on another nationality in part to honor my routes and stake claim to a hyphenated *dyaspora* identity that cannot encapsulate the complexities of living in-between while negotiating comforts abroad with longings for one's *pays natal*. Paradoxically, the three of us have kept or intend to keep some version of Papa's surname. Migration is undoubtedly responsible for my decision. And my staunch feminist consciousness, which in part turned Father and me into fierce rivals, continues to have everything to do with it.

Notes

[1] He did not migrate for political reasons. During the late sixties and early seventies, individuals and entire families migrated in search of greater opportunities. As was customary then, the plan was for Father to work, raise the necessary capital and then send for us.

[2] Behar (1995) writes about her father's response to her writing about their family as a way to explicate who owns the right to tell which family stories.

[3] This ethnography is something of a counter-narrative articulated from what I call an *alter(ed)native* perspective to the conventionalities of the dominant discourse within anthropology. It is *alter* as in other and *native* as I was born in the Caribbean and am ascribed that identity as a native. It is *alter(ed)* because of how

my approach to writing has been modified both by my training in graduate school as well as my experience as a field researcher. My self (as text) is central to this perspective that I use to 'flip the script' on dominant discourses concerning the mythic "Other" and their worldview. In that sense, I use reflexivity as a maestro to connect everyone and everything gathered within a researcher's perception at the crossroads of observation (Ulysse 2007).

[4] At a panel "Shifting Gazes/Paradigm Shifts: (Re)telling Haiti's (Un)known" at the Haitian Studies Association in 2006, I argued that there must be a shift in both where and how Haitian Studies directs and constructs its objects of study given the dominance of the compartmentalized frameworks that remain bound to disciplinary boundaries. I believe that the field needs to consider new interdisciplinary approaches to highlight the current renaissance (it is already in progress), and move away from narratives of incarceration. My point of focus in using an alter(ed)native approach is to illuminate Haiti's present by breaking the silence (as Trouillot urges) on stories that have been told yet remain unknown or disavowed (to use Fischer's formulation) as they are eclipsed by metanarratives that reinforce aspects of both Haitian discourse and discourses about Haiti.

[5] This body of work includes the unpublished manuscript, *Loving Haiti, Loving Vodou: A Book of Rememories, Meditations and Recipes* (2006).

[6] Had we remained in Brooklyn, I believe my parents' fears would have been less intense because the Haitian community is much larger. We would have been under more scrutiny. In our town, there were Jamaicans, Trinidadians and other Caribbean and Latin American immigrants. The number of Haitian families was small enough that we could count them on two hands.

[7] I thank Joy James for making this point.

[8] That isn't to say that this term has lost its power to ruin a woman's reputation in some circles (McAlister 2002). Rather, in recent years various local feminist challenges have forced the issue of a woman's right to her sexuality, at least on the popular culture agenda.

[9] Personal interview June, 2001.

[10] See Laguerre 1984, Stepick 1998.

[11] It must be noted that on the East Coast, that divide has also been bridged on numerous occasions. In the moments where skin color has trumped nationality, African-Americans, Dominicans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Puerto-Ricans, and others joined forces to confront waves of state violence as exerted by members of New York City's police force.

[12] I discuss this further in "Never Really Black Enough: The Symbolic Politics of Being Cool, Righteous, and Haitian Among African-Americans" (Ulysse 1999b).

[13] Here I adopt definitions of diaspora put forth by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg. They note, "Diaspora refers to the doubled relationship of our dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with 'back home" (1996:14).

[14] In recent years, the *dyas* arrives on the island with the privileges of living abroad and proceeds to disrupt an otherwise rigid local social order. Indeed, my short hair, to my interlocutors, only confounded local boundaries of gender. But this hairdo, as the young girl rightly assessed, was also laden with the class privilege that being a *dyas* automatically gives me. Indeed, it is not as if this hairstyle was uncommon in Haiti. Rather whomever wore it (did so for specific reasons) had their place within the local structure.

In 1997, I took part in *Vakans pou demen miyo* (Vacation for a Better Tomorrow), a summer program held to encourage young professionals from the *dyaspora* to factor Haiti in their future plans. Participants in this effort included a few of us who had been born on the island, a significant number of first-generation immigrants among whom there were a few presidential hopefuls (I revisit this point in the conclusion), as well as students from local universities. Indeed, the value given to the *dyas* with our foreign degrees and education was quite apparent. At a cocktail party organized to introduce students to the business community, those of us who were consistently engaged by the hosts were from abroad. This caused tremendous tension. All we had in common was Haiti, no matter how abstract or concrete our different perceptions of the country and the prevailing situation.

[15] See Farmer 1994, Schiller and Fouron 2001.

[16] Congresswoman Maxine Waters, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, made the following statement: "Gerard Latortue is a mere puppet installed by the supporters of the coup d'etat that ousted the democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He is totally controlled by Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roger Noriega, the former chief of staff for Senator Jesse Helms and the Haiti-hater who has used his power hold at the OAS and the State Department to carry out the policy of right-wing conservative American and Haitian business elites. The opposition in Haiti, led by the Group of 184 and the so-called rebels who were thugs and criminals in exile, were organized by these rich Haitian business elites to play their role in the ouster of President Aristide." www.haitiaction.org/News/CBC4_5_4.html. In the media, Latortue's government was dubbed a puppet regime (Lavender 2004).

[17] Laguerre describes the diasporic public sphere as a space that permeates the spatiality of the transnation, uses various means of expression from gossip to diasporic media (ethnic television, ethnic newspapers, ethnic radio) to public gatherings and discussions as well as the internet (web sites, chat rooms, emails). It has both online and off-line dimensions that feed each other, that sustain and expand the sphere of interaction from the local to the global formally and informally, and that differentiate the diasporic public sphere from other public spheres (2005:207).

[18] http://www.usip.org/events/2006/0725_haiti_diaspora.html.

Kingdom of heaven

In a new sermon at The Mount
(The ten-star boutique hotel, not a nameless hill),
Mr Jesus speaks of plans to launch
A zillion-dollar multinational conglomerate to produce
Steel-frame, titanium-coated made-to-order needles
Whose eyes allow camels large as leviathans
To cruise through.

ONE **CRUEL OPTIMISM**

1. *Optimism and Its Objects*

All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises,

some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much. Thus attachments do not all *feel* optimistic: one might dread, for example, returning to a scene of hunger, or longing, or the slapstick reiteration of a lover's or parent's predictable distortions. But being drawn to return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form. In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object.[1]

In the introduction I described "cruel optimism" as a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different from that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has invested her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object. One more thing: sometimes, the cruelty of an optimistic attachment is more easily perceived by an analyst who observes the cost of someone's or some group's attachment to *x*, since often persons and communities focus on some aspects of their relation to an object/world while disregarding others.[2] But if the cruelty of an attachment *is* experienced by someone/some group, even in a subtle fashion, the fear is that the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything. Often this fear of loss of a scene of optimism as such is unstated and only experienced in a sudden incapacity to manage startling situations, as we will see throughout this book.

One might point out that all objects/scenes of desire are problematic, in that investments in them and projections onto them are less about them than about what cluster of desires and affects we can manage to keep magnetized to them. I have indeed wondered whether all optimism is cruel, because the experience of loss of the conditions of its reproduction can be so breathtakingly bad, just as the threat of the loss of *x* in the scope of one's attachment drives can feel like a threat to living on itself. But some scenes of optimism are clearly crueler than others: where cruel optimism operates,

the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, working for a living, patriotism, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition.

This means that a poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near *x* (as though *x* has autonomous qualities) from the *activity* of the emotional habitus I have constructed, as a function of having *x* in my life, in order to be able to project out my endurance in proximity to the complex of what *x* seems to offer and proffer. To understand cruel optimism, therefore, one must embark on an analysis of indirection, which provides a way to think about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling. I learned how to do this from reading Barbara Johnson's work on apostrophe and free indirect discourse. In her poetics of indirection, each of these two rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of fantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer gains superhuman observational authority, enabling a performance of being that is made possible by the proximity of the object. Because this aesthetic process is something like what I am describing in the optimism of attachment, I'll describe a bit the shape of my transference with her thought.

In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," my key referent here, Johnson tracks the political consequences of apostrophe for what has become fetal personhood: a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor (a lover, a fetus) is animated in speech as distant enough for a conversation but close enough to be imaginable by the speaker in whose head the entire scene is happening.[3] But the condition of projected possibility, of a hearing that cannot take place in the terms of its enunciation ("you" are not here, "you" are eternally belated to the conversation with you that I am imagining) creates a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place. The present moment is made possible by the fantasy of you, laden with the *x* qualities I can project onto you, given your convenient absence. Apostrophe therefore appears to be a reaching out to a you, a direct movement from place *x* to place *y*, but it is actually a turning back, an animating of a receiver on behalf of the desire to make something happen *now* that realizes something *in the speaker*, makes the

speaker more or differently possible, because she has admitted, in a sense, the importance of speaking for, as, and to, two—but only under the condition, and illusion, that the two are really (in) one.

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there).[4] Later work, such as in "Muteness Envy," elaborates Johnson's description of the gendered rhetorical politics of this projection of voluble intersubjectivity.[5] The paradox remains that the lush submerging of one consciousness into another requires a double negation: of the speaker's boundaries, so s/he can grow bigger in rhetorical proximity to the object of desire; and of the spoken of, who is more or less a powerful mute placeholder providing an opportunity for the speaker's imagination of her/his/their flourishing.

Of course, existentially and psychoanalytically speaking, intersubjectivity is impossible. It is a wish, a desire, and a demand for an enduring sense of being with and in *x* and is related to that big knot that marks the indeterminate relation between a feeling of recognition and misrecognition. As chapter 4 argues at greater length, recognition is the misrecognition you can bear, a transaction that affirms you without, again, necessarily feeling good or being accurate (it might idealize, it might affirm your monstrosity, it might mirror your desire to be minimal enough to live under the radar, it might feel just right, and so on).[6] To elaborate the tragicomedy of intersubjective misrecognition as a kind of realism, Johnson's work on projection mines the projective, boundary-dissolving spaces of attachment to the object of address, who must be absent in order for the desiring subject of intersubjectivity to get some traction, to stabilize her proximity to the object/scene of promise.

When Johnson turns to free indirect discourse, with its circulation of merged and submerged observational subjectivity, the projection of the desire for intersubjectivity has even less pernicious outcomes.[7] In a narrator's partial-merging with a character's consciousness, say, free indirect discourse performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body, and therefore forces the reader to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands. In Johnson's work such a transformative trans-

action through reading/speaking "unfolds" the subject in a good way, despite whatever desires she may have not to become significantly different.[8] In this, her work predicted the aesthetics of subjective interpenetration more recently advanced by Tim Dean's Levinasian and Leo Bersani's psychoanalytic optimism about the cognitive-ethical decision to become transformed by a project of limited intersubjectivity, a letting in of the Other's being without any claim to knowledge of what the intimate Other is like.[9] Like Johnson's work on projection, their focus is on the optimism of attachment, and is often itself optimistic about the negations and extensions of personhood that forms of suspended intersubjectivity demand from the lover/reader.

What follows is not so buoyant: this chapter elaborates on and politicizes Freud's observation that "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them."[10] Eve Sedgwick describes Melanie Klein's depressive position as an orientation toward inducing a circuit of repair for a broken relation to the world.[11] The *politically* depressed position exacerbates the classic posture by raising a problem of attachment style in relation to a conflict of aims. The political depressive might be cool, cynical, shut off, searingly rational, or averse, and yet, having adopted a mode that might be called detachment, may not really be detached at all, but navigating an ongoing and sustaining relation to the scene and circuit of optimism and disappointment. (The seeming detachment of rationality, for example, is not a detachment at all, but an emotional style associated normatively with a rhetorical practice.)

Then, there remains the question of the *direction* of the repair toward or away from reestablishing a relation to the political object/scene that has structured one's relation to strangers, power, and the infrastructures of belonging. So, too, remains the question of who can bear to lose the world (the "libidinal position"), what happens when the loss of what's not working is more unbearable than the having of it, and vice versa. *Cruel Optimism* attends to practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people's struggles to change, but not traumatically, the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast.[12]

Cruel optimism is, then, like all phrases, a deictic—a phrase that points to a proximate location. As an analytic lever, it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call "the good life," which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. This is not

just a psychological state. The conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the "technologies of patience" that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*.[13] Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons people are not Bartleby, do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it. Or perhaps they move toward the normative form to get numb with the consensual promise, and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement. Working from pieces by John Ashbery, Charles Johnson, and Geoff Ryman, this chapter traverses three episodes in which what constitutes the cruel bindings of cruel optimism is surprising and induces diverse dramas of adjustment to being postgenre, postnormative, and not knowing entirely how to live. In the middle of all that, we discover in the impasse a rhythm that people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world.

11. *The Promise of the Object*

A recent, untitled poem by John Ashbery stages the most promising version of this scene of promises for us, foregrounding the Doppler effect of knowledge, phrasing as a kind of spatial lag the political economy of disavowal we drag around like a shadow, and yet providing an experience of liveness in the object that's not only livable, but at once *simplifying and revolutionary*—that bourgeois dream couplet:

> We were warned about spiders, and the
> occasional famine.
> We drove downtown to see our
> neighbors. None of them were home.
> We nestled in yards the municipality had
> created,

reminisced about other, different places—
but were they? Hadn't we known it all
before?

In vineyards where the bee's hymn
drowns the monotony,
we slept for peace, joining in the great
run.
He came up to me.
It was all as it had been,
except for the weight of the present,
that scuttled the pact we made with
heaven.
In truth there was no cause for rejoicing,
nor need to turn around, either.
We were lost just by standing,
listening to the hum of the wires overhead.[14]

The opening frame is the scene of the American dream not realized, but almost—or as Ashbery says in a contiguous poem, "Mirage control has sealed the borders/with light and the endless diffidence light begets."[15] Likewise, here, home and hymn *almost* rhyme; but we are restless, no one is home, nature threatens our sense of plenitude; and then there is what the speaker calls "the weight of the present" that makes our politics, therefore, quietist, involving sleeping for peace, deflating the symbolic into the somatic. How long have people thought about the present as having weight, as being a thing disconnected from other things, as an obstacle to living? Everything in this poem is very general, and yet we can derive some contexts from within it—imagining, for example, the weight of the default space of the poem, as it instantiates something of the American dream, suburb-style. The people who maintain the appearance of manicured space are not agents in the poem's "we"; they are actors, though, they make noise. Their sounds are the sounds of suburban leisure, not the workers' leisure. We know nothing of where they came from, the noises of their day beyond work, and their play. We know nothing about what any of the bodies look like, either: this is practical subjectivity manifesting personhood in action and rhetorical refraction. We can speculate, though, that the unmarked speaking people are probably white and American while their servants are probably not, but the

poem's idiom is so general and demographic so suppressed that its location in the normative iconicity of the unmarked forces realism into speculation.

This transition is part of its pedagogy of desire. These materialist concerns are not foregrounded in the poem's sense of its event or scene of prolific consciousness. It does not, however, violate the poem's aesthetic autonomy or singularity to think about the conditions of the production of autonomy in it. If anything, the explicit rhetoric of the neighbor shows it to be aware, after all, that the American dream does not allow a lot of time for curiosity about people it is not convenient or productive to have curiosity about. It is a space where the pleasure that one's neighbors give is in their proximity, their light availability to contact: in the American dream we see neighbors when we want to, when we're puttering outside or perhaps in a restaurant, and in any case the pleasure they provide is in their relative distance, their being parallel to, without being inside of, the narrator's "municipally" zoned property, where he hoards and enjoys his leisured pleasure, as though in a vineyard in the country, and where intrusions by the nosy neighbor, or superego, would interrupt his projections of happiness from the empire of the backyard.[16] The buzz of other people's labor in the vineyards is the condition of the privilege of being bored with life and three-quarters detached, absorbed in a process of circulating, in a vaguely lateral way.

In short, in this untitled poem, "we" have chosen to be deadened citizens, happy to be the color someone has placed inside of the lines: "we" would be tickled if, after all, "we" were those characters in Donald Barthelme's short story "I Bought a Little City" who live simply in a housing complex that, seen from the sky, reproduces the *Mona Lisa* for anyone with the time and money to inhabit a certain perspective. "We" live our lives as works of formal beauty, if not art: "we" live with a sense of slight excitement, composing ourselves patiently toward fulfilling the promise of living not too intensely the good life of what Slavoj Žižek might call a decaffeinated sublime.[17] There is nothing especially original or profound in Ashbery's send-up of suburban pleasures: the comforting sound and slightly dull rhythm of cliché performs exactly how much life one can bear to have there, and what it means to desire to move freely within the municipality, a manicured zone of what had been a fantasy.

Marx comments on the political economy of such a self-medicating and self-mediating subject orientation as an outcome of its relation to regimes of private property:

> Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,—in short, when it is *used* by us. . . . In the place of all physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses, into the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world. . . . The abolition of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its *object* has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. *The senses* have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, [in practice I can relate myself to a thing humanly only if the thing relates itself humanly to the human being] and vice versa. Need or enjoyment have consequently lost its *egotistical* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* by use becoming *human* use.[18]

Marx's analysis of the senses resonates throughout Ashbery's poem. As Marx would predict, the "we" of this poem begins by owning what it sees and seeing what it owns, feeling nature as an impingement on his autoreferential world; but, then, "we" is haunted that its knowledge is a repetition of a something it can't quite remember, perhaps because, as subjects of productive and consumer capital, "we" were willing to have our memories rezoned by the constant tinkering required to maintain the machinery and appearance of dependable life. "We" were docile, compliant, good sports. "We" live in proximity to a desire now bound up in this version of the good life and can almost remember being alive in it, flooded by a sense of expectation that "we" knew was only pointed to by property and the dependable life we meant to make for it. Our cruel objects don't feel threatening, just tiring.

Our senses are not yet theoreticians because they are bound up by the rule, the map, the inherited fantasy, and the hum of worker bees that fertilize materially the life we're moving through. Then again, maybe we did not really want our senses to be theoreticians: because then we would see ourselves as an effect of an exchange with the world, beholden to it, useful for it, rather than sovereign, at the end of the day. What do we do for a living, after

all? "We" seem to be folks of leisure, of the endless weekend, of our own exploitation off-screen, where a consumer's happy circulation in familiarity is almost all that matters: "Hadn't we known it all before?"

But despite the presenting face of it, as a poem voiced from within the community of faceless universal subjects of self-referentiality, the action of the poem is not bound up wholly in the vague attachment to an American dream that is actually lived as a series of missed encounters with disaster and human contact, cut to size in barely experienced episodes. The action of the poem is charted in the small movement between Home, Hymn, and Hum. Most importantly, there is an event that breaks up the undramatic self-hoarding of the collective life, and it is not the vacation in the vineyards that the relief of suburban unproductivity suggests.

Ashbery might be having a Christian thought, in the space between reverie and reverence: the bees seem to echo the famous passage from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* that describes how the wisdom of bees is far in advance of what human reason understands about its condition.[19] Relatedly, with all the Miltonic and Eliotic resonance of the poem's tropes, he might be revising his relation to religious lyric.[20] We might even think that the point is to contrast the poem's wittily ironic and vaguely sacred meditations with its key present and fleshly event, that scene of gayness in America embodied in the phrase: "He came up to me." This moment recalls the sexual shock of Virginia Woolf's "Chloe liked Olivia."[21] He came up to me and broke my contract with heaven not to be gay. Queerness and religious affect open up a space of resonance and reverence here: life is at the best imaginable of impasses. Life has been interrupted and, as Badiou would say, seized by an event that demands fidelity.[22]

This event, however, also has impact *despite* the autobiographical. The poem closes by focusing on what happens when someone allows himself to continue to be changed by an event of being with the object, not in the semi-anonymous projected proximity of apostrophe or the we-did-this and we-did-that sociality of the first stanza and not in terms of a dramatics of an uncloseted sexual identity, indeed not in terms of biography at all. The aesthetic and sexual scenario induces a mode of impersonality that is fully felt and dispersed in relationality and in the world. The seismic shift takes place in yielding to the proximity of an intimacy undefined by talking, made by a gesture of approach that holds open a space between two people just standing there, linked newly.

This shift in registers, which relocates the speaker of the poem into a sus-

pended place, might be understood in a Habermasean way. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas talks about the public/private zoning of normative being in terms of a split within the man of modernity, who is a man of the house and a man of the market.[23] Habermas suggests that the problem of living capitalist modernity is in managing the relations between these spheres as a bourgeois and a subject of emotions. A bourgeois is someone who instrumentalizes his social relations in terms of the rules of the market, and who is zoned by the people who assign value to property as having value in proximity to his property and his being self-possessed. For the bourgeois there is property, there is home, and the man is a little leader in the home, and everyone recognizes his authority wherever he carries his propriety onto property. At the same time the man cultivates an image of himself as fundamentally shaped in transactions of feeling, not capital. The "*homme*" in the house who sees himself as effective in the world and an authority in all domains of activity is distinguished and made singular by participation in a community of love, among people who choose each other—who, one might say, can come up to each other. The poem says that "In truth there was no cause for rejoicing": there was no cause for rejoicing in truth, or objectivity. Instead, there is the expectation of intimacy. And lyric poetry.

The event of live intimacy there is in this poem, though, happens outside of the home and the municipality, in an unzoned locale. The event of the poem is the thing that happens when he comes up to me and reminds me that I am not the subject of a hymn but of a hum, the thing that resonates around me, which might be heaven or bees or labor or desire or electric wires, but whatever it is it involves getting lost in proximity to someone and in becoming lost there, in a lovely way. He and I together experience a hum not where "we" were but all around, and that hum is a temporizing, a hesitation in time that is not in time with the world of drives and driving; nor is it in a mapped space, but in a space that is lost. What intersubjectivity there is has no content but is made in the simultaneity of listening, a scene of subjective experience that can only be seen and not heard along with the poet and his "him." Their intimacy is visible and radically private, and mostly uncoded. Life among *les hommes* between home and hymn becomes interrupted by an um, an interruption of truth, where the meaning of "we" shifts to the people who are now lost but alive and unvanquished in their displacement.

It might be kind of thrilling to think about this poem as delineating a means of production of the impasse of the present that hasn't yet been absorbed in the bourgeois senses, but that takes one out to the space of soci-

ality and into the world whose encounters absorb one into an unpredicted difference. Be open to the one who comes up to you. Be changed by an encounter. Become a poet of the episode, the elision, the ellipsis . . .

At the same time, it matters who speaks in this poem: a confident person. He finds possibility in a moment of suspension and requires neither the logic of the market to secure his value nor the intimate recognition of anything municipally normal or domestic to assure that he has boundaries. He can hold a nonspace without being meaningful. This does not seem to threaten him. Thus this instance of optimism might or might not be a part of cruel optimism: we don't know. The promise is everywhere, and the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event is not cause for mourning or rejoicing: it is just a fact. Does the episodic nature of the interruption enable him, after the moment, to return to the suburbs refreshed? Will they go to a high-end café and buy some intensified coffee supercharged by sugar and milk? Will they go get otherwise stimulated? Will they become different in a way on which they can build a world? Is the couple a stand-in for the collective that can now be awake for peace rather than somnambulant? Does the aesthetic moment of the different autonomy they get when they exist together in reverie become not a condition for *detaching* from the market but the condition of living in it, so that they can think that who they *really are* are people who can be lost in a moment? Habermas would perhaps note that the fantasy of the lovers' worlding power enables the speaker to disavow how otherwise he is constituted as a man of property and the market. John Ricco might argue that the men's outsideness and outsiderness demonstrates the potential resource of gayness to make a queer antinormativity that does not look back to domesticity wishfully. It is impossible to say how deep the break is. By the end, the speaker thinks he *really* lives now, in a moment of suspension. He *really* is a lover, an intimate, no longer the user of gas and fertilizer and the delegator of labor to others. That was in another life, so it seems.

Or, perhaps we can read the scale of the shift in terms of the humming soundtrack. We hear the hum of the world, says Ashbery's optimist, and aspire to be in proximity to it. In melodrama, the soundtrack is the supreme genre of ineloquence, or eloquence beyond words: it's what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself when you are bathed by emotions you can always recognize, and that whatever dissonance you sense is not the real, but an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work. The concept of "the soundtrack of

our lives"—to cite a cliché that is also the ironic name of a great postpunk neopsychedelic band and a growing category of niche marketing—is powerful because it accompanies one as a portable hoard that expresses one's true inner taste and high value. It holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living, and confirms everybody as a star. Your soundtrack is one place where you can be in love with yourself and express your fidelity to your own trueness in sublime conventionality, regardless of the particularity of the sounds. Our poem performs the situation of that potentially sustaining self-integration.

But that does not close the case of cruel optimism here, either, because the political context of the poem matters: it matters how much an instance of sentimental abstraction or emotional saturation costs, what labor fuels the shift from the concrete real to the soundtrack reel, and who's in control of the meaning of the shift, the pacing of the shift, and the consequences of detaching, even for a moment, from the consensual mirage. The political context that is mutely present does not trump the pleasures and openings either: what's irreconcilable measures the situation. Moving from home to hymn to hum, Ashbery's poem makes an interruptive stillness that's ineloquent and eloquent, meaningful and a placeholder for an unformed transitional experience. The soundtrack he hears is like lyric itself, comfortable with displacing realism about the material reproduction of life and the pain of intimacy and numbness to another time and space.

Moving from home to hum, to *homme* to um, an interruption: it sounds like punning, this Thoreauvian method of sounding out the space of a moment to measure its contours, to ask what is being stopped, who gets to do it, and what it would mean to be in this moment and then beyond it. It is always a risk to let someone in, to insist on a pacing different from the productivist pacing, say, of capitalist normativity. Of course "he" was not *my object*, my cluster of promises: "he" came up to *me*. Even if being the object is more secure than having one and risking disappointment, the poem stops before anyone gets too deep into the projecting and embedding. It's a poem about being open to an encounter that's potentially transformative, without having yet congealed into the couple form, a friendship, a quick sexual interlude, anything. It gestures toward being lost or suspended in a process of knowing nothing about how a scene of collaborative action will open up a space of potential liveness that is not a space on which anything can be built. In the space of lag between he and me something happens and the royal or sovereign we of the poem is no longer preoccupied. The encounter releases

the speaker to lose himself in the um of a singular sociality whose political economy we are asking questions of. If its happiness is cruel, requiring someone else's or some class's expenditure, we'll never know: the substitution of habituated indifference with a spreading pleasure might open up a wedge into an alternative ethics of living, or not. What happens next is the unfinished business of the poem: right now, the senses it stages are open to becoming theoreticians.

Sounding the poem for the meaning of the impasse it portrays in an event that displaces and dissolves ordinary life does not confirm that all lyric or episodic interruptions are even potentially a condition of possibility for imagining a radically resensualized post-neoliberal subject. But analytically this singular lyric opens up an opportunity to learn to pay attention to, have transference with, those moments of suspension in which the subject can no longer take his continuity in the material world and contemporary history for granted, because he feels full of a *something* ineloquently promising, a something that reveals, at the same time, a trenchant *nothing* about the general conditions of optimism and cruel optimism. Attending to the heterosonic and heterotemporal spaces within capital in which an event suspends ordinary time, sounds and senses can change, potentially, how we can understand what being historical means. Because Ashbery's speaker is confident, because he has the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of his flesh, I believe, he can stand detaching from the promise of his habituated life and can thrive in the openness of desire to form, as heady as that might be. If it is to be any more than a story about his singularity, though, the new intersubjective scene of sense would have to be able to extend the moment to activity that would dissolve the legitimacy of the optimism embedded in the now displaced world, with its promising proprietary zones, scenes, scapes, and institutions. Otherwise this is not an event but an episode in an environment that can well absorb and even sanction a little spontaneous leisure.

III. *The Promise of Exchange Value*

Ashbery's speaker is very lucky that he gets to dissolve and thrive in the collaborative unknowing initiated by the gesture, the encounter, and potentially the event that unbottle whatever it is that "he/me" can now rest in hearing. In Charles Johnson's "Exchange Value" a situation that might also have turned out that way does not. The way the story plays out what happens

when a certain kind of person is defeated by being between one habituated life and another yet to be invented because something good turns out to be unbearable says something about why the phrase "political economy" must thread throughout our analysis of cruel and usual optimism. Why do some people have the chops for improvising the state of being unknowing while others run out of breath, not humming but hoarding?

As with Ashbery's lyric, this story begins with a meditation on neighbors and neighborhoods. "Exchange Value" takes place during the 1970s on the South Side of Chicago, around 49th Street.[24] The protagonists, eighteen-year-old Cooter and his older brother, Loftis, are poor and African American. They do not drive downtown regularly to see their friends, or frequent other neighborhoods regularly: they do not have cars. Home and the 'hood are spaces of localized, personalized practices of encountering, wandering, and scrounging. But here, the intimacy of proximity has nothing to do with anyone's lyric intersubjectivity, even though the story takes place in the meditative rhythms of Cooter's way of parsing a new situation. The subjects of "Exchange Value" are expressive and opaque, but with quite different valences than in our previous example.

The story opens onto a plot: two brothers concoct a plan to rob their possibly dead neighbor, Miss Bailey. Who is Miss Bailey? Nobody knows: she is a neighbor, so one does not need to know her; her job is to be around, to be a "character," which is what you call someone who performs a familiar set of actions around you but is not intimate with you. Miss Bailey dresses in cast-off men's clothes; like Cooter and Loftis, she eats free meals that she begs off of a local Creole restaurant; when Cooter gives her pocket change, she doesn't spend it, she puts it in her mouth and eats it. This is what Cooter knows about her, deducing nothing more about her from her actions. The story takes place because she's always around and then she isn't. Cooter and Loftis think that perhaps she's died and determine to get the first pickings.

This kind of behavior, this scavenging in other people's stuff, is not characteristic of Cooter, but it doesn't violate his fundamental relation to the world either. Compared to his brother, he's always been branded a loser. "Mama used to say it was Loftis, not me, who'd go places . . . . Loftis, he graduated fifth at DuSable High School, had two gigs and, like Papa, he be always wanting the things white people had out in Hyde Park, where Mama did daywork sometimes." The children's parents are both dead by this point in their lives: Papa from overwork and Mama because she was "big as a Frigidaire."[25] Having watched this, Cooter refuses to ride the wave of the Ameri-

can dream: remembering his parents "killing theyselves for chump change—a pitiful li'l bowl of porridge—I get to thinking that even if I ain't had all I wanted, maybe I've had, you know, all I'm ever gonna get" and so organizes his life through the lateral enjoyments of fantasy (29–30).[26] "I can't keep no job and sorta stay close to home, watching TV, or reading *World's Finest* comic books, or maybe just laying dead, listening to music, imagining I see faces or foreign places in water stains on the wallpaper" (29).

During the 1970s the *World's Finest* series paired Batman and Superman as a double crime-fighting team. But Cooter's fantasies aren't mimetic—they're aleatory and passive ways of inhabiting and making an environment in which attachments are not optimistically pointing toward a cluster of transcendent promises but toward something else, something bearable that holds off not just the imminence of loss but the loss that, inevitably, just happened. For Cooter fantasy isn't a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the *action* of living for him, his way of passing time *not* trying to make something of himself in a system of exploitation and exchange. In the political economy of his world, that system does not produce rest or waste but slow death, the attrition of subjects by the situation in which capital determines value. In this story, that scene dedicates the worker's body to a deferred enjoyment that, if they're on the bottom of the class structure, they are not likely to be around to take pleasure in, as his parents' fate demonstrates.[27]

In contrast, Loftis's relation to fantasy is realist. He inherited his parents' optimism toward his life by being ambitious. But his strategies are strictly formal. He takes classes from Black Nationalists at the "Black People's Topographical Library," reads *Esquire* and *The Black Scholar*, and sews upscale labels onto his downscale clothes:[28] to him getting ahead is what counts, whether it is via power, labor, or the "hustle" (29). His opinion of Cooter is quite low, because the younger brother is dreamy and has no drive. Nonetheless, they decide to do the job together.

Miss Bailey's apartment is pitch dark and reeks of shit: a newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Defender* among the garbage reveals that her former employer, Henry Conners, had left her his entire estate, and that all of the years of scavenging and weirdness masked her possession of enormous wealth. It all makes sense in the dark. But when the light turns on, Cooter notes, "shapes come forward in the light and I thought for an instant like I'd slipped in space" (30). In this moment Cooter enters an impasse: his talent

at making out foreign shapes becomes applied to his own life, which he can no longer occupy.

> Her living room, webbed in dust, be filled to the max with dollars of all denominations, stacks of stock in General Motors, Gulf Oil, and 3M company in old White Owl cigar boxes, battered purses, or bound in pink rubber bands. . . . [E]verything, like a world inside the world, you take it from me, so like picturebook scenes of plentifulness you could seal yourself off in here and settle forever. Loftis and me both drew breath suddenly. There be unopened cases of Jack Daniel's, three safes cemented to the floor, hundreds of matchbooks, unworn clothes, a fuel-burning stove, dozens of wedding rings, rubbish, World War II magazines, a carton of a hundred canned sardines, mink stoles, old rags, a birdcage, a bucket of silver dollars, thousands of books, paintings, quarters in tobacco cans, two pianos, glass jars of pennies, a set of bagpipes, an almost complete Model A Ford dappled with rust, and I swear, three sections of a dead tree. (30–31)

How do we understand this collection not only of things but of details? Cooter's verbal response is not to be a historian but a moralist: "A *tree* ain't normal" (31). But to my eye the story's main event, the scene of potential change, is somatic. Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and as such is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent, engendering an atmosphere that they spend the rest of the story and their lives catching up to. It's like winning the lottery, getting a wash of money they haven't earned; being possessed by coming into possession of possessions, they are shocked into something impassive. This crack in the necessities of history makes Cooter's head get light—"My knees failed; then I did a Hollywood faint" (32); Loftis "pant[s] a little" and "for the first time . . . looked like he didn't know his next move" (31). Their bodies become suspended.

But if riches change history, they also make it possible for history to be something other than a zone of barely or badly imagined possibility. Loftis returns to crazy reason and puts the break on their adrenalin. He forces Cooter to catalogue everything. Eventually,

> that cranky old ninnyhammer's hoard adds up to $879,543 in cash, thirty-two bank books (some deposits be only $5), and me, I wasn't sure I was dreaming or what, but I suddenly flashed on this feeling, once we left her flat, that all the fears Loftis and me had about the future be gone, 'cause

> Miss Bailey's property was the past—the power of that fellah Henry Conners trapped like a bottle spirit—which we could live off, so it was the future too, pure potential: can *do*. Loftis got to talking on about how that piano we pushed home be equal to a thousand bills, jim, which equals, say, a bad TEAC A-3340 tape deck, or a down payment on a deuce-and-a-quarter. Its value be (Loftis say) that of a universal standard of measure, relational, unreal as number, so that tape deck could turn, magically, into two gold lamé suits, a trip to Tijuana, or twenty-five blow jobs from a ho—we had $879,543 worth of wishes, if you can deal with that. Be like Miss Bailey's stuff is raw energy, and Loftis and me, like wizards, could transform her stuff into anything else at will. All we had to do, it seemed to me, was decide exactly what to exchange it for. (34–35)

Cooter's senses, awakened to the promises clustered around things, have truly become theoreticians. Exchange value is not identical to the price of things, but marks a determination of what else a thing can get exchanged *for*, as though money were not involved, exactly, in the mediations. Your coat for a piano. Your money for your life.

The scene of shocking wealth changes the terms of the meaning of life, of the reproduction of life, and of exchange itself. Loftis gets very quiet. Cooter grabs a bunch of money and goes downtown to spend it. But though downtown Chicago is just a few miles away, it is like a foreign country to Cooter: he does not speak its economic language. Theory aside, in practice Cooter doesn't have a clue what to do with the money and realizes sickeningly, right away, that money cannot make you feel like you belong if you are not already privileged to feel that way. He buys ugly, badly made, expensive clothes that shame him right away. He eats meat until he gets sick. He takes cabs everywhere. When he gets home, his brother's gone psychotic. Loftis has built an elaborate trap, a vault to protect the money. He yells at Cooter for spending, because the only power is in hoarding. Loftis says, "As soon as you buy something you *lose* the power to buy something" (36). He cannot protect himself from Miss Bailey's fate: "suffering that special Negro fear of using up what little we get in this life" (37); inheritance "put her through changes, she be spellbound, possessed by the promise of life, panicky about depletion, and locked now in the past because *every* purchase, you know, has to be a poor buy: a loss of life" (37–38).

Notice how frequently Johnson reverts to the word "life." Can a person on the bottom survive living "life" stripped of the illusion of indefinite en-

durance via whatever kinds of fantasmatic practices he's been able to cobble together? How quickly can one dispense with the old bargains between defense and desire, adapting to a regime whose rules provide no felt comfort? "Exchange Value" demonstrates the proximity of two kinds of cruel optimism: with little cultural or economic capital and bearing the history of a racial disinheritance from the norms of white supremacist power, you work yourself to death, or coast to nonexistence; or, with the ballast of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die. Cooter is the realist; he can see that there's no way out, now, no living as if not in a relation to death, which is figured in all of the potential loss that precedes it.

This story is exquisitely tender toward the surrealism of survival in the context of poverty so extreme that riches can only confirm insecurity. On either side of the capital divide, human creativity, energy, and agency are all bound up in bargaining, strategizing: it only begins with the mother at the sink predicting which of her sons has the sense to ride the rhythms of remuneration in the system; the parents dying before the kids are of age because of having had to scavenge for what Cooter scathingly calls "chump change"; Cooter choosing to live to feed his passivity and capacity for fantasy; and Loftis living amorally among a variety of styles for gaining upward mobility. Before the windfall they all manifest the improvisatory opportunism of people on the bottom who, having little to lose, and living in an economy of pleading, sharing, and hiding, will go for something if the occasion permits (29).

But the inheritance the sons engineer produces a sensorial break for them, and whereas the earlier modes of optimism included a community and a meanwhile that meant being somewhere and knowing people no matter what style of living-on one chose, the later modes almost force privacy, hoarding, becoming pure potential itself. The inheritance becomes the promise of the promise, of a technical optimism; it sutures them both to life lived without risk, in proximity to plenitude without enjoyment. For Loftis it destroys the pleasure of the stress of getting through the day because the scale of potential loss is too huge. Cooter is more passive: he'll fold himself in to his brother's crypt because that's who he is, a person who does not make spaces but navigates the available ones.

At the same time, the withdrawal of the brothers from even vague participation in a life made from scheming mimes another aspect of the logic of capital. We have seen that they have always been the subjects of cruel

optimism and its modes of slow death, having inherited their parents' future-directed, life-building, do-it-so-your-kids-won't-have-to discipline of the respectable body and soul. Now, in this relation of life-building to life-expending, they induce new generational orientations toward exhaustion. From coasting to the activity of the hustle they embody styles of being that can seem anything from subcivilized and extralegal to entrepreneurial and ambitious, in the good sense. In this final logic, though, capitalist sensibility in "Exchange Value" manifests as crazy in the way that reason is crazy—not only crazy-dogged, crazy-compulsive, crazy-formalist, and crazy-habituated, but crazy from the activity of maintaining structural contradictions.

In this world the subject's confrontation with singularity is the most horrifying thing of all. Singularity is the part of one's sovereignty that cannot be handed off to a concept, object, or property. Under capitalism, money is power and if one has *only* surplus amounts of it, sovereignty is infinite and yet a weight that cannot be borne. Exchange value was supposed to leaven the subject through the handoff of value to another, who would return something *in kind*. The space of exchange would make breathing space, and breathing space is what the capitalist subject, in all of her ambition, is trying to attain—the good life, as in Ashbery's poem. But what usually gets returned in the exchange of desire embedded in things is merely, disappointingly, a brief episode, often with a *thing* as memento of the memory and not the actualization of desire. In "Exchange Value" the money form in particular reveals in-kind reciprocity as a mirage, the revelation of which destroys for the brothers, and Miss Bailey before them, the whole infrastructure of *trust* in the world that merges the credit with the affectional economy and keeps people attached to optimism of a particular kind.

If consumption promises satisfaction in substitution and then denies it because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism, in the impasse of desire, then hoarding seems like a solution to something. Hoarding controls the promise of value against expenditure, as it performs the enjoyment of an infinite present of holding pure potential. The end, then, is the story's tableau of the structural contradiction that shakes, stuns, and paralyzes its protagonists. Under capitalism, being in circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy, which is itself a hoarding station against a threatening real, and therefore *seems* like a better aspirational realism. But in fantasy one is stuck with one's singular sovereignty in an inex-

haustable nonrelationality. Therefore, an unquantifiable surplus of money—what any capitalist subject thought anyone would want—turns each brother into a walking contradiction, a being who has what everyone wants and yet who reveals that the want that had saturated the fantasy of the whole imaginable world is wanting, because sovereignty, while ideal, is a nightmarish burden, a psychotic loneliness, and just tainted.

This means that the object of cruel optimism here appears as the thing within any object to which one passes one's fantasy of sovereignty for safekeeping. In cruel optimism the subject or community turns its treasured attachments into safety-deposit objects that make it possible to bear sovereignty through its distribution, the energy of feeling relational, general, reciprocal, and accumulative. In circulation one becomes happy in an ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings. When one's sovereignty is delivered back into one's hands, though, its formerly distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity. In a relation of cruel optimism our activity is revealed as a vehicle for attaining a kind of passivity, as evidence of the desire to find forms in relation to which we can sustain a coasting sentience, in response to being *too* alive.

IV. *The Promise of Being Taught*

Even amid the racial mediations entrenched in capitalist inequalities in the United States, optimism involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition. But, one must always ask, recognition of what? One's self-idealization, one's style of ambivalence, one's tender bits, or one's longing for the event of recognition itself? For Ashbery, recognition's exchange value takes him out of personality, that cluster of familiar repetitions. It is pure potentiality in the good sense and provides a lovely experience of realizing that the flurry of activity that stood in for making a life was an impasse now passed by and replaced by another, slower one, where he experiences hanging around, letting something or someone come in the way a sound comes, without being defensive. For the men who still feel like boys at the close of "Exchange Value" the affect attached to optimism is either panic or numbness, not humming. While, as defenses, these modes of vibrating near-paralysis are cognate to the modes of getting by that preceded Miss Bailey's death, those earlier styles of floating beneath value while having

fantasies of it seem utopian compared to the crypt of shattered being that pecuniary optimism cruelly engenders.

It is striking that these moments of optimism, which mark a possibility that the habits of a history might *not* be reproduced, release an overwhelmingly negative force. One predicts such effects in traumatic scenes, but it is not usual to think about an optimistic event as having the same potential consequences. The conventional fantasy that a revolutionary lifting of being might happen in proximity to the new object/scene of promise would predict otherwise than that a person or a group might prefer, after all, to surf from episode to episode while leaning toward a cluster of vaguely phrased prospects. And yet: at a certain degree of abstraction both from trauma and optimism the sensual experience of self-dissolution, radically reshaped consciousness, new sensoria, and narrative rupture can look similar; the subject's grasping toward stabilizing form, too, in the face of dissolution, looks like classic compensation, in which the production of habits that signify predictability defends against losing emotional shape entirely.

I have suggested that the particular ways in which identity and desire are articulated and lived sensually within capitalist culture produce such counterintuitive overlaps. But it would be reductive to read the preceding as a claim that anyone's subjective transaction with the optimistic structure of value in capital *produces* the knotty entailments of cruel optimism as such. People *are* worn out by the activity of life-building, *especially* the poor and the nonnormative. But lives are singular; people make mistakes, are inconstant, cruel, and kind; and accidents happen. This essay's archive focuses on artworks that deliberately remediate singularities into cases of nonuniversal but general abstraction, providing narrative scenarios of how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being *x* and having *x*, given that their attachments were promises and not possessions after all. Geoff Ryman's historical novel, *Was*, offers yet a different scenario for tracking the enduring charisma of the normative. Weaving highly subjective activities of fantasy-making through agrarian Kansas and the mass culture industry, *Was* uses four encounters with *The Wizard of Oz* to narrate the processes by which people hoard themselves in fear of dissolution and yet seek to dissolve their hoard in transformative experiences of attachment whose effects are frightening, exhilarating, the only thing that makes living worthwhile, and yet a threat to existence itself. *Was* provides a kind of limit case of cruel optimism, as its pursuit of the affective continuity of trauma and optimism in self-unfolding excitement is neither comic, nor

tragic, nor melodramatic—but metaformal. Mining self-loss in episodes ranging from absorption in pretty things to crazy delusion, it thinks about genre as *defense*. *Was* validates fantasy as a life-sustaining defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history.

In this novel as in our other examples, the affective feeling of normativity is expressed in the sense that one ought to be dealt with gently by the world and to live happily with strangers and intimates without being torn and worn out by the labor of disappointment and the disappointment of labor. Here, though, evidence of the possibility of enduring that way in one's object/scene is not embedded in the couple form, the love plot, the family, fame, work, wealth, or property. Those are the sites of cruel optimism, scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving. Instead, the novel offers a two-step of saturation in mass fantasy and history as solutions to the problem of surviving the brutality of trauma *and* optimism in the ordinary world. It sees leaving the singular for the general through embracing a range of stranger intimacy as the best resource for thriving, but in at least one case, even those encounters endanger the subject who is so worn out by the work of surviving the bad life that all she has left, in a sense, are her defenses.

Was constructs a post-traumatic drama that is held together, in the end, by the governing consciousness of Bill Davison, a mental health worker, a white heterosexual Midwesterner whose only previous personal brush with trauma had been ambivalence toward his fiancée, but whose professional capacity to enter into the impasse with his patients, and to let their impasses into him, makes him the novel's optimistic remainder, a rich witness. The first traumatic story told is about the real Dorothy Gale, spelled Gael, partly, I imagine, to link up the girl who's transported to Oz on a strong breeze to someone in prison, and also to link her to the Gaelic part of Scotland, home of the historical novel, the genre whose affective and political conventions shape explicitly Ryman's meditation on experiences and memories whose traces are in archives, landscapes, and bodies scattered throughout Kansas, Canada, and the United States. Like Cooter, this Dorothy Gael uses whatever fantasy she can scrape together to survive her scene of hopeless historical embeddedness. But her process is not to drift vaguely but intensely, by way of multigeneric invention: dreams, fantasies, private plays, psychotic projection, aggressive quiet, lying, being a loud bully and a frank truth-teller. Dorothy's creativity makes a wall of post-traumatic noise, as she has been abandoned by her parents, raped and shamed by her Uncle Henry Gulch,

shunned by children for being big, fat, and ineloquent. Part Two of *Was* tells the story of Judy Garland as the child Frances Gumm. On the *Wizard of Oz* set she plays Dorothy Gale as vaguely sexualized sweetheart, her breasts tightly bound so that she can remain a child and therefore have *her* childhood stolen from her. It is not stolen through rape but by parents bound up in their own fantasies of living through children in terms of money and fame (Gumm's mother) or sex (Gumm's father, whose object choice was young boys). The third story in *Was* is about a fictional gay man, a minor Hollywood actor named Jonathan, whose fame comes from being the monster in serial-killer movies titled *The Child Minder* and who, as the book begins, is offered a part in a touring *Wizard of Oz* company while he is entering AIDS dementia. All of these stories are about the cruelty of optimism revealed to people without control over the material conditions of their lives, or whose relation to fantasy is such that the perverse shuttling between fantasy and realism destroys, according to Ryman, people and the nation. I cannot do justice here to the singularities of what optimism makes possible and impossible in this entire book; instead, I want to focus on a scene that makes the whole book possible. In this scene Dorothy Gael encounters a substitute teacher, Frank Baum, in her rural Kansas elementary school.

"The children," writes Ryman, "knew the Substitute was not a real teacher because he was so soft."[29] "Substitute" derives from the word "succeed," and the sense of possibility around the changeover is deeply embedded in the word. A *Substitute* brings optimism if he hasn't yet been defeated—by life or by the students. He enters their lives as a new site for attachment, a dedramatized possibility. He is by definition a placeholder, a space of abeyance, an aleatory event. His coming is not personal—he is not there for anyone in particular. The amount of affect released around him says something about the intensity of the children's available drive to be less dead, numb, neutralized, or crazy with habit; but it says nothing about what it would feel like to be in transit between the stale life and all its others, or whether that feeling would lead to something good.

Of course often students are cruel to substitutes, out of excitement at the unpredictable and out of not having fear or transference to make them docile or even desiring of a recognition that has no time to be built. But this substitute is special to Dorothy: he is an actor, like her parents; he teaches them Turkish and tells them about alternative histories lived right now and in the past (171). Dorothy fantasizes about Frank Baum not in a narrative way, but with a mixture of sheer pleasure and defense: "Frank, Frank, as

her uncle put his hands on her" (169); then she berates herself for her "own unworthiness" (169) because she knows "how beautiful you are and I know how ugly I am and how you could never have anything to do with me" (174). She says his name, Frank, over and over: it "seemed to sum up everything that was missing from her life" (169). Yet face-to-face she cannot bear the feeling of relief from her life that the substitute's being near provides for her. She alternately bristles and melts at his deference, his undemanding kindness. She mocks him and disrupts class to drown out her tenderness, but obeys him when he asks her to leave the room to just write something, anything.

What she comes back with is a lie, a wish. Her dog, Toto, had been murdered by her aunt and uncle, who hated him and who had no food to spare for him. But the story she hands in to the substitute *is* a substitute: it is about how happy she and Toto are. It includes sentences about how they play together and how exuberant he is, running around yelping "like he is saying hello to everything" (174). Imaginary Toto sits on her lap, licks her hand, has a cold nose, sleeps on her lap, and eats food that Auntie Em gives her to give him. The essay suggests a successful life, a life where love circulates and extends its sympathies, rather than the life she actually lives, where "[i]t was as if they had all stood back-to-back, shouting 'love' at the tops of their lungs, but in the wrong direction, away from each other" (221). It carries traces of all of the good experience Dorothy has ever had. The essay closes this way: "I did not call him Toto. That is the name my mother gave him when she was alive. It is the same as mine" (175).

Toto, Dodo, Dorothy: the teacher sees that the child has opened up something in herself, let down a defense, and he is moved by the bravery of her admission of identification and attachment. But he makes the mistake of being mimetic in response, acting soft toward her in a way he might imagine that she seeks to be: "'I'm very glad,' he murmured, 'that you have something to love as much as that little animal'" (175). Dorothy goes ballistic at this response and insults Baum, but goes on to blurt out all of the truths of her life, in public, in front of the other students. She talks nonstop about being raped and hungry all the time, about the murder of her dog, and about her ineloquence: "I can't say anything," she closes (176). That phrase means she can't do anything to change anything. From here she regresses to yelping and tries to dig a hole in the ground, to become the size she feels, and also to become, in a sense, an embodiment of the last thing she loved. After that, Dorothy goes crazy. She lives in a fantasy world of her own, wandering

homeless and free, especially, of the capacity to reflect on loss in the modalities of realism, tragedy, or melodrama. To protect her last iota of optimism, she goes crazy.

In *Was* Baum goes on to write *The Wizard of Oz* as a gift of alternativity to the person who can't say or do anything to change her life materially, and who has taken in so much that one moment of relief from herself produces a permanent crack in the available genres of her survival. In "What is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari exhort people to become minor in exactly that way, to deterritorialize from the normal by digging a hole in sense like a dog or a mole.[30] Creating an impasse, a space of internal displacement, in this view, shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusions of compliance with autonomous individuality. This strategy looks promising in the Ashbery poem. But in "Exchange Value," a moment of relief produces a psychotic defense against the risk of losing optimism. For Dorothy Gael, in *Was*, the optimism of attachment to another living being is itself the cruelest slap of all.

From this cluster we can understand a bit more of the magnetic attraction to cruel optimism. Any object of optimism promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something, and above all the protection of the desire that made this object or scene powerful enough to have magnetized an attachment to it. When these relations of proximity and approximate exchange happen, the hope is that what misses the mark and disappoints won't much threaten anything in the ongoing reproduction of life, but will allow zones of optimism a kind of compromised endurance. In these zones, the hope is that the labor of maintaining optimism will not be negated by the work of world-maintenance as such and will allow the flirtation with *some* good-life sweetness to continue. But so many of the normative and singular objects made available for investing in the world are themselves threats to both the energy and the fantasy of ongoingness, namely, that people/collectivities face daily the cruelty not just of potentially relinquishing their objects or changing their lives, but of losing the binding that fantasy itself has allowed to what's potentially there in the risky domains of the yet untested and unlived life. The texts we have looked at stage moments when life could become otherwise, in the good sense. A substantive change of heart, a sensorial shift, intersubjectivity, or transference with a new promising object does not generate on its own the better good life, though, and never without an equally threatening experience of loss—and neither can a single collaboration, whether of a couple,

brothers, or in pedagogy. Fantasy is an opening and a defense. The vague expectations of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the heterotopias of sovereignty amid structural inequality, political depression, and other intimate disappointments. By staging the impasse in which breakdown does its work on suspending the rules and norms of the world, these works show us how to pay attention to the built and affective infrastructure of the ordinary, and how to encounter what happens when infrastructural stress produces a dramatic tableau. In scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place. Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment.

What Crosses the Sea

Not birds. Not kites.
They are children wrapped
in shawls, placed inside cots.
In the sky, warplanes detonate
bombs on the earth, the houses
reduced to debris, to a spectacle
of grief that the survivors of war
stare at, their eyes brimming
sadness. What seeks to cross the sea
is the son of a refugee. Like the sky,
the sea is not a home for children.
In Rio, the drowned bodies
of a man and his daughter
are washed ashore. They
look like waste, like discarded
items. What is home when
birds vanish in the smoke
of bombs that saturates the sky?
Somewhere there are women
scouring the debris for the
shoes of their children,
for the toys of their children,
for the bones of their children.
In the streets, there are bodies
displayed like the photographs
of missing children. What is home
when blood spills like dews
on the earth? Tonight the aches
of being a mother grip my heart as
I sleep beside my child in bed.
I know there are days when,
instead of waking to the songs
of birds, what greets us is the
dirge that traverses the sky.
In this world, I pray for the
women backing their children
as they cross the sea, as they
search for a home that offers
them an eternity of peace.

5
Necro-Capitalism

Global Civil War?

The political theory of the past century resorted broadly to two models of interpretation in order to explain the evolution of the world. The first was the geopolitical model, based on the territorial players in the game: nation states, military alliances, geographical spaces defined by ethnicity, religion, nationality. The second was a socio-ideological model, based on the hypothesis that conflicts were motivated by economic interests and that the actors were social classes or political parties pursuing projects of social organization. It worked, as during the past century the historical process could be described as the interaction of the aforementioned models, and strategies of action could be conceived on that ground.

Even though according to Marx class struggle cannot be identified with a national project, the Russian Revolution linked and subordinated the destiny of the workers' movement in the world to the establishment of a new state, the Soviet Union. In the seventy years that followed the Revolution, class struggle has been indissolubly linked to

the geopolitical. Western capitalism and Soviet socialism have turned into two military blocks in permanent conflict, and all social struggle has been subjected to the geopolitical destiny of the first socialist state – the authoritarian state whose force of attraction decreased until the point of its final collapse in 1989–91.

Because it subjected the social dynamics and autonomous movement of workers to the destiny of an imperial authoritarian state, the Leninist decision of 1917 and the ensuing militarization of class struggle can be understood as the beginning of the defeat of communism and of internationalism itself.

When, finally, the Soviet empire crumbled, its dismantlement resulted in the effective collapse of the communist project and of the workers' movement worldwide, paving the way for the neoliberal offensive.

The *nomenklatura* of communist establishment in Russia and in other territories of the former empire turned out to be themselves the perpetrators of the privatization of social services and of productive structures.

Class struggle has not been abandoned since the end of the Soviet empire, not at all: instead it has turned into a unilateral war against people's daily life, against salaries and social services, against the social civilization established over the last two centuries of modern progress. But over the recent decades, workers have been helplessly facing the neoliberal firing squad.

As an effect of the de-solidarization that followed the worldwide defeat of socialism, the model of interpretation based on the concept of social conflict has surreptitiously been put aside, and the geopolitical model has seized the upper hand as the one to best describe the historical process.

The living subjectivities involved in such conflict have lost consciousness of their social dimension, and have redefined themselves in terms of national or religious

belonging. Since the Yugoslav Wars, nation states have been re-motivated along ethnic and religious identities. This tendency has been exacerbated by the American wars and the subsequent rise of Islamist jihadism. At the end of 2015 (when I started writing this torturous book), the talk of world war was recurrent in public discourse and in the press.

Privatization of War

It would be inappropriate to name the current state ‘world war’ as with the conflicts of the past century.

The causes of the current looming war lie in the past two hundred years of the colonial impoverishment and humiliation of the majority of the world’s population, in the philosophy of neoliberal competition and in the privatization of everything, including war itself.

War is being normalized: the stock markets no longer react to massacres. Instead, their main worry is the impending stagnation of the world economy. After every armed attack, by Islamists or by white supremacists, by improvised random murderers or by well-trained killers, the American people run to buy more weapons. The available supply of weapons is increasing not only in the arsenals of the national powers but also in the kitchens and bedrooms of normal families.

In December 2015, Michele Fiore, a Republican assemblywoman in Las Vegas posted a Merry Christmas greeting on Facebook. At first glance, it seems like any other holiday card: three generations in red shirts and jeans standing in front of a Christmas tree. But if you look again you see that Fiore, her adult daughters, their husbands, and one of her grandchildren are all holding firearms.

Privatization of war is an obvious feature of neoliberal deregulation, and the same paradigm has generated Halliburton and the Sinaloa Cartel, Blackwater and Daesh.

The business of violence is one of the main branches of the global economy, and financial abstraction does not discriminate against criminal money.

The process of externalization and privatization is now provoking a worldwide civil war that is feeding on itself. According to Nicholas Kristof, 'In the last four years, more people have died in the United States from guns (including suicides and accidents) than Americans died in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq combined.'[1]

We are not heading towards a third world war. There will be no declaration of war, but a proliferation of uncountable combat zones. There will be no unification of the fronts, but fragmented micro-conflicts and uncanny alliances with no general strategic vision.

'World war' is not the right term for this very original form of apocalypse we are now in. I call it 'fragmentary global civil war'.

The fragments are not converging, because the war is everywhere. According to Ash Carter, former American secretary of defense, 'Destructive power of greater and greater magnitude falls into the hands of smaller and smaller groups of human beings.'[2]

In conditions of war privatization, no geopolitical order of the world can be imagined, no consent among the conflicting religious tribes can be pursued. No beginning, no end because this war is endless, as it was decreed in 2001 by George Bush and Dick Cheney, who willingly fell into the trap set by bin Laden. From the Paradise where he certainly dwells, bin Laden looks upon the present emergence of the Caliphate of Death, smiling: so far, he can claim that the Army of Allah is winning the war.

Some American Republicans say that the spontaneous killing sprees that occur with regularity are the product of mental illness. They are right in a way, but they wrongly categorize what they label mental illness. This mental illness

is not the rare malady of some isolated social dropout; it is the widespread consequence of panic, depression, precariousness and humiliation. These, too, are at the heart of the contemporary fragmentary global war, and they are spreading everywhere, rooted as they are in the legacy of colonialism and in the frantic competition of the everyday.

Neoliberal deregulation has given birth to a worldwide regime of necro-economy: moral prescriptions and legal regulations have been annulled by the all-encompassing law of competition. From its very beginning, Thatcher's philosophy prescribed war among individuals. Hobbes and Darwin and Hayek have been summoned to conceptualize the end of social civilization, the end of peace.

Forget about the religious or ideological labels of the agents of massive violence; look at their true natures. Take the Sinaloa Cartel and Daesh, then compare them to Blackwater and to Exxon Mobil. They have much more in common than not. Their shared goal is to extract a maximum of money from investment in the most exciting products of the contemporary economy: terror, horror and death.

Global Work Composition: Inside and Outside the Bunker

At the end of 2013, a group of Bay Area activists launched a protest campaign against the private buses that carried the everyday cognitive workers of the city to Google's Mountain View headquarters. These buses are bulky vehicles that the workers of the net corporation use as mobile offices. The nerds, in fact, are working all the time, with the merry awareness of being the protagonists of the ultimate virtualization of life and final step towards bunkerization. Leaving aside the immediate motivations of the protest (the

protection of public space against the invasion of private transportation), this conflict sheds light on the new stratification of labour, and demands new conceptual tools. The composition of contemporary global society is structured around a fundamental separation between the inside-the-bunker social sphere and the outside-the-bunker social sphere.

The bunker is the area in which the financial class and the cognitive workers live and work. This area can be outlined in terms of technical environment or in terms of urban location, and it is here where the main connective and recombinant functions are situated: the function of the financial decisions that dominate and exploit the whole cycle of production, and the function of cognitive labour, mostly precarious but protected to some extent, because it is strictly necessary to the accumulation of capital.

Both of these functions are internally stratified and differentiated, but the sphere in which all of its functionaries live and produce is ever more wired, virtualized and sealed, separated from the territorial society that lives outside the bunker, where industrial workers labour in factories and where the growing areas of poverty and marginalization dwell.

The extra-bunker sphere is composed of all those people who have no place inside the networked cycle. While they can obviously own and use wired, technical devices for their private lives and activities, their subsistence is based on a direct relation to the physical matter of production. This is the unprotected territory of the metropolis: industrial workers, the unemployed, migrants, refugees.

The old industrial bourgeoisie, too, were interested in preserving the physical distinction of territory. Although separated from the lower classes, the bourgeoisie lived in the same urban space, and expected profits from the progress of society as a whole and from the community’s future consumption.

Financial capital is not interested in the territory, nor in the future of the community, as it has no contact with extra-bunker spaces. Financial profit is realized in the dimension of simultaneity and virtual exchange.

The financial class dwells in militarily protected gate communities, and takes holidays in simulated locations guarded by armies, where the snow is fake, the mountains are fake, the sea is fake and the human beings express fake sentiments. Furthermore, financial capital is not planning for any future, as the future is *now*, in the instantaneous valorization of virtual value and in the devastation of the radial spaces of physical territory.

Cognitive workers, indeed, are living in a halfway condition: as long as they are doing their job, they live inside the bunker, but as soon as they suspend their intercourse with the connected screen, as soon as they come out of the protected offices of their net corporation, they, too, sink into the metropolitan jungle.

Those who do not work directly in the networked or financial spheres are living outside of the bunker. Industrial workers have not decreased in their number, as the globalization of the labour market has introduced new masses of workers into the physical process of production, but they have lost any political or syndicated power. They are continuously threatened by the process of delocalization, and they have no possibility of intervening in decision-making processes, as they cannot access the bunker where the decisions are made and implemented.

The Ultimate Business

Outside the bunker (although subject to the bunker), the necro-economy is growing in extent and economic importance. Necro-work is the activity that produces profit for corporations whose actual product is death.

In his book *Gomorrah* – which is both a wonderful literary achievement and a detailed documentation of criminal activity in the area of Naples – Roberto Saviano has outlined the foundation of contemporary necro-economics.

> Profit, business, capital. Nothing else. One tends to think that the power determining certain dynamics is obscure, and so must issue from an obscure entity: the Chinese Mafia. A synthesis that cancels out all intermediate stages, financial transfers, and investments – everything that makes a criminal economic outfit powerful …
>
> You beat the competition on price. Same merchandise quality but at a 4, 6, 10 percent discount. Percentages no sales rep could offer, and percentages are what make or break a store, give birth to new shopping centres, bring in guaranteed earnings and, with them, secure bank loans. Prices have to be lower. Everything has to move quickly and secretly, be squeezed into buying and selling.[3]

The importance of criminal activity is growing and growing as an increasing number of young people at the urban peripheries of the world are left aside, humiliated and infuriated by competition and by the consumerist race.

Enterprises of terror and death are proliferating around the world: two outstanding examples are the Mexican narco-business and Daesh, the Syraqi Caliphate.

Joaquin Guzmán, better known as ‘El Chapo’ (‘Shorty’), became Mexico’s top drug kingpin in 2003 after the arrest of his rival Osiel Cárdenas of the Gulf Cartel. He is considered the ‘most powerful drug trafficker in the world’ by the United States Department of the Treasury. Every year from 2009 to 2011, *Forbes* ranked Guzmán as one of the most powerful people in the world, ranking him forty-first, sixtieth and fifty-fifth respectively. This made him the second most powerful man in Mexico, after Carlos Slim. He was named the tenth richest man in Mexico (and 1,140th in the world) in 2011, with a net worth of roughly US $1 billion. Not surprisingly, the magazine considered El Chapo as a deregulated entrepreneur who invests his capital in the ultimate business.

Dan Winslow has written extensively about the Mexican cartels and the Sinaloa Cartel in particular, which holds a preeminent importance in the history of the Narco-business.

The hellish Mexican situation was widely trumpeted in the international press at the end of 2014, when forty-three students of the Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa were kidnapped during an action of the police that, in this case (and in many, many others), was taken in coordination with local politicians linked to the narco-business.

According to the Italian journalist Federico Mastrogiovanni, the identification of the Mexican criminal industry as 'narco' is wrong, as the actual extension of criminal activities is not limited to drug-smuggling and production, but range from ransom to prostitution, from exploitation of slave labour to shale gas extraction. In his book *Ni vivos ni muertos* (Neither Alive Nor Dead), Mastrogiovanni focuses especially on the business of capturing and torturing human beings, and suggests that the narco-businesses are aiming to develop and expand into this market as well as others, such as a special interest in shale gas. In order to extract shale gas, it is necessary to dislodge the population of villages who live in areas like the Cuenca de Burgos. According to Mastrogiovanni, mass murders in the area have been planned and accomplished to achieve this purpose.

The Work of Terror

If the Mexican cartels are recruiting the young and unemployed from the poorest villages of the country (we might call them narco-proletarians), similarly the Caliphate recruits young men in the suburbs of London, Cairo, Tunis and Paris, then trains them to kidnap and slaughter people at random.

Thus an army of necro-workers is expanding around the world: the young unemployed who daily put their lives at risk in exchange for a salary, who develop a specialization in violence, torture and murder, and are paid for their criminal skills.

Daesh pays a monthly salary of US $450, while cashing funds from ransoms, oil revenues, and the fiscal imposition on millions of Sunni people. They deliver a postmodern Middle Age, but this is not backward at all, this is the anticipation of the future.

Dubiq, the advertising agency of the Islamic State has released a video in the style of any other advertisement: buy this product and you'll be happy.[4] Multiple camera angles, slick graphics, slow motion replays and even artificial wind give the whole thing a more dramatic feel.

Join the Allah Army and you'll find friends, warmth and well-being. Jihad is the best therapy for depression.

It is a message for feeble-minded people, for people who are suffering and crave warmth, strength of friendship, belonging. Not so different from the ads that we can see every day in the streets of our own cities, only more sincere on the subject of suicide. Suicide is crucial to this video: 6,500 soldiers in the US Army commit suicide every year, according to Dubiq. Americans die in anger, despair, while the soldiers of God die eager to meet the seventy virgins awaiting them in Paradise.

> The main reason why some young people are attracted to IS is because they are looking for jobs and it is easy to join it. IS has opened the door for Sunnis in the area that stretches from southern Baghdad to the outskirts of the city of Fallujah, by providing a good salary ... things changed since the fall of Fallujah, as more young people joined IS. [Since then,] their duties have become daily and only about combat. [In return, they get] a monthly income of $400 to $500, but it is intermittent and not stable.[5]

It's easy to understand that Daesh will not be eradicated by the rhetorical speeches of François Hollande or by carpet

bombings. Their potential recruiting area, in fact, is large: millions of young Muslims who were ten years old when they watched the Abu Ghraib images on their TV screens and are now moneyless on the outskirts of London and Paris, of Cairo and Tunis, ready to join up and to slit Western throats in exchange for a salary. Why not? Business is business.

The emerging composition of work is changing in a frightening way: violence is no longer a marginal tool for social repression, but a normal mode of production, a special cycle of capital accumulation.

Is There a Way Out?

After the attacks in the centre of Paris on 13 November 2015, a nervous French president declared, 'The security pact takes precedence over stability pact. France is at war.'

Bin Laden's dream was in that moment fulfilled: a small group of fanatics provoked global civil war. Can it now be stopped?

Under the present conditions of long-lasting economic stagnation, in which the emerging markets are crumbling, the European Union is paralyzed and the promised economic recovery is elusive, it is hard to expect an awakening from this nightmare. The only imaginable way out of this hell is the end of financial capitalism, but this does not seem to be at hand.

Nevertheless, this is the only prospect we can pursue in this time of obscurantism: creating solidarity among the bodies of cognitive workers worldwide and building a techno-poetical platform for the collaboration of cognitive workers so as to liberate knowledge from religious dogma and from economic dogma, too.

Globalism has brought about the obliteration of modern universalism: capital flows freely everywhere and the labour market is globally unified, but this does not lead to the free

circulation of women and men, nor to the affirmation of universal reason in the world. Rather, the opposite is happening: as the intellectual energies of society are captured by the network of financial abstraction, as cognitive labour is subjugated by the abstract law of valorization and human communication is transformed into abstract interaction among disembodied digital agents, the social body has become detached from the general intellect. The subsumption of the general intellect by the corporate kingdom of abstraction is depriving the living community of intelligence, understanding and affective emotion.

And the brainless body reacts. On one side, a huge wave of mental suffering, on the other side, the much-advertised cure for depression: fanaticism, fascism and war. And suicide at the end of it all.

Black Earth

Necro-labour is an essential part of the global economy, and terror a defining feature of power in the present neoliberal world. A second feature of contemporary power is a form of totalitarianism based on the perception of danger, fear and apocalypse.

In the book *Black Heart: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, Timothy Snyder argues that violent totalitarian drives can re-emerge as an effect of the contemporary observation of a looming apocalyptic danger. Such a sense is, indeed, actually spreading because of the environmental disruptions resulting from global warming.

> The planet is changing in ways that might make Hitlerian description of life, space and time more plausible. The expected increase of average global temperatures by four degrees Celsius this century would transform human life on much of the globe … Hitler was a child of the first globalisation, which arose under imperial auspices at the end of the nineteenth century. We are children of the second, that of the late twentieth century … When a global order collapses, as was the

> experience of many Europeans in the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, a simplistic diagnosis such as Hitler's can seem to clarify the global by referring to the ecological, supernatural, or the conspiratorial. When the normal rules seem to have been broken and expectations have been shattered, a suspicion can be burnished that someone (the Jews, for example) has somehow diverted nature from its proper course. A problem that is truly planetary in scale, such as climate change, obviously demands global solutions, and one apparent solution is to define a global enemy.

According to Snyder, when speaking of Nazism we should distinguish between history and warning: between the historical occurrence of the German outbreak of genocidal violence and the general implication that extreme totalitarianism and violence may emerge in situations of critical danger, in which a community can be easily united by the identification of an enemy. The effect of neoliberal globalization, the ensuing accelerated process of deterritorialization, and the aggressive competition unleashed can lead – and actually does lead – people to fiercely identify with a community of belonging, and to antagonize any ethnic or religious minority. The frightening trend that I detect in the present becoming of world history is the reaction of the declining white race against the deterritorialization that is sweeping over the economic, cultural and ethnic lines on the map of the world.

The emergence of Trump in American politics, and the proliferation of nationalist regimes in the Euro-Asian continent, may be read as the formation of an anti-globalist front that unifies Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, Jarosław Kacziński and Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen and Boris Johnson. This front is the expression of the pressure of the white working class defeated by financial globalism, and it is heading for a total opposition to the neoliberal elite.

Marwa Helal

intimacy v. isolation ixix.

he aint the one if youre asking yourself if he's a
vampire feeding off of the pictures with your
head cut off silky smooth with a perfect kick of
contrast in the highlights
the downturn in the tantric attention economy fall
back in the gauze of a sodden june afternoon
glowing
i said i loved you and i wanted music / in the
man's car next to /
i said i loved you and i wanted i wanted
justice under my nose
i said i loved you and i wanted i wanted
just us under my nose

Good morning. you called again a few times
while i was sleeping?
my phone was on the other side of the room i
couldn't get up and get it without going thru my
back pain again and the pills had just kicked in.
next time i'll just

what you know about love?
what you know about life?
what you know about blood?
pish you aint even my type

CHAPTER 4

The Performativity of Disgust

> The term 'disgust', in its simplest sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour or nature of our food. In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating . . . and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty. (Darwin 1904: 269)

What does it mean to feel 'utter disgust'? Why do some things seem more disgusting than others? Are we necessarily disgusted by the same things and can we recognise when another is 'plainly disgusted', by what they do with their bodies? In the quotation above, the complexity of disgust could not be more apparent, despite Darwin's emphasis on the almost self-evident nature of disgust reactions. Beginning with the etymology of the word 'disgust' (bad taste), he draws his reader into an apparently straightforward encounter, but one that can take place only given a certain history, a history whereby the mobility of white European bodies involves the transformation of native bodies into knowledge, property and commodity. Darwin here reads the native body as being disgusted by the texture of that which he eats, while he conveys to the reader his own disgust at the mere proximity of the 'naked savage' to his own food. That other is not dirty, he admits. The admission is telling; the other's hands do not 'look dirty' for the proximity of the other to be felt as disgusting. The other is already seen as dirt, as the carrier of dirt, which contaminates the food that has been touched. Disgust reads the objects that are felt to be disgusting: it is not just about bad objects that we are afraid to incorporate, but the very designation of 'badness' as a quality we assume is inherent in those objects. Darwin relates 'badness' to anything unusual

about food, that is, to anything that departs from 'the ordinary palate'. This association of what is bad with what is strange or other is significant. The question of what 'tastes bad' is bound up with questions of familiarity and strangeness: here, the proximity of the bodies of others is read as the cause of 'our sickness' precisely insofar as the other is seeable and knowable as stranger-than-me and stranger-to-us in the first place.

Of course, it is significant that this cross-cultural encounter takes place over food, partly because the politics of 'what gets eaten' or consumed is bound up with histories of imperialism (Sheller 2003). Food is significant not only because disgust is a matter of taste as well as touch – as senses that require proximity to that which is sensed – but also because food is 'taken into' the body. The fear of contamination that provokes the nausea of disgust reactions hence makes food the very 'stuff' of disgust. Of course, we must eat to survive. So the very project of survival requires we take something other into our bodies. Survival makes us vulnerable in that it requires we let what is 'not us' in; to survive we open ourselves up, and we *keep the orifices of the body open*. The native touching the white man's food is a sign of the danger that the native will be taken into the white man's body, contaminating the white man's body with its dirt. At the same time, the native is read as being disgusted by the texture of the white man's food, a reading which not only assumes access to the interiority of the native body, but also enables the distantiation necessary to the recovery of the white man's apartness, in the sense that the native's disgust guarantees that he will eat something other than what the white man eats. Disgust does something, certainly: through disgust, bodies 'recoil' from their proximity, as a proximity that is felt as nakedness or as an exposure on the skin surface.

We can see from this example that being disgusted is not simply about 'gut feelings'. Or if disgust is about gut feelings, then our relation to our guts is not direct, but is mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies. Even the apparently simple concept of 'bad taste' gets us into some thorny problems. On the one hand, 'bad taste' suggests that what is bad is something we have eaten (the taste comes from 'what is eaten' rather than the one who eats). Badness might then seem to describe the nature of what gets taken into the orifice of the mouth (the food or object). On the other hand, something tastes bad only within the mouth of the one who tastes (the subject). The inter-corporeal encounter of incorporation or ingestion hence involves the perception of 'badness' as a quality of something only in the event that the badness fills up, as it were, the mouth of the one who tastes. So disgust, even defined simply as bad taste, shows us how the boundaries that allow the distinction between subjects and objects are undone in the moment of their making.

How can we tell the story of disgust in a way that works with the complicated relations between bodies, objects and others? In the first section, I will reflect on how disgust is fascinated with the texture and qualities of what is felt to be disgusting, as well as on how disgust affects the surface of the bodies of the disgusted. Secondly, I will examine the relation between disgust and stickiness, and how 'stickiness' becomes an affective quality of objects. And finally, I will reflect on the performativity of disgust, by looking at how disgust involves not just corporeal intensities, but speech acts. My questions are simple: What does it mean to designate something as disgusting? How do such designations work to generate effects? In particular, I will reflect on the generative effects of the responses to the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001, which declare: 'That's disgusting!'

Throughout this chapter, it will be apparent that disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent. As William Ian Miller has put it: 'Even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing "double-takes" at the very things that disgust us' (Miller 1997: x). The contradictory impulses of desire and disgust do not necessarily resolve themselves, and they do not take us to the same place. Disgust pulls us away from the object, a pulling that feels almost involuntary, as if our bodies were thinking for us, on behalf of us. In contrast, desire pulls us towards objects, and opens us up to the bodies of others. While the affect of being pulled may feel similar at one level, at another, the *direction* or *orientation* of the pull creates a very different affective relation between the subject and object. In the previous two chapters, I reflected on the processes of 'moving' or 'turning' towards and away from objects and others, and how these processes work to align social and bodily space. I now want to think of 'pulling' *as an intensification of movement as such*. In such an intensification, the objects seem to have us 'in their grip', and to be moving towards us in how they impress upon us, an impression that requires us to pull away, with an urgency that can be undoing.

DISGUST AND ABJECTION

So how else can we tell the story of disgust without assuming some things are inherently disgusting? Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon identify four key elements of the disgust experience: a characteristic facial expression; an appropriate action (distancing of the self from an offensive object); a distinctive physiological manifestation (nausea); and a characteristic feeling state (revulsion) (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 23). This list shows us how disgust

involves the 'weightiness' of feelings, the way in which feelings are, in some sense, material; like objects, feelings do things, and they affect what they come into contact with. So feeling 'disgusted' is not simply an inner or psychic state; it works on bodies, by transforming or 'working on' the surfaces of bodies. What is still bypassed in the above list is the question of how some objects come to be felt to be 'offensive' in the first place. We can only ask this question if we assume that offensiveness (and with it disgust) is not an inherent quality of an object, but is attributed to objects partly in the affective response of 'being disgusted'. At the same time, we can only make this observation if we avoid assuming disgust simply comes from within, and then moves out towards others.

We can certainly reflect upon the way in which disgust, as an intense bodily feeling of being sickened, is always directed towards an object. One does not feel disgust in the abstract; one feels disgusted by something in which the thing itself seems to repel us. Or as William Ian Miller puts it: 'Disgust is a feeling *about* something and in response to something, not just raw unattached feeling' (Miller 1997: 8). Disgust is about an object, such that one's feelings of sickness become attributed to the object ('I feel sick, you have sickened me, you are sickening'). We need to account for how it is that the object of disgust impresses upon us, as if the object contained the 'truth' of our own response to it.

Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. That contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity: it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of 'being offensive', but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive. The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted. As a result, while disgust *over takes* the body, it also *takes over* the object that apparently gives rise to it. The body is over taken precisely insofar as it takes the object over, in a temporary holding onto the detail of the surface of the object: its texture; its shape and form; how it clings and moves. It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so 'offensive' that it sickens and over takes the body.

Disgust does not end with the proximity of such contact. The body recoils from the object; it pulls away with an intense movement that registers in the pit of the stomach. The movement is the work of disgust; it is what disgust does. Disgust brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence. Or, as Paul Rozin et al. put it: 'Disgust is manifested as a distancing from some object, event or situation, and can be characterized as a rejection' (Rozin et al. 1993: 577). That distancing requires proximity is crucial to the intercorporeality of the disgust encounter. The double movement (towards, away) is forgotten, however, as the body pulls back: it is as if the object moved

towards the body, rather than the body having got close enough to the object. Hence the proximity of the 'disgusting object' may feel like an offence to bodily space, as if the object's invasion of that space was a necessary consequence of what seems disgusting about the object itself. Pulling back, bodies that are disgusted are also bodies that feel a certain rage, a rage that the object has got close enough to sicken, and to be taken over or taken in. To be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected.* As Silvan S. Tomkins suggests, in disgust: 'Attention is most likely to be referred to the source, the object, rather than to the self or the face. This happens because the response intends to maximise the distance between the face and the object which disgusts the self. It is a literal pulling away from the object' (Tomkins 1963: 128). The pulling away from the object keeps the object at the centre of attention, as a centring which attributes the affect of sickness to the very quality of the object.

But describing the inter-corporeality of disgust encounters does not allow us to understand how some forms of contact between the surfaces of bodies and objects (a contact which produces the effect of surfacing, of skins that shudder and form) are felt as sickening invasions. In order to ask this question of why some forms of contact are felt to be disgusting (and not others), we can examine the relationship between disgust and abjection. Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* provides one of the most influential models of abjection.[1] She argues that, within abjection: 'There looms . . . one of the violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' (Kristeva 1982: 1). Here, the abject threatens, and the threat may come from without or within, as it works to threaten what is thinkable or possible in the first place. But what makes something so threatening? Kristeva shows us that what threatens from the outside only threatens insofar as it is already within: 'It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self", but scraped and transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before *the dejection of its contents*' (Kristeva 1982: 53, emphasis added). It is not that the abject has got inside us; the abject turns us inside out, as well outside in.

Kristeva suggests provocatively that, in abjection, it is the border that is transformed into an object (Kristeva 1982: 4). We could return to the racist encounter described in Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and discussed in Chapter 2. Here, the border between the white woman and black child is transformed into an object: the roach (Lorde 1984: 147–8). The object that makes us 'sick to the stomach' is a substitute for the border itself, an act of substitution that protects the subject from all that is 'not it'. Abjection is bound up with the insecurity of the not; it seeks to secure 'the not' through the response of being disgusted. This extends my argument in Chapter 3: it

suggests that what makes 'the not' insecure is the possibility that what is 'not not' (what is 'me' or 'us') can slide into 'the not', a slippage which would threaten the ontology of 'being apart' from others.

The relationship between disgust reactions and the transformation of borders into objects is unclear. On the one hand, it is the transformation of borders into objects that is sickening (like the skin that forms on milk). On the other, the border is transformed into an object precisely as an effect of disgust (spitting/vomiting). Perhaps the ambiguity relates to the necessity of the designation of that which is threatening: borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or even to appear *as* borders, and part of the process of 'maintenance-through-transgression' is the appearance of border objects. Border objects are hence disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects. As a result, disgust involves a 'time lag' as well as being generative or futural. It does not make borders (out of nothing), but responds to their making, through a reconfirmation of their necessity. So the subject feels an object to be disgusting (a perception that relies on a history that comes before the encounter) and then expels the object and, through expelling the object, finds it to be disgusting. *The expulsion itself becomes the 'truth' of the reading of the object.* There is a certain truth in the apparently banal statement that border objects are disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects. Is there a route out of this circular economy or is the circularity part of the lure of abjection itself?

For Kristeva, the abject 'is that which opposes the I' (Kristeva 1982: 3). We can also consider how disgust is shaped by the relation *between* objects. Objects come to matter within disgust reactions not simply insofar as they oppose 'the I', *but through their contact with other objects.* As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the word 'contact' is related to the word 'contingency'. Is the object that disgusts 'disgusting' because of its contact with other objects? The way in which disgust is generated by 'contact' between objects is what makes the attribution of disgust dependent on a certain history, rather than being a necessary consequence of the nature of things. It is not that an object we might encounter is inherently disgusting; rather, an object becomes disgusting through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place. It is the dependency of disgust on contact or proximity that may explain its awkward temporality, the way it both lags behind and makes an object.

Disgust hence operates as a contact zone; it is about how things come into contact with other things. As many commentators have argued: 'Anything which has had contact with disgusting things itself becomes disgusting' (Tomkins 1963: 131; see also W. I. Miller 1997: 5 and S. B. Miller 1993: 711). While disgust involves such a metonymic slide, it does not move freely: it sticks to that which is near it; it clings. Furthermore, an object can become

disgusting because it resembles another object that is disgusting (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 30; Angyal 1941: 397). Hence, disgust can move between objects through the recognition of likeness. Disgust binds objects together in the very moment that objects become attributed with bad feeling, as 'being' sickening. The slide between disgust and other emotions is crucial to this binding: the subject may experience hate towards the object, as well as fear of the object, precisely as an affect of how the bad feeling 'has got in'. However, the feeling of disgust may resist being fully transferred to the object, even when the object is attributed as the source of the feeling. The object becomes disgusting, in a way that allows the subject to recoil, only after an intimate contact that is felt on the surface of the skin.

We can return to the example of Darwin's disgust at the 'naked savage'. The 'nakedness' of the native body becomes a sign of the risk of proximity. Such proximity is sexualised; it involves contact between skins, without the mediation or distance of cloth or clothing. The nature of the encounter demonstrates that disgust involves not simply distantiation (recoiling), but the intensification of bodily contact that 'disturbs' the skin with the possibility of desire. Such a risky proximity does not involve pulling towards the native's body, in an expression of forbidden desire. Rather natives must get too close for the white man to move away. Furthermore, the feeling that the proximity of this other is disgusting is dependent on past associations, in this case evoked through a negation. The admission that the native body 'is not dirty' works to associate the native body with dirt. The association between the two border objects is very important: the native body 'stands for' dirt (it does not have to be dirty) only insofar as 'dirt' is held in place as the border object. We could argue of course that dirt itself 'stands for' something else; it is not in itself inherently disgusting, but comes to matter 'as matter out of place' (Douglas 1995: 36). But this potential deferral of what is disgusting is *halted or blocked* in the sticking of the objects together. The very process of substitution of objects is halted in the very contingency of the association between 'dirt' and 'native body'. Through sticking these two objects together (adherence), disgust allows the subject to recoil, as if from an object, even given the lack of an inherent quality to the object. It is this metonymic contact between objects or signs that allows them to be felt to be disgusting *as if that was* a material or objective quality.

When thinking about how bodies become objects of disgust, we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations. Why is disgust so crucial to power? Does disgust work to maintain power relations through how it maintains bodily boundaries? The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchising of spaces as well as bodies. As William Ian Miller has argued, disgust reactions are not only about objects that seem to threaten the boundary lines

of subjects, they are also about objects that seem 'lower' than or below the subject, or even beneath the subject (Miller 1997: 9). We can return here to the question of abject matter. Lower regions of the body – that which is below – are clearly associated both with sexuality and with 'the waste' that is literally expelled by the body. It is not that what is low is necessarily disgusting, nor is sexuality necessarily disgusting. Lowness becomes associated with lower regions of the body as it becomes associated with other bodies and other spaces. The spatial distinction of 'above' from 'below' functions metaphorically to separate one body from another, as well as to differentiate between higher and lower bodies, or more and less advanced bodies. As a result, disgust at 'that which is below' functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, *through which 'aboveness' and 'belowness' become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces*. Given the fact that the one who is disgusted is the one who feels disgust, then the position of 'aboveness' is maintained only at the cost of a certain vulnerability (Miller 1997: 9), as an openness to being affected by those who are felt to be below. Darwin's disgust keeps the native below, as it makes the native below, but it also signals his own openness to falling below the native.

ON STICKINESS

I suggested in the previous section that we cannot understand disgust without understanding its contingency, defined in terms of the 'contact' between objects. In disgust, contingency is itself intensified; the contact between surfaces engenders an intensity of affect. But it is not just surfaces that materialise through disgust. As one object is substituted for another, or moves into another, a border is temporarily affected, despite the fact that neither object is inherently disgusting. Such objects become sticky as an effect of this substitution.

I have already asked the question 'What sticks?' in this book, but I have yet to address the question of stickiness and how stickiness becomes a quality of some surfaces, objects and signs. Needless to say, the sticky and the disgusting have been linked, if not reduced to each other. As William Ian Miller has argued: 'Horrifying things stick, like glue, like slime' (Miller 1997: 26). We might note already here a slight paradox. It is certainly the case that slimy things might be disgusting, but glue is hardly a substance that is represented as disgusting. So something that is sticky like glue might be disgusting, but glue itself probably isn't. Immediately, we can begin to see that not all sticky things are disgusting. Perhaps glue doesn't bring with it disgusting associations because we think of glue as *something we use to stick other things together*, rather than being something that threatens to stick to us. Glue is also about

adherence: and when we remove objects that have been stuck together with glue, typically the stickiness will cease. Perhaps stickiness becomes disgusting *only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us.*

We can draw here on a philosophical literature on substances that are not simply solid or liquid. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, reflects on slime as a quality of surface and feeling, both of which are understood as material in shape and form. He suggests that what is slimy is disgusting because: 'At this instant I suddenly understand the snare of the slimy: it is a fluidity which holds me and which compromises me; I can not slide on this slime, all its suction cups hold me back; it can not slide over me, it clings to me like a leech' (Sartre 1996: 609). The quality of sliminess is that it 'clings'; it neither has the firmness of something solid, nor the flow of something liquid. In between solid and liquid, it takes form only insofar as it sucks at the surface onto which it clings. However, this assumption that sliminess is a repulsive quality in a feeling or substance can be questioned. For the attribution of a quality to substance, although posited as a quality as such (rather than being merely substantial), relies on the figurability of disgust. The quality of slime is described through the use of an analogy: 'It clings to me *like* a leech.' Although sliminess is given the status of a quality as such, the very necessity of figuring that quality through speech suggests its deferral along the chain of signification (figuration without ground). In the last instance, the substance of slime is displaced through the analogy with a leech, which, like the roach in Audre Lorde's narrative, becomes a substitute for an object of disgust.

As Elizabeth Grosz argues, in response to Sartre's work on slime and viscosity, the 'fear of being absorbed into something which has no boundaries of its own' is 'not a property' of something (Grosz 1994: 194). In her terms, such slimy things become disgusting only given the maintenance of an order of things, which allows such absorption to become threatening. Stickiness, like slime, is also not inherently disgusting. Or, to make this point more strongly, stickiness itself might not be a quality that always 'adheres' to an object. Rather than using stickiness to describe an object's surface, we can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, *as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs.* To relate stickiness with historicity is not to say that some things and objects are not 'sticky' in the present. Rather, it is to say that stickiness is an effect. That is, stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object.

One could question the relation between being literally sticky (as my finger would be if it brushed against wet paint) or metaphorically sticky (a sign that gets repeated and accumulates affective value: such a sign might seem *like* a sticky finger). However, I do not want to presume an association of the literal

with the physical body and the metaphorical with language. Certainly, there are different forms of stickiness. But the sticky surface and the sticky sign cannot be separated through any simple distinction between literal and metaphorical. Rather, stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a 'with-ness', in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together. One can stick by a friend. One can get stuck in traffic. Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are about blockages or stopping things moving. When a sign or object becomes sticky it can function to 'block' the movement (of other things or signs) and it can function to bind (other things or signs) together. Stickiness helps us to associate 'blockages' with 'binding'.

We could ask an obvious question here: How do surfaces become sticky? Well, at one level an obvious question has an obvious answer: things become sticky as an effect of encountering other sticky things. Such stickiness gets transferred onto other things. As such, a sticky surface is one that will incorporate other elements into the surface such that the surface of a sticky object is in a dynamic process of re-surfacing. The incorporation can lead of course to surfaces becoming less sticky. But the stickiness of that surface *still tells us a history of the object that is not dependent on the endurance of the quality of stickiness*: what sticks 'shows us' where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object. What makes something sticky in the first place is difficult to determine precisely because stickiness involves such a chain of effects. This does not mean that some substances are not sticky (in the here and the now), but that stickiness is not the property of an object, as it accumulates and affects that which it touches. As a result, to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky. In the event of being cut off from a sticky object, an object (including the skin surface) may remain sticky and may 'pick up' other objects. Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects – it involves a transference of affect – but it is a relation of 'doing' in which there is not a distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it.

We can follow up with a less obvious question: How do signs become sticky? We can return to the example of hate speech discussed in Chapter 2. We could argue signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that 'use' *becomes* intrinsic; it becomes a form of signing. It is hard then to hear words like 'Pakis' without hearing that word as insulting. The resistance to the word acquiring new meaning is not about the referent; rather the resistance is an effect of these histories of repetition of the word 'Paki'.[2] This repetition has a binding effect; the word works to generate others as 'Paki'; it has particular effects on others who

recognise themselves as the object of the address. The 'binding' effect of the word is also a 'blockage': it stops the word moving or acquiring new value. The sign is a 'sticky sign' as an effect of a history of articulation, which allows the sign to accumulate value. The stickiness of the sign is also about the relation or contact between signs. The word 'Paki' becomes an insult through its association with other words, other forms of derision. However, such words do not have to be used once the sign becomes sticky. To use a sticky sign is to evoke other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association. The word 'Paki' might then stick to other words that are not spoken: immigrant, outsider, dirty, and so on. The association between words that generates meanings is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value*. I am describing this accumulation of affective value as a form of stickiness, or as 'sticky signs'.

What is the relationship between signs and bodies? As I argued in the first section, economies of disgust also involve the shaping of bodies. When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body *becomes* sticky. Such bodies become 'blockages' in the economy of disgust: they slow down or 'clog up' the movement between objects, as other objects and signs stick to them. This is how bodies become fetish objects: as we shall see, feelings of disgust stick more to some bodies than others, such that they become disgusting, as if their presence is what makes 'us sick'.

SPEAKING DISGUST

The question, 'What sticks?', is not simply a question of how objects stick to other objects, but also about how some objects more than others become sticky, such that other objects seem to stick to them. It is important not to neutralise the differences between objects and to recognise that some objects become stickier than others given past histories of contact. In this section, I will address how disgust works performatively not only as the intensification of contact between bodies and objects, but also as a speech act. In other words, I want us to reflect on how disgust can generate effects by 'binding' signs to bodies as a binding that 'blocks' new meanings.

What do I mean here by performative? According to Judith Butler, performativity relates to the way in which a signifier, rather than simply naming something that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names. Performativity is hence about the 'power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration' (Butler 1993: 20). The temporal dimension of performativity is crucial. On the one hand, the performative is futural; it generates effects in the constitution or materialisation of that which is 'not yet'. But, on the other hand, performativity depends upon the sedimentation

of the past; it reiterates what has already been said, and its power and authority depend upon how it recalls that which has already been brought into existence. This model of performativity relates to my argument about the temporality of disgust: it both 'lags behind' the object from which it recoils, and generates the object in the very event of recoiling.

Given this paradoxical temporality, performativity involves iterability (Butler 1993: 13). A performative utterance can only 'succeed' if it repeats a coded or iterable utterance: it works precisely by citing norms and conventions that already exist (Butler 1993: 13; see also Chapter 5). Importantly, the historicity of the performative and its role in the generation of effects cannot be separated. If the performative opens up the future, it does so precisely in the process of repeating past conventions, as to repeat something is always to open up the (structural) possibility that one will repeat something with a difference. Significantly, iterability means that the sign can be 'cut off' from its contexts of utterance; that possibility of 'cutting' is structural to the writerly nature of signification (Derrida 1988).

We can relate the question of 'cutting' to the question of stickiness. Thinking of how signs are sticky – and in particular how they may stick to other signs – also demonstrates the (equally structural) resistance to cutting. This resistance is not inherent within signs, but is dependent on how signs work in relation to other signs, or how the signifier sticks to a signified in a chain of signifiers (see Lacan 1977: 154). Although it is possible that signs will be cut off, the resistance to being cut off, in the stickiness of the sign, relates to the historicity of signification. The resistance is not in the sign, but a 'sign' of how signs are already associated with other signs through metonymic proximity (word-to-word) or metaphoric displacement (word-for-word). While this historicity plays a crucial role in theories of performativity and iterability, it is linked to repetition, to the very fact that signs must be repeatable, and with them, forms or conventions. I want to expand our understanding of the historicity implicit to signification, reconceiving historicity in terms of stickiness as well as repetition: stickiness does not relate to conventions that are explicit, but to the attachments that implicitly govern ways in which signs work with other signs. How does the stickiness of signification relate to the performativity of disgust?

To name something as disgusting – typically, in the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' – is performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But to say something is disgusting is still to 'make something'; it generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object*. Indeed, the word 'disgust' is itself a sticky sign, insofar as other signs stick to it ('yuk', 'bad', 'savage'), and insofar as it sticks to some bodies and objects ('the naked

savage'), rather than others. To name something as disgusting is to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken. The relationship between the stickiness of the sign and the stickiness of the object is crucial to the performativity of disgust as well as the apparent resistance of disgust reactions to 'newness' in terms of the generation of different kinds of objects. The object that is generated as a disgusting (bad) object through the speech act comes to stick. It becomes sticky and acquires a fetish quality, which then engenders its own effects.

It is not only 'disgusting objects' that are generated by the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' What else does disgust do? We can return to my reflections on abjection. To abject something is literally to cast something out, or to expel something. How can speech acts involve abjection? How do abject bodies and objects relate to abject speech? In disgust reactions, 'words' are also cast out or vomited. The speech act, 'That's disgusting!', can work as a form of vomiting, as an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating. That is, to designate something as disgusting is also to create a distance from the thing, which paradoxically becomes a thing only in the act of distantiation. We might recall here that vomiting involves expelling something that has already been digested, and hence incorporated into the body of the one who feels disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 27). Ingestion means that one has already been made disgusting by the perception of something other than me as being disgusting. To name something as disgusting is not only to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object that then comes to stick, but also to the subject. In other words, the disgusted subject is 'itself' one of the effects that is generated by the speech act, 'That's disgusting!'

However, the speech act is never simply an address the subject makes to itself. The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect. In other words, the subject asks others to repeat the condemnation implicit in the speech act itself. Such a shared witnessing is required for speech acts to be generative, that is, for the attribution of disgust to an object or other to stick to others. In addition, the demand for a witness shows us that the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' generates more than simply a subject and an object; it also generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event. A community of witnesses is generated, whose apparent shared distance from an event or object that has been named as disgusting is achieved through the repetition of the word 'disgust'. Elspeth Probyn in *Carnal Appetites* argues persuasively that others are required to witness the distantiation from an object implicit in naming something as disgusting. As she puts it: 'Through public statements, we want

to distance ourselves from this uncomfortable proximity. In uttering the phrase, we call upon others to witness our pulling away' (Probyn 2000: 131). The sharing of the physical processes of both casting out and pulling away means that disgust works to align the individual with the collective at the very moment both are generated. We can examine the way in which such speech acts generate effects by reflecting on how 'That's disgusting!' worked as a response to the events of September 11.

The internet has been a powerful means by which such a community of witnesses to the events of September 11 has been produced, along with other technologies or forms of mediation. On the internet, organisations and individuals have responded to the events on home pages, as well as message boards that have also allowed individuals to respond to each other's responses. This generation of a community of shared witnessing does not require subjects to be co-present, nor does it require that the speech act be made to an addressee who is co-present. The speech act instead takes the form of writing that is posted, with all the risks involved in posting a letter, given that the letter might not reach its destination (Derrida 1987). So what role does disgust have in generating a community in the face of September 11?

In the mediation of the events of September 11, the images seem saturated or even 'full' of affect. The images are repeated, and the repetition seems binding. The signs of the collapse of the buildings, and of bodies falling from the sky, are an invasion of bodies, spaces, homes and worlds. The images that appeared on television screens of the event as it unfolded, and which were repeated after the event, were images of trauma. They were also traumatic images. We did not have to see through the images to witness their trauma. To be a witness to the event through watching the images was to be affected by the images, which is not to say that we were all affected in the same way. As Marusya Bociurkiw puts it:

> The subsequent replaying of the Twin Towers' collapse (every few minutes on the first day; every few hours for months afterwards, and then every six months) seemed to enact the compulsion to repeat that characterizes post-traumatic stress. The compulsive return speaks to an unconscious desire to return to the state of trauma. By repeating or returning to unpleasurable experiences, the traumatized subject unconsciously hopes to achieve mastery, and thus to return to pleasure. (Bociurkiw 2003: 21)

The repetition of the images of trauma suggests a need to replay that which has yet to be assimilated into the individual or collective psyche. Critics such as Bociurkiw, Butler and Eng have analysed responses to September 11 in terms of the politics of trauma and grief (see also Chapter 7). Disgust may

also be crucial to how the event 'impacts' on others; indeed, the event is often attributed as 'being disgusting'. How does that attribution work? What does it do? Disgust involves a fascination with the event as image, in the desire to get closer to the image as if it were a salient object in the present. Take, for example, the following response to September 11 posted from Urban Outlaw Productions:[3]

> Roughly a month out and the disgusting, damnable events of September 11, 2001 still resonate in my heart and mind daily, if not hourly. I suppose there is some minor consolation in that fact, as for a full week immediately after the attacks, the shell-shocked feeling was omnipresent and inescapable. Not only did every aspect of the media, from television and radio to newspapers and the Internet, saturate us with seemingly every sordid detail of the tragedy, but that was almost all that was heard on the streets, all that we spoke of in private, all that was discussed on an e-group or in chat rooms. It infiltrated almost every facet of our lives. For many I am sure the terrorist incidents curtailed concentration, sleep, and invaded dreams . . . or nightmares.

Here, the object that disgusts has saturated the subjective world; disgust names the penetration of the world by that which is deemed sickening. The 'getting-in-ness' of the disgust reaction constitutes the object only through its proximity, its fatal nearness. The 'disgusting events' have 'invaded' and 'saturated' life itself such that they still resonate in life, even after the attribution of 'That's disgusting!' has been made. Note the slide between what is sickening and the 'shell-shocked feeling'. It is the inability to grasp the event in the present, or even to 'feel its impact', which demands the event is replayed, again and again, as the repetition of the sounds of trauma. This fatal proximity of the event is such that it can register its impact only through a perpetual recontamination of the homes and bodies of 'the disgusted'.

The disgust reaction creates an object, which we can describe as a border or fetish object, insofar as it admits to a prior contamination. The very 'pulling away' from the event is what allows it to acquire this fetish quality. At the same time, the generation of the object also creates the subject. By naming the event as disgusting, the subject 'stands out' in the 'standing apart' or 'pulling away' from the event. The posting is posted to other anonymous net readers; it speaks to an audience who is assumed to share this feeling of disgust and being disgusted. The sharing of disgust (through shared witnessing of that which is designated as disgusting) also becomes a shared rage or anger *about the ingestion of the disgusting* (about the ways in which it saturates one's life, minute by minute).

The ingestion of the disgusting constructs the objects of disgust, by identifying the bodies that 'cause' the event. The posting moves on:

> Those who died have had their lives snuffed out for what is truly an insanely hateful and imprudent cause. This is a cause based on some twisted form of what these terrorists would call religion. These brainwashed, lost and depraved subhuman beasts must be sought out, flushed from the holes in which they cower, and annihilated like the vermin they are.

Here, the bodies of others become the salient object; they are constructed as being hateful and sickening only insofar as they have got too close. They are constructed as non-human, *as beneath and below the bodies of the disgusted.* Indeed, through the disgust reaction, 'belowness' and 'beneathness' become properties of their bodies. They embody that which is lower than human or civil life. The sexualised and militaristic nature of this description is crucial. Hidden in holes, the others threaten through being veiled or covered. The others who are the objects of our disgust must be penetrated or uncovered. We must 'get to them' to 'get away from them'. The proximity of others is here an imperative. They got too close (the event was only possible given this fatal intimacy), but we must get closer, if they are to be expelled. So the word 'disgust' is articulated by the subject, as a way of describing the event, which works to create the event as a border object, as a marker of what we are not and could not be. The word 'disgust' is then transferred from the event to the bodies of those others who are held responsible for the event. But how are those others ingested and expelled? What does this do to the bodies of those who narrate their disgust?

The posting then says: 'And the people, the survivors, and those of us who live, we move forward. We press on into a changed world with a new national mindset that has been violently thrust upon us. It remains to be seen what the ramifications are of the actions perpetuated on us by these Middle Eastern terrorists.' Here, the possibility of 'moving on' is dependent on the origin of terror as coming from another who is recognisable. That is, the transference of affect – such that the disgust is no longer 'in me' or 'ours' – involves an identification of bodies as its object; they are named as 'Middle Eastern terrorists'. Clearly, disgust sticks to the bodies of the others that are named; it is transferred from sign to body. But it can do this work of transference only by sticking together signs. The naming of disgust metonymically sticks these signs together, such that the terror and fear become associated with bodies that are already recognised as 'Middle-Eastern'. It is the association or contact between those signs 'Middle-Eastern' and 'terrorists' that 'blocks' the sticky flow of disgust.

Such 'blocking' means that the 'pulling away' of the disgust reaction simultaneously 'pushes out' the bodies of those others who surface as the objects of disgust. Of course, the 'sticking together' of these signs depends upon an economy of recognition in which some bodies more than others will be identified as terrorist bodies, regardless of whether they have any official links with terrorist organisations. This economy of recognition has become a part of lived reality on the streets in many countries where any bodies who 'look Muslim or Middle-Eastern' have been the victims of racial assault or abuse because they are associated with terrorism, or 'could be' terrorists (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, the sticking of disgust to some bodies, a sticking which never finishes as the possibility remains open that other bodies 'could be' terrorists, generates other effects. The speech act, 'It's disgusting!' becomes 'They are disgusting,' which translates into, 'We are disgusted by them.' We can see this shift in the final sentence of the posting:

> September 11, 2001 should provide a valuable lesson to the world about the tenacity of our safety and the importance of the lives of rational people. People who are adjusted to survive, strive, and cope in a civilized society, something these ghastly, empty, and, basically, sick terrorists forfeited.

This 'we' is named and renamed; first as 'the people', then as 'the survivors', and finally as 'the lives of rational people'. The community of witnesses is named by the speech act, and generated in the act of being named. Such a community comes into being as 'sticking together' in the shared condemnation of the events, a sticking together, that not only spits out the word 'disgusting', but also 'stands for' the spitting out of the bodies of those who become stuck to the word itself ('sick terrorists'). The disgust reaction hence vomits out the words 'Middle-Eastern terrorists', which comes to *stand for* and *slide into* the expulsion of the bodies of such others, who are recognisable as the cause of our sickness, from the community, nation or world. Such an expulsion will never be over given the possibility that other others 'could be' the cause of our disgust; the unfinished nature of expulsion allows its perpetual rejustification: we must be sick, to exclude the sick, again and again. Being sick is performed by the text, which allows the 'word' disgust to become a 'sign' of the other's being.

This is not to say, however, that disgust always sticks, and that the transference of the stickiness from a sign, to an object, to a body and to other signs, always works to affect a community that sticks together: to adhere is not always to cohere. It is clear, of course, that the word 'disgusting' was repeated, again and again, in personal and official responses to the events.

But it is not clear that what was named disgusting was the same thing: each time the attribution 'That's disgusting!' is made, the object, as it were, is remade, but not necessarily in a way that binds the community together. Some disgust reactions named their disgust at the way in which disgust has stuck to the bodies of some others. Take, for example, the following posting: 'The war in Afghanistan is disgusting . . . While the need for increased security is undoubtedly on the minds of the American people, the means being discussed are as disgusting as the terrorist attacks themselves.'[4] Such disgust reactions involve 'pulling away' from the 'pulling away' of the disgust reaction that authorises a community of witnesses. In other words, the speech act 'That's disgusting!' pulls away from the response to the event, which assumes that 'they're disgusting' (in which the 'they' slips between sticky signifiers: terrorists, Middle-Eastern, Muslim) and should be expelled, or vomited out of the nation, the civil world. To put it even more strongly, the disgusting nature of the terrorist attacks is argued to be 'replicated' or 'repeated' in the response to the attacks themselves.

Disgust, therefore, as an imperative not only to expel, but to make that very expulsion stick to some things and not others, does not always work simply to conserve that which is legitimated as a form of collective existence. Disgust can involve disgust at what disgust effects as a form of collective existence (in this case, the war is seen as replicating that which is disgusting about terrorism). The feeling of being disgusted may also be an element in a politics that seeks to challenge 'what is'. However, what the loop of disgust shows us is not simply the possibility of dissent within even the stickiest economies, but also how dissent cannot be exterior to its object. Dissent is always implicated in what is being dissented from. Furthermore, the limits of disgust as an affective response might be that disgust does not allow one the time to digest that which one designates as a 'bad thing'. I would argue that critique requires more time for digestion. Disgust might not allow one to get close enough to an object before one is compelled to pull away.

Of course we must remember that critics of American foreign policy – those who have expressed their disgust at what has been authorised as disgust – have also been met with disgust reactions. One of the most repeated statements about disgust was directed towards Susan Sontag's article in the *New Yorker*, which questioned the representation of the terrorists as cowards and suggested that the act was comprehensible in the sense that hatred towards the US could be explained. Statements such as Sontag's implication that '"we had it coming" is "disgusting"' are repeated as a way of resticking disgust to its object.[5] So the economy of disgust does not stop, as it were, with the unsticking of the object of disgust. Disgust reactions that 'pull away' from those that stick a community together can themselves engender other disgust reactions. In pulling away from the pulling away, these disgust

reactions work to restick the sign 'disgust' to an object, which becomes salient as an effect of such collective transference. In other words, what gets unstuck can always get restuck and can even engender new and more adhesive form of sticking. Adhesion involves not just sticking to a surface, but giving one's support and allegiance. So we might need to persist with two questions, asked simultaneously. We might need to ask 'What sticks?' (a question that must be posed to ourselves as well as others). But we might pose this question alongside a more hopeful one: How can we stick to our refusal of the terms of allegiance?

NOTES

1. Kristeva's work has especially been taken up by feminist critics interested in how women's bodies are associated with the abject, as well as the monstrous. I will not be engaging with such arguments here, but do wish to signal their importance. See, for example, Creed (1993) and Stacey (1997).
2. I use this example since this is an insult that has been addressed to me, and I remember its effects profoundly.
3. http//:www.urbanoutlaw.com/opinion/100901.html Accessed 2 October 2002. I choose this site from thousands as it builds up a complex narrative around the word 'disgust'. Use a search engine, and type in 'September 11' and 'disgusting' and you can access many comparable web postings, usually on discussion lists.
4. http://gauntlet.ucalgary.ca/a/story/7458 Accessed 2 October 2002.
5. http://www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/flashpoint_speech.htm Accessed 2 October 2002.

I, SING

out of this world & out of time & out
of love & out of mind & out of the
pan & out of butter, out of anger
& out of mother, out of the cradle

& out of pocket, out of space & out
of cash & out of change & out of sight
& out of range & force of habit
& out of oil & out of whack & out

of water & Damascus, out of courtesy
& out of shock & out of duty
& out of turn & out of tune & out of line

& out of the ground & out of his gourd
& out of all the possible solutions,
out of the ashes & conviction

(Anna Maria Hong)

4 Queering Fat Bodies/Politics

KATHLEEN LEBESCO

Queens will not be pawns.

Derek Jarman

The body is a pliable entity whose determinable form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription and the provision of a set of limiting biological codes. . . . The body is not open to all the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject: the human body, for example, cannot fly in the air. . . . On the other hand, while there must be some kinds of biological limit or constraint, these constraints are perpetually capable of being superseded, overcome, through the human body's capacity to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment, to continually augment its powers and capacities through the incorporation into the body's own spaces and modalities of objects that, while external, are internalized, added to, supplementing and supplemented by the "organic body" (or what culturally passes for it), surpassing the body, not "beyond" nature but in collusion with a "nature" that never really lived up to its name, that represents always the most blatant cultural anxieties and projections.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (1994)

INTRODUCING FAT BODIES

Are fat bodies revolting? Popular culture would have us believe so, as would theorists who celebrate transgression writ large, though quite different rationales underpin these similar contentions. In the United States in the late 1990s, as in most Western countries with developed industrial economies since at least World War II, fat has a bad rap.[1] The medical establishment has proclaimed fat to be a scourge more far-reaching than the bubonic plague, a "national health crisis," with obesity "striking" nearly one-third of all adult Americans.[2] Aesthetically, fat is the antithesis

of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned. Viewed, then, as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as revolting—they are agents of abhorrence and disgust.[3] But if we think of *revolting* in terms of overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting, and rejecting, then corpulence carries a whole new weight as a subversive cultural practice that calls into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature. We can recognize fat as a condition not simply aesthetic or medical, but *political.*

In much of the West, fat is seen as disgusting/revolting and thus lurks on the cultural periphery. Given Judith Butler's contention that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and . . . all margins are accordingly considered dangerous,"[4] fat people can tap into the resources of abjection[5] in the margin in order to strengthen their claim to the kinds of entitlement felt only by those bodies deemed natural, healthy, and beautiful. In this essay, I draw from the theoretical frames of Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others in order to queer fat bodies/politics, in hopes of propelling corpulent bodies to qualify as bodies that matter.

I hope ultimately to alter the discourses of fat subjectivity by moving inquiries about fat from medical and scientistic discourses to social and cultural ones, offering instead of self-help literature a different way of looking at, and living in, fat. My interest here stems from experiencing and imagining the possibilities of political relationships forged from affinities, from the performance of self and the recognition of other both as subject and subjected. According to the political theorist Patricia Mann, "if we assume the conjecture of multiple dimensions of both oppression and agency within concrete institutional settings, we can seek to construct a fluid micro-politics embracing diverse forms of intersectional agency and struggle."[6] Instead of simply venerating or denouncing fat subjects, my aim is to theorize fat embodiment in a way that alters the relational topography around body size and shape. This task calls for theorizing the simultaneous construction of fat people as choice-making, self-defining subjects who are also subjected to fat oppression in an attempt to understand the "diverse and conflicting practices, pressures, and possibilities that provide the context for political struggle and social transformation."[7] In so doing, this essay (and the larger project of retheorizing corpulence) guards against the propensity to long idealistically for the emancipation of innocent fat people from the bonds of subjection,[8] just as it suggests alternatives to helplessness in the face of overdetermined social relationships.

EMPOWERING DISCOURSE? LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

> As we think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible, the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very "offense" that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms.
>
> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (1997)

Language may be used to carry out the revolution that replaces the spoiled identity of fatness—an identity so powerful that even fat people roundly abhor their own bodies—with a more inhabitable subject position. Butler claims that "discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression—that is, take for granted the speaking subject's own impossibility or unintelligibility."[9] Inarguably, current discourse surrounding body size and shape has worked to incorporate the protests of fat people against their own bodies; when civil rights are being demanded on the basis of the genetic subjection of fat people, the fat body is effectively rendered uninhabitable. This power of language isn't purely abstract, either; it enacts physical and material violence on bodies.[10]

Butler, following the work of Mary Douglas, suggests that a more important question than how a particular shitty/Othered identity is internalized is why the distinction between inner and outer is maintained. Whom does it serve in public discourse? When you think about it, only Others internalize things (such as oppression), thus rendering their *surfaces* invisible; that is how "a body figure[s] on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth."[11] My interest in transforming fatness from a spoiled, uninhabitable, invisible identity to a stronger subject position dissuades me from analyzing internalization, as it is a paradigm that further propels abjection.

Language, according to Monique Wittig, "is a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as 'facts.' "[12] Thus, fat people (scholars, nonacademic intellectuals, activists, and lay people alike) can begin creating and regulating a new social reality through the use of words—spoken as well as written. Butler believes that language is capable of enacting material change "through locutionary acts, which, [when] repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions."[13] What I appreciate about this understanding of language is

that it does not posit some truly representable reality on which language, like a tool, is used; instead, it speaks to the artificiality of the truths we think we know. Such a recognition of artificiality offers the possibility of generating new truths through language. Butler's work suggests to me that we just might be able to talk our way out of anything, even seemingly entrenched fat oppression, because speaking builds subjects.

However, the strategies for talking one's way into a subject position are a point of contention among fat activists today. They provide various rationales for preempting the position of the speaking subject: some want to be able to make claims on behalf of *all* fat people, to posit one specific notion of "the" fat experience; others want only to be able to speak for themselves, and frequently articulate concerns about the oppressive nature of fat community demands. Clearly, we need to examine more closely the range of terms used and reappropriated by fat people to redeploy and destabilize the dominant categories of the body and of fat identity. This task lies beyond my current scope, but by theorizing fat politics through queer politics, I hope to open a critical space for such an examination.

REINSCRIBING CORPULENCE, RESIGNIFYING FAT

Inasmuch as it aims to undermine what counts as normal, my theorization of fatness, my theoretical queering of fat politics, guards against the slip into relativistic evaluation of various transgressions. Butler writes that "The loss of the sense of 'the normal' . . . can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody."[14] However, we need some way of discerning which actions are truly disruptive of so-called normalcy, and which in fact help to maintain the status quo. We must therefore look at performances *in context* and ask: What performance in what context will help to destabilize naturalized identity categories?[15]

I argue that it is possible to theorize (or rather, to retheorize) the signs of fatness, rendering fat intelligible socially and culturally. Butler argues that "[i]f the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility . . . then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible,"[16] a claim vital for understanding that signification never equals determination, and thus that the reworkings (in specific language communities, in written and spoken discourses) provide very real promise. This is not a way *out* but a way *in*, a way to gain the upper hand in signification games—by gaining the ability to change the rules by which

they are played. One who threatens and disrupts dominant significations is not doomed to a perpetually overshadowed pocket of resistance; instead, these actions are "a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility."[17] Elizabeth Grosz concurs with Butler about the vitality of these disruptions: "Where one body . . . takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, or other kinds of bodies and subjectivities."[18]

However, I am aware that the process of gaining the upper hand, or reconstituting fat identity to change its current status as spoiled, will in turn produce its own subset of unthinkable, unlivable, and abject bodies. Subjects are constituted by the processes of excluding and abjecting, so it is necessary to reflect on how these processes shape fat identity. While I examine strategies for transforming (widening) the fat body, I also consider the ways in which this transformation constitutes excluded and abjected Others. Butler's discussion of the possibilities of reworking abjection into political agency is illuminating here, as are Grosz's warnings against simply replacing the current standards of health and beauty with different models, while allowing the structure to remain intact.

In the domain of gender identity, Butler claims that "the public assertion of queerness enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy."[19] Yet she asserts that one enters into public discourse not simply to get the advantage in the same old, tired dialectic but to attempt to "rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification." This revision is crucial to making queer lives "legible, valuable, worthy of support, [lives] in which passion, injury, grief, aspiration become recognized without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion."[20] Though I recognize her goal of deviating from the citational chain "toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world"[21] as exceptionally worthwhile, for fat politics as well as for queer politics, I also realize that we're just not quite there yet. My theorization of corpulence takes one step toward its realization.

Like Butler, Grosz urges us to refuse "singular models, models which are based on one type of body as the norm by which all others are judged," instead favoring a field of body types "which, in being recognized in their specificity, cannot take on the coercive role of singular norm or ideals for all the others. Such plural models must be used to define the norms and

ideals not only of health and fitness but also of beauty and desire."[22] We can appreciate this goal, without naively expecting a happy, separate-but-equal assessment of bodies, as the process of bringing into being the plural models is itself inevitably violent and disruptive. Ultimately, the question boils down to whether or not that process is *worthy*.

FAT IDENTITY POLITICS?

In revaluing bodies, we open up a space for revaluing fat bodies. An important related question concerns the foundation of fat identity. Can it be conceptualized as "the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity," as Butler defines gender identity?[23] What difference does the physical immanence of fat make, as compared with the usually-only-assumed physical presence of a specific set of genitals in gender identity? Fat, unlike gender, *is* written on the body for *all* to see; what kinds of dissonant and denaturalized performances are nevertheless possible in the assertion of fat identity? Like Butler on gender identity, I argue that the act of fat identity is "open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and . . . hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural.' "[24] That claim leads to another question: Where do we see these happenings in fat-identified communities, and what are their consequences for the larger process of resignification?

The work of Elizabeth Grosz on identity and the body compels another line of questioning for the retheorization of fatness, fat bodies, and fat politics. Grosz maintains that identities, such as race, class, and sex, are not merely independent vectors that intersect with one another in the space of the person; rather, they mutually constitute one another. She urges us to attempt to understand the body through a range of disparate discourses, instead of confining our inquiries to scientistic and naturalistic modes of explanation.[25] In this essay, I thus begin to question how we can move the study of the fat body out of the natural and life sciences and into the realm of social and cultural criticism;[26] I hope that other scholars, activists, and members of the general public will follow suit in similarly rethinking fat bodies. Furthermore, Grosz contends that "bodies speak, without necessarily talking because they become coded with and as signs. . . . They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated";[27] it is therefore worth considering how these social codes, norms, ideals, and signs present themselves narratively on culturally invisible fat bodies.

New strategies for playing games of identity wherein pleasure can be

taken by and in fat bodies need to be theorized.[28] Following Mann, we should consider the extent to which political struggle over the meaning of fat is "buil[t] upon the facts of cultural intersectionality."[29] We can now easily recognize that an actor is no more "simply fat" than she is "simply white" or "simply female." However, this lesson was learned the hard way after notable attempts by certain social and political groups to organize their membership by shared, irreducible, and unchanging essential, physical characteristics. Examining those recent identity-based political movements (e.g., Black Nationalism and second wave feminism) can help us better understand the genesis of fat identity politics. We must also consider the contributions of queer theory and activism to the strategies of fat politics, a connection documented by Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that demonstrates the possibilities of organizing around conflicted identities.[30] These histories should help illuminate an analysis of what it means to stake a claim to fat identity when the definition of acceptable subjectivity is very narrow. They may also begin to explain how political subjectivities are constituted by physical and sensual arrangements and experiences, as well as clarifying the role of the body's biocultural position in constructing subjectivity. In terms of identity, the lived experience of fatness inhabits the same space as, and yet diverges from, other influential subject-marking experiences, such as the embodiment of race and sexuality.

Judith Butler asks what the political stakes are in according naturalness to identity categories that are actually *effects* of multiple and diffuse discourses.[31] The same question needs to be asked about fat identity politics. Other questions are equally pertinent. Specifically, what political possibilities does a critique of identity categories open up? We must inquire into the political construction and regulation of fat identity, rather than trying to make shared identity a foundation for fat politics. Building on Butler's claim that the body is a discursive production, I explore how the semiotic is used as a source of subversion. This type of theoretical investigation will enable us to understand how a flexible, diffuse fat politics can locate its subjects more favorably within fields of power.

A related question concerns the ways in which categories of body size and shape are regulatory constructs. We need to theorize how these categories are deployed and to guard against their uncritical extension, which might unwittingly propel a regime of power/knowledge that subjugates fat people. Many other questions still need to be examined, and I suggest below a critical direction for such inquiries by examining fat bodies/politics through the lens of queer theory. For example, do categories of body size

and shape provide fluid and denaturalized possibilities, once they are no longer linked to fixity and causality? How is it that categories of health and beauty are constantly invoked and, in turn, refused by those interested in recontextualizing the fat body? Is it possible to articulate the convergence of these multiple discourses at the site of fat identity, thereby making that "simple" category forevermore troubled?

AFFINITY POLITICS AND PLAYFUL SUBJECTIVITY

Judith Butler criticizes the underpinnings of identity politics, which "assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken."[32] She argues instead that the doer is constructed in doing the deed/political act, not the other way around. Queer activists and theorists propose forms of political action that recognize individuals both as subjects with the capacity to act and as subjected to larger forces over which they have less control. The claim of queer theory, here voiced by Samuel Delany, that insistent and articulate "rhetoric can *control* discourse,"[33] is one of its more appealing and promising for the project of theorizing new spaces for fatness. What can it mean to speak publicly about practices and persuasions that are normatively inscribed with evil meanings, as many queer activists do when they describe their sexual proclivities and acts? Queer theorists contend that such public performance of "perversion" enables sexual subjects to play a role in how they are inscribed with meaning—to enter themselves into discourse, if you will. As Sarah Schulman warns, "we're wasting our lives being careful."[34]

One queer activist group that particularly exemplifies the potential benefits of the creative and polyvocal practice of cultural politics is the Lesbian Avengers, whose members play with their "selves" loudly and visibly in an attempt to work the meanings ascribed to them to their liking and to their best advantage. A joyful sense of the creatively outrageous is ever present in the Lesbian Avengers' fire-eating, baton-twirling direct action political organizing. They strive for innovation, "avoid[ing] old stale tactics at all costs."[35] Indeed, the authors of the Avenger handbook seem to have abandoned abstract theoretical discussion and false polarities, instead recognizing that their audience (other Avengers and Avenger wanna-bes) identify themselves diversely both inter- and intrapersonally.

They follow Gayle Rubin in a radical rhetoric of sex that "identif[ies], describe[s], explain[s], and denounce[s] erotic injustice and sexual oppression."[36] Still, the mention of "Lesbian" in the name of the group may raise

a flag for some; does their exclusive recruitment of lesbians posit the sexual essentialism so common in identity politics? The Avengers steer clear of this problem by making no claims about the fundamental nature of lesbianism; instead, according to Schulman, Lesbian Avengers urge people to "imagine what your life could be." They challenge: "Aren't you ready to make it happen? WE ARE. If you don't want to take it anymore and are ready to strike, call us."[37] They leave it up to the callers, the potential activists, to decide what the "it" is that they're not willing to take anymore. They urge imagination and inventiveness in anti-essentialized political action. They encourage playing with one's multiple selves.

The persistence of the "Lesbian" label might be explained, Eve Sedgwick suggests, "not in the first place because of its meaningfulness to those whom it defines but because of its indispensableness to those who define themselves against it."[38] But why would a political group that seeks to dismantle false polarities willingly select a name that lends itself so easily to a lesbian/nonlesbian dichotomy? Are the Lesbian Avengers actually caught up in the same political arena as dangerously essentializing liberal and nationalist political projects?

The queer theorist Lisa Duggan might here emphasize a "new elasticity in the meanings of 'lesbian' and 'gay' " in which "the notion of a fixed sexual identity determined by a firmly gendered desire beg[ins] to slip away." The queer community of Lesbian Avengers can be viewed not as an identity group but as "no longer defined solely by the gender of its members' sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender." Duggan would recognize the Lesbian Avengers as having constituted through their dissent a new stance of queer opposition and would argue that their stress on constant innovation makes their "actual historical forms and positions . . . open, constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation."[39]

Such queer affinity groups (organized by a desire to work or play together, rather than by a shared identity) suggest that individuals can inscribe themselves with meanings over against dominant inscriptions. By exuberantly saying what they do, affinity groups use rhetoric to enter themselves into discourse in significant ways, demonstrating that even small collective actions can make important differences. In a political climate in which the comfort of some is predicated on the silence of others, queer theory encourages us to play with our selves and to make a joyful noise in the doing.

Some might argue that while queer theory provides a kind of philosophical fuel for such play, it is queer *activists* who make action. So cor-

pulence theory and fat politics must interact, as fat activists plan events that focus less on official policy and more on repositioning fat in the cultural imaginary. They borrow tactics from the Lesbian Avengers: we see scale smashings, ice cream eat-ins, and fat bikini swim meets, which aim to publicly present a fatness that is not the victim of bad genes or its own lack of will. Through this rubric, we can begin to envision *fat play*, rather than *fat pathology*.

PERFORMATIVITY: THE RESCUE OF IDENTITY

Underlying the project of retheorizing corpulence is an understanding of communication as the primary process by which identities are negotiated and narratives are constructed, such negotiation and construction both scrambling traditional views of what it means to be a political subject. I take my cue from interrogations of essentialism in queer theory and performance studies, which suggest that identities are never merely descriptive; rather, they are strategically performed. The queer theorist Cindy Patton treats identities as a series of rhetorical closures that connect and reconnect with political strategies and alliances to stage political claims; she urges us to reconsider identity to see how it is used in everyday life, where the struggle to control the rules of identity construction is played out.[40] Fat identity (like queer identity), however performative, will possibly and indeed probably be read as admitting to what current Western mainstream standards imagine as grotesque perversion. A consideration of the ways in which fat identities alter how politics is staged (rather than merely representing yet another aesthetic choice) highlights the importance of communication as political practice.[41]

Judith Butler claims that performativity must be understood "not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[42] This frame opens a radical critical space for investigating not only isolated incidents symbolizing fat identity but also the ongoing, even technologically enabled, discursive negotiations that regulate and constrain the signification of fat bodies. Because these negotiations are ongoing and can be cited as (sometimes) productive for fat bodies, they enable a more livable resignification.

QUEERING FAT BODIES/POLITICS

The politics of fat identity is rooted in the kind of controversy over essentialized identity politics seen in queer theory, with important implications

for corpulent bodies that matter. An essentialist position on fat identity can take a biological or sociocultural perspective; common to both is the theme that the condition of fatness is necessary, could not be otherwise, or has some essential (usually failure-related) cause. Whether they trace a biological path to bad genes or horrible hormones or a social path to traumatic childhood experience, those arguing for essentialist positions view fat identity as the unfortunately unavoidable outcome resulting from some original variable gone awry. Of course, not all essentialist positions are anti-fat; some prefer to focus on the present fact of fatness and the impossibility of changing it, using this resignation as a platform for civil rights size-acceptance movements.

In contrast, an anti-essentialist position on fat identity does not seek causal factors but focuses instead on the ability of human actors to participate in the creation of meaning (including the meaning of material bodies) through the discursive processes of communication and politics. Many examples of such fat activism and discursive negotiation exist and others are still emerging: members of NAAFA (the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance); Roseanne Barr, who in March 1999 hosted the "Large and Luscious Beauty Contest" on her daytime syndicated show; other actors, such as Camryn Manheim, who won an Emmy for her work on *The Practice;* and, more important, individuals from varied sociopolitical, economic, and educational backgrounds who are all invested in projects of fat resignification.[43] I hope that scholars interested in corpulence will begin to work through questions of how essentialism renders political struggle more or less effective; we must explore how people understand themselves through their shifting, fabricated locations, tolerating their changes in identity as they cross borders to know and create themselves in acts of affirmation and resistance.[44]

This essay is intended to initiate a different theorization of fatness and fat politics. By *queering* corpulent bodies/politics, perhaps we can resist dominant discursive constructions of fatness, while at the same time opening new (and playful) sites for reconstructing fat bodies through a lens that examines the corporeal alongside the material, the racial, and the sexual as mutually constitutive elements.

NOTES

1. Other scholars point to different periods during the twentieth century as marked by cultural disdain for fat. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, for instance, contends that widespread contempt for fat came of age at the turn of the century, as newly

"liberated" Victorians refocused their surveillance on their bodies instead of their morals (*The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* [New York: Random House, 1997]). Pinpointing an exact moment for the beginning of fat hatred (an impossible task, in any case) is less important than recognizing the prevalence of this belief, which was forcefully manifested at various key moments during the century. Following Elizabeth Grosz, I want to be careful here *not* to suggest a lumpy ol' body hanging around passively, waiting to be signified by culture, for it is *through* culture that bodies are constructed. Although I feel that Grosz's criticism misrepresents the social constructionist project, I am inclined to examine, as she recommends, how particular bodies are lived, "interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation" (*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 18).

2. Melinda Beck, "An Epidemic of Obesity," *Newsweek*, August 1, 1994, 62–63.

3. Some might think it odd that I do not examine fat hatred as specifically antiwoman, given my feminist framework and the historical (though viciously arbitrary) link between woman and the flesh. However, I want to be cautious about equating "fat" with "woman," as this connection is, at root, culturally constructed.

4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 132.

5. According to Judith Butler, "the abject designates those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* [New York: Routledge, 1993], 3).

6. Patricia S. Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 160.

7. Ibid.

8. Paralleling Butler's reading of Michel Foucault on sexed subjects, to say that fat subjects are innocent victims "is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory . . . politics" (*Bodies That Matter*, 97).

9. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 116.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 134. Butler builds on Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966).

12. Monique Wittig, quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 115.

13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 116.

14. Ibid., 138–39.

15. Ibid., 139.

16. Ibid., 145.

17. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

18. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 19.

19. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 21.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 22.

23. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.

24. Ibid., 146–47.

25. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 19–20.

26. A recent Infotrac database search powered by the term *fat* found only a few popular press articles (usually centered on dieting) and a bevy of journal se-

lections on lipids. To find much of anything in scholarly literature that deals with fat *bodies* rather than fat *molecules*, one must search on *obesity*, already comfortably (but problematically) lodged in medical/scientific discourse.

27. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 35.

28. Though it is tempting to focus specifically on *women's* fat bodies, the project of resignification of fatness is vital to (and is in part propelled by) men as well. Thus, my intentions are not gender-specific.

29. Mann, *Micro-Politics*, 159.

30. Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion," in *Tendencies*, by Sedgwick (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993) [see chapter 15 of this volume].

31. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii–ix.

32. Ibid., 142.

33. Samuel Delany, "Street Talk/Straight Talk," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (1991): 21–38.

34. Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 279.

35. Ibid., 298.

36. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 275.

37. Schulman, *My American History*, 279.

38. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Epistemology of the Closet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 55.

39. Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review* 22, no. 1 (1992): 11–13, 20, 23.

40. Cindy Patton, "Tremble, Hetero Swine!" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 143–77.

41. For a further discussion of fat performativity, see part 5 of this volume.

42. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

43. Particularly important for drawing in diverse individuals are on-line sites and electronic mailing lists dedicated to fatness. On pro-fat Internet sites, users create narratives steeped in both essentialist arguments and perspectives to suggest, instead, an understanding of their own subject position as the vortex constituted by a whirl of discourses. I address these issues in "Revolting Bodies? The On-Line Negotiation of Fat Subjectivity" (manuscript, 1998).

44. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

WHAT IS THIS AIR CHANGING, THIS WARM AURA, THESE THREADS OF AIR VIBRATING ROWS OF PEOPLE

This small effort
Because this little singing
This little sound
Small song
This fathomless effort
This voice which comes from the gut
This soft effort at making song
This effort at song
This effort to make song which birds do effortlessly
What birds do effortlessly
This tiny bird
This tender worthy effort
And sometimes it is no effort
No effort to sing
Sometimes I've had a drink or two
Sometimes it's effortless to make song
If enough people sing in a group
If I'm part of that group, I cry
I am holding a thing that breathes and makes sound
Where song comes from and goes to

(Ariel Yelen)

The Evidence of Experience

Joan W. Scott

Becoming Visible

There is a section in Samuel Delany's magnificent autobiographical meditation, *The Motion of Light in Water,* that dramatically raises the problem of writing the history of difference, the history, that is, of the designation of "other," of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm.[1]

I am grateful to Tom Keenan for inviting me to the conference ("History Today—and Tonight," Rutgers and Princeton Universities, March 1990) where I tried out some of these ideas, and to the many people there whose questions and comments led to a first round of revisions and reformulations. The students in my graduate seminar at Rutgers in the spring of 1990 helped immeasurably in the clarification of my ideas about "experience" and about what it means to historicize. Criticism from members of the "History" seminar during 1990–91 in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study helped give this paper its final—and, I think, much improved—form. As usual, Elizabeth Weed provided the crucial suggestions for the conceptualization of this paper. I also appreciate the important contributions of Judith Butler, Christina Crosby, Nicholas Dirks, Christopher Fynsk, Clifford Geertz, Donna Haraway, Susan Harding, Gyan Prakash, Donald Scott, and William Sewell, Jr. Karen Swann's astute comments led me to rethink and rewrite the final section of this paper. I learned a great deal from her and from that exercise. In a letter he wrote in July 1987, Reginald Zelnick challenged me to articulate a definition of "experience" that might work for historians. Although I'm not sure he will find this essay the answer he was looking for, I'm indebted to him for that early provocation.

1. For an important discussion of the "dilemma of difference," see Martha Minow. "Justice Engendered," foreword to "The Supreme Court, 1986 Term," *Harvard Law Review* 101 (Nov. 1987): 10–95.

Critical Inquiry 17 (Summer 1991)

Delany (a gay man, a black man, a writer of science fiction) recounts his reaction to his first visit to the St. Marks bathhouse in 1963. He remembers standing on the threshold of a "gym-sized room" dimly lit by blue bulbs. The room was full of people, some standing, the rest

> an undulating mass of naked, male bodies, spread wall to wall.
>
> My first response was a kind of heart-thudding astonishment, very close to fear.
>
> I have written of a space at certain libidinal saturation before. That was not what frightened me. It was rather that the saturation was not only kinesthetic but visible.[2]

Watching the scene establishes for Delany a "fact that flew in the face" of the prevailing representation of homosexuals in the 1950s as "isolated perverts," as subjects "gone awry." The "apprehension of massed bodies" gave him (as it does, he argues, anyone, "male, female, working or middle class") a "sense of political power":

> what *this* experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals . . . not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex. [*M*, p. 174]

The sense of political possibility is frightening and exhilarating for Delany. He emphasizes not the discovery of an identity, but a sense of participation in a movement; indeed, it is the extent (as well as the existence) of these sexual practices that matters most in his account. Numbers—massed bodies—constitute a movement and this, even if subterranean, belies enforced silences about the range and diversity of human sexual practices. Making the movement visible breaks the silence about it, challenges prevailing notions, and opens new possibilities for everyone. Delany imagines, even from the vantage of 1988, a future utopian moment of genuine sexual revolution, "once the AIDS crisis is brought

2. Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957–1965* (New York, 1988), p. 173; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

Joan W. Scott is professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. She is the author, most recently, of *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988) and is currently at work on a history of feminist claims for political rights in France during the period 1789–1945 as a way of exploring arguments about equality and difference.

under control":

> That revolution will come precisely because of the infiltration of clear and articulate language into the marginal areas of human sexual exploration, such as this book from time to time describes, and of which it is only the most modest example. Now that a significant range of people have begun to get a clearer idea of what has been possible among the varieties of human pleasure in the recent past, heterosexuals and homosexuals, females and males will insist on exploring them even further. [*M,* p. 175]

By writing about the bathhouse Delany seeks not, he says, "to romanticize that time into some cornucopia of sexual plenty," but rather to break an "absolutely sanctioned public silence" on questions of sexual practice, to reveal something that existed but that had been suppressed.

> Only the coyest and the most indirect articulations could occasionally indicate the boundaries of a phenomenon whose centers could not be spoken or written of, even figuratively: and that coyness was medical and legal as well as literary; and, as Foucault has told us, it was, in its coyness, a huge and pervasive discourse. But what that coyness means is that there is no way to gain from it a clear, accurate, and extensive picture of extant public sexual institutions. That discourse only touched on highly select margins when they transgressed the legal and/or medical standards of a populace that firmly wished to maintain that no such institutions existed. [*M,* pp. 175–76]

The point of Delany's description, indeed of his entire book, is to document the existence of those institutions in all their variety and multiplicity, to write about and thus to render historical what has hitherto been hidden from history.

As I read it, a metaphor of visibility as literal transparency is crucial to his project. The blue lights illuminate a scene he has participated in before (in darkened trucks parked along the docks under the West Side Highway, in men's rooms in subway stations), but understood only in a fragmented way. "No one ever got *to see* its whole" (*M,* p. 174; emphasis added). He attributes the impact of the bathhouse scene to its visibility: "You could *see* what was going on throughout the dorm" (*M,* p. 173; emphasis added). Seeing enables him to comprehend the relationship between his personal activities and politics: "the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies." Recounting that moment also allows him to explain the aim of his book: to provide a "clear, accurate, and extensive *picture* of extant public sexual institutions" so that others may learn about and explore them (*M,* pp. 174, 176; emphasis added). Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged;

writing is then put at its service.[3] Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.

This kind of communication has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past. It has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories. It has also occasioned a crisis for orthodox history by multiplying not only stories but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely "true." Like Delany's memoir, these histories have provided evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds, whether these constructions vaunt the political superiority of white men, the coherence and unity of selves, the naturalness of heterosexual monogamy, or the inevitability of scientific progress and economic development. The challenge to normative history has been described, in terms of conventional historical understandings of evidence, as an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision, and it has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts.

Documenting the experience of others in this way has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference. It has been successful because it remains so comfortably within the disciplinary framework of history, working according to rules that permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered. The status of evidence is, of course, ambiguous for historians. On the one hand, they acknowledge that "evidence only counts as evidence and is only recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, so that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative."[4] On the other hand, historians' rhetorical treatment of evidence and their use of it to falsify prevailing interpretations, depends on a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real.[5] Michel de Certeau's description is apt. Historical

3. On the distinction between seeing and writing in formulations of identity, see Homi K. Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity," in *Identity: The Real Me*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London, 1987), pp. 5–11.

4. Lionel Gossman, *Towards a Rational Historiography*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s. 79, pt. 3 (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 26.

5. On the "documentary" or "objectivist" model used by historians, see Dominick LaCapra, "Rhetoric and History," *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 15–44.

discourse, he writes,

> gives itself credibility in the name of the reality which it is supposed to represent, but this authorized appearance of the "real" serves precisely to camouflage the practice which in fact determines it. Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it.[6]

When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.[7]

6. Michel de Certeau, "History: Science and Fiction," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 203; hereafter abbreviated "H."

7. Vision, as Donna Haraway points out, is not passive reflection. "All eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of seeing—that is, ways of life" (Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 [Fall 1988]: 583). In another essay she pushes the optical metaphor further: "The rays from my optical device diffract rather than reflect. These diffracting rays compose *interference* patterns, not reflecting images. . . . A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather where the *effects* of differences appear" (Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: Reproductive Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," typescript). In this connection, see also Minnie Bruce Pratt's discussion of her eye that "has only let in what I have been taught to see," in her "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," in Elly Bulkin, Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1984), and the analysis of Pratt's autobiographical essay by Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies,* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), pp. 191–212.

To put it another way, the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems—those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between, say, sexual practices and social conventions, or between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Histories that document the "hidden" world of homosexuality, for example, show the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected by it and bring to light the history of their suppression and exploitation. But the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause. Homosexual practices are seen as the result of desire, conceived as a natural force operating outside or in opposition to social regulation. In these stories homosexuality is presented as a repressed desire (experience denied), made to seem invisible, abnormal, and silenced by a "society" that legislates heterosexuality as the only normal practice.[8] Because this kind of (homosexual) desire cannot ultimately be repressed—because experience is there—it invents institutions to accommodate itself. These institutions are unacknowledged but not invisible; indeed, it is the possibility that they can be seen that threatens order and ultimately overcomes repression. Resistance and agency are presented as driven by uncontainable desire; emancipation is a teleological story in which desire ultimately overcomes social control and becomes visible. History is a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which categories appear as nonetheless ahistorical: desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, sex, and even sexual practices become so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized. Presenting the story in this way excludes, or at least understates, the historically variable interrelationship between the meanings "homosexual" and "heterosexual," the constitutive force each has for the other, and the contested and changing nature of the terrain that they simultaneously occupy. "The importance—an importance—of the category 'homosexual,'" writes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

> comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nascent or already-constituted minority of homosexual people or desires, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring defini-

8. On the disruptive, antisocial nature of desire, see Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston, 1976).

tional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution.[9]

Not only does homosexuality define heterosexuality by specifying its negative limits, and not only is the boundary between the two a shifting one, but both operate within the structures of the same "phallic economy"—an economy whose workings are not taken into account by studies that seek simply to make homosexual experience visible. One way to describe this economy is to say that desire is defined through the pursuit of the phallus—that veiled and evasive signifier which is at once fully present but unattainable, and which gains its power through the promise it holds out but never entirely fulfills.[10] Theorized this way, homosexuality and heterosexuality work according to the same economy, their social institutions mirroring one another. The social institutions through which gay sex is practiced may invert those associated with dominant heterosexual behavior (promiscuous versus restrained, public versus private, anonymous versus known, and so on), but they both operate within a system structured according to presence and lack.[11] To the extent that this system constructs desiring subjects (those who are legitimate as well as those who are not), it simultaneously establishes them and itself as given and outside of time, as the way things work, the way they inevitably are.

The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead, it reproduces its terms. We come to appreciate the consequences of the closeting of homosexuals and we understand repression as an interested act of power or domination; alternative behaviors and institutions also become available to us. What we don't have is a way of placing those alternatives within the framework of (historically contingent) dominant patterns of sexuality and the ideology that supports them. We know they exist, but not how they have been constructed; we know their existence offers a critique of normative practices, but not the extent of the critique. Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this

9. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), p. 86.

10. See Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), esp. chap. 5, "Desire in Narrative," pp. 103–57; Sedgwick, *Between Men;* and Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," *Écrits: A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), pp. 281–91.

11. Discussions with Elizabeth Weed on this point were helpful.

definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces. This kind of historicizing represents a reply to the many contemporary historians who have argued that an unproblematized "experience" is the foundation of their practice; it is a historicizing that implies critical scrutiny of all explanatory categories usually taken for granted, including the category of "experience."

The Authority of Experience

History has been largely a foundationalist discourse. By this I mean that its explanations seem to be unthinkable if they do not take for granted some primary premises, categories, or presumptions. These foundations (however varied, whatever they are at a particular moment) are unquestioned and unquestionable; they are considered permanent and transcendent. As such they create a common ground for historians and their objects of study in the past and so authorize and legitimize analysis; indeed, analysis seems not to be able to proceed without them.[12] In the minds of some foundationalists, in fact, nihilism, anarchy, and moral confusion are the sure alternatives to these givens, which have the status (if not the philosophical definition) of eternal truths.

Historians have had recourse to many kinds of foundations, some more obviously empiricist than others. What is most striking these days is the determined embrace, the strident defense, of some reified, transcendent category of explanation by historians who have used insights drawn from the sociology of knowledge, structural linguistics, feminist theory, or cultural anthropology to develop sharp critiques of empiricism. This turn to foundations even by antifoundationalists appears, in Fredric Jameson's characterization, as "some extreme form of the return of the repressed."[13]

"Experience" is one of the foundations that has been reintroduced into historical writing in the wake of the critique of empiricism; unlike "brute fact" or "simple reality," its connotations are more varied and elusive. It has recently emerged as a critical term in debates among historians about the limits of interpretation and especially about the uses and limits of post-structuralist theory for history. In these debates those most open to interpretive innovation—those who have insisted on the study of collective mentalities, of economic, social, or cultural determinations of individual behavior, and even of the influences of unconscious motives on

12. I am grateful to Judith Butler for discussions on this point.

13. Fredric Jameson, "Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theory," *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 1991), p. 199.

thought and action—are among the most ardent defenders of the need to attend to "experience." Feminist historians critical of biases in "malestream" histories and seeking to install women as viable subjects, social historians insisting on the materialist basis of the discipline on the one hand and on the "agency" of individuals or groups on the other, and cultural historians who have brought symbolic analysis to the study of behavior, have joined political historians whose stories privilege the purposive actions of rational actors and intellectual historians who maintain that thought originates in the minds of individuals. All seem to have converged on the argument that experience is an "irreducible" ground for history.

The evolution of "experience" appears to solve a problem of explanation for professed anti-empiricists even as it reinstates a foundational ground. For this reason it is interesting to examine the uses of "experience" by historians. Such an examination allows us to ask whether history can exist without foundations and what it might look like if it did.

In *Keywords* Raymond Williams sketches the alternative senses in which the term *experience* has been employed in the Anglo-American tradition. These he summarizes as "(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge.'"[14] Until the early eighteenth century, he says, experience and experiment were closely connected terms, designating how knowledge was arrived at through testing and observation (here the visual metaphor is important). In the eighteenth century, experience still contained this notion of consideration or reflection on observed events, of lessons gained from the past, but it also referred to a particular kind of consciousness. This consciousness, in the twentieth century, has come to mean a "full and active 'awareness,'" including feeling as well as thought (*K*, p. 127). The notion of experience as subjective witness, writes Williams, is "offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth," as "the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis" (*K*, p. 128). According to Williams, experience has acquired another connotation in the twentieth century different from these notions of subjective testimony as immediate, true, and authentic. In this usage it refers to influences external to individuals—social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception—"real" things outside them that they react to, and does not include their thought or consideration.[15]

14. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York, 1985), p. 126; hereafter abbreviated *K*.

15. On the ways knowledge is conceived "as an assemblage of accurate representations," see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), esp. p. 163.

In the various usages described by Williams, "experience," whether conceived as internal or external, subjective or objective, establishes the prior existence of individuals. When it is defined as internal, it is an expression of an individual's being or consciousness; when external, it is the material on which consciousness then acts. Talking about experience in these ways leads us to take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced.[16] It operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals.

Teresa de Lauretis's redefinition of experience exposes the workings of this ideology. "Experience," she writes, is the

> process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in, oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical.[17]

The process that de Lauretis describes operates crucially through differentiation; its effect is to constitute subjects as fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience.[18] When talking about historians and other students of the human sciences it is important to note that this subject is both the object of inquiry—the person one studies in the present or the past—and the investigator him- or herself—the historian who produces knowledge of the past based on "experience" in the

16. Bhabha puts it this way: "*To see* a missing person, or *to look* at Invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject's *transitive* demand for a *direct* object of self-reflection; a point of presence which would maintain its privileged enunciatory position *qua subject*" (Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity," p. 5).

17. De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 159.

18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes this as "positing a metalepsis":

> A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network . . . of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. . . . Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet the continuist and homogenist deliberative consciousness symptomatically requires a continuous and homogeneous cause for this effect and thus posits a sovereign and determining subject. This latter is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause. [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1987), p. 204]

archives or the anthropologist who produces knowledge of other cultures based on "experience" as a participant observer.

The concepts of experience described by Williams preclude inquiry into processes of subject-construction; and they avoid examining the relationships between discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge. Questions are not raised about, for example, whether it matters for the history they write that historians are men, women, white, black, straight, or gay; instead, as de Certeau writes, "the authority of the 'subject of knowledge' [is measured] by the elimination of everything concerning the speaker" ("H," p. 218). His knowledge, reflecting as it does something apart from him, is legitimated and presented as universal, accessible to all. There is no power or politics in these notions of knowledge and experience.

An example of the way "experience" establishes the authority of an historian can be found in R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History*, the 1946 classic that has been required reading in historiography courses for several generations. For Collingwood, the ability of the historian to reenact past experience is tied to his autonomy, "where by autonomy I mean the condition of being one's own authority, making statements or taking action on one's own initiative and not because those statements or actions are authorized or prescribed by anyone else."[19] The question of where the historian is situated—who he is, how he is defined in relation to others, what the political effects of his history may be—never enters the discussion. Indeed, being free of these matters seems to be tied to Collingwood's definition of autonomy, an issue so critical for him that he launches into an uncharacteristic tirade about it. In his quest for certainty, the historian must not let others make up his mind for him, Collingwood insists, because to do that means

> giving up his autonomy as an historian and allowing someone else to do for him what, if he is a scientific thinker, he can only do for himself. There is no need for me to offer the reader any proof of this statement. If he knows anything of historical work, he already knows of his own experience that it is true. If he does not already know that it is true, he does not know enough about history to read this essay with any profit, and the best thing he can do is to stop here and now.[20]

For Collingwood it is axiomatic that experience is a reliable source of knowledge because it rests on direct contact between the historian's perception and reality (even if the passage of time makes it necessary for the historian to imaginatively reenact events of the past). Thinking on his own

19. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 274–75.
20. Ibid., p. 256.

means owning his own thoughts, and this proprietary relationship guarantees an individual's independence, his ability to read the past correctly, and the authority of the knowledge he produces. The claim is not only for the historian's autonomy, but also for his originality. Here "experience" grounds the identity of the researcher as an historian.

Another, very different use of "experience" can be found in E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class,* the book that revolutionized social and labor history. Thompson specifically set out to free the concept of "class" from the ossified categories of Marxist structuralism. For this project "experience" was a key concept. "We explored," Thompson writes of himself and his fellow New Left historians, "both in theory and in practice, those junction-concepts (such as 'need', 'class', and 'determine') by which, through the missing term, 'experience', structure is transmuted into process, and the subject re-enters into history."[21]

Thompson's notion of experience joined ideas of external influence and subjective feeling, the structural and the psychological. This gave him a mediating influence between social structure and social consciousness. For him experience meant "social being"—the lived realities of social life, especially the affective domains of family and religion and the symbolic dimensions of expression. This definition separated the affective and the symbolic from the economic and the rational. "People do not only experience their own experience as ideas, within thought and its procedures," he maintained, "they also experience their own experience as *feeling*" ("PT," p. 171). This statement grants importance to the psychological dimension of experience, and it allows Thompson to account for agency. Feeling, Thompson insists, is "handled" culturally as "norms, familial and kinship obligations and reciprocities, as values or (through more elaborated forms) within art and religious beliefs" ("PT," p. 171). At the same time it somehow precedes these forms of expression and so provides an escape from a strong structural determination: "For any living generation, in any 'now,'" Thompson asserts, "the ways in which they 'handle' experience defies prediction and escapes from any narrow definition of determination" ("PT," p. 171).[22]

And yet in his use of it, experience, because it is ultimately shaped by relations of production, is a unifying phenomenon, overriding other kinds of diversity. Since these relations of production are common to workers of different ethnicities, religions, regions, and trades they necessarily provide a common denominator and emerge as a more salient determinant of

21. E. P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors," *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978), p. 170; hereafter abbreviated "PT."

22. Williams's discussion of "structures of feeling" takes on some of these same issues in a more extended way. See Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York, 1961), and the interview about it in his *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (1979; London, 1981), pp. 133–74. I am grateful to Chun Lin for directing me to these texts.

"experience" than anything else. In Thompson's use of the term, experience is the start of a process that culminates in the realization and articulation of social consciousness, in this case a common identity of class. It serves an integrating function, joining the individual and the structural, and bringing together diverse people into that coherent (totalizing) whole which is a distinctive sense of class.[23] "'Experience' (we have found) has, in the last instance, been generated in 'material life', has been structured in class ways, and hence 'social being' has determined 'social consciousness'" ("PT," p. 171). In this way unequivocal and uniform identity is produced through objective circumstances and there is no reason to ask how this identity achieved predominance—it had to.

The unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience, at least not with any consequences for social organization or politics. When class becomes an overriding identity, other subject-positions are subsumed by it, those of gender, for example (or, in other instances of this kind, of history, race, ethnicity, and sexuality). The positions of men and women and their different relationships to politics are taken as reflections of material and social arrangements rather than as products of class politics itself; they are part of the "experience" of capitalism. Instead of asking how some experiences become more salient than others, how what matters to Thompson is defined as experience, and how differences are dissolved, experience becomes itself cumulative and homogenizing, providing the common denominator on which class consciousness is built.

Thompson's own role in determining the salience of certain things and not others is never addressed. Although his author's voice intervenes powerfully with moral and ethical judgments about the situations he is recounting, the presentation of the experiences themselves is meant to secure their objective status. We forget that Thompson's history, like the accounts offered by political organizers in the nineteenth century of what mattered in workers' lives, is an interpretation, a selective ordering of information that through its use of originary categories and teleological accounts legitimizes a particular kind of politics (it becomes the only possible politics) and a particular way of doing history (as a reflection of what happened, the description of which is little influenced by the historian if, in this case, he only has the requisite moral vision that permits identification with the experiences of workers in the past).

In Thompson's account class is finally an identity rooted in structural relations that preexist politics. What this obscures is the contradictory and contested process by which class itself was conceptualized and by which diverse kinds of subject-positions were assigned, felt, contested, or embraced. As a result, Thompson's brilliant history of the English work-

23. On the integrative functions of "experience," see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), pp. 22–25.

ing class, which set out to historicize the category of class, ends up essentializing it. The ground may seem to be displaced from structure to agency by insisting on the subjectively felt nature of experience, but the problem Thompson sought to address isn't really solved. Working-class "experience" is now the ontological foundation of working-class identity, politics, and history.[24]

This kind of use of experience has the same foundational status if we substitute "women's" or "black" or "lesbian" or "homosexual" for "working-class" in the previous sentence. Among feminist historians, for example, "experience" has helped to legitimize a critique of the false claims to objectivity of traditional historical accounts. Part of the project of some feminist history has been to unmask all claims to objectivity as an ideological cover for masculine bias by pointing out the shortcomings, incompleteness, and exclusiveness of mainstream history. This has been achieved by providing documentation about women in the past that calls into question existing interpretations made without consideration of gender. But how do we authorize the new knowledge if the possibility of all historical objectivity has been questioned? By appealing to experience, which in this usage connotes both reality and its subjective apprehension—the experience of women in the past and of women historians who can recognize something of themselves in their foremothers.

Judith Newton, a literary historian writing about the neglect of feminism by contemporary critical theorists, argues that women, too, arrived at the critique of objectivity usually associated with deconstruction or the new historicism. This feminist critique came "straight out of reflection on our own, that is, women's experience, out of the contradictions we felt between the different ways we were represented even to ourselves, out of the inequities we had long experienced in our situations."[25] Newton's appeal to experience seems to bypass the issue of objectivity (by not raising the question of whether feminist work can be objective) but it rests firmly on a foundational ground (experience). In her work the relationship between thought and experience is represented as transparent (the visual metaphor combines with the visceral) and so is directly accessible, as it is in historian Christine Stansell's insistence that "social practices," in all their "immediacy and entirety," constitute a domain of "sensuous experience" (a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen, and known) that cannot be subsumed by "language."[26] The effect of these kinds of statements, which

24. For a different reading of Thompson on experience, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-class Formation," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Debates,* ed. Harvey J. Kay and Keith McClelland (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 50–77. I also have benefitted from Sylvia Schafer's "Writing about 'Experience': Workers and Historians Tormented by Industrialization," typescript.

25. Judith Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring 1988): 93.

26. Christine Stansell, "A Response to Joan Scott," *International Labor and Working-*

attribute an indisputable authenticity to women's experience, is to establish incontrovertibly women's identity as people with agency. It is also to universalize the identity of women and thus to ground claims for the legitimacy of women's history in the shared experience of historians of women and those women whose stories they tell. In addition, it literally equates the personal with the political, for the lived experience of women is seen as leading directly to resistance to oppression, that is, to feminism.[27] Indeed, the possibility of politics is said to rest on, to follow from, a preexisting women's experience.

"Because of its drive towards a political massing together of women," writes Denise Riley, "feminism can never wholeheartedly dismantle 'women's experience,' however much this category conflates the attributed, the imposed, and the lived, and then sanctifies the resulting mélange." The kind of argument for a women's history (and for a feminist politics) that Riley criticizes closes down inquiry into the ways in which female subjectivity is produced, the ways in which agency is made possible, the ways in which race and sexuality intersect with gender, the ways in which politics organize and interpret experience—in sum, the ways in which identity is a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims. In Riley's words, "it masks the likelihood that . . . [experiences] have accrued to women not by virtue of their womanhood alone, but as traces of domination, whether natural or political."[28] I would add that it masks the necessarily discursive character of these experiences as well.

But it is precisely the discursive character of experience that is at issue for some historians because attributing experience to discourse seems somehow to deny its status as an unquestionable ground of explanation. This seems to be the case for John Toews, who wrote a long article in the *American Historical Review* in 1987 called "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience." The term *linguistic turn* is a comprehensive one used by Toews to refer to approaches to the study of meaning that draw on a num-

---

Class History, no. 31 (Spring 1987): 28. Often this kind of invocation of experience leads back to the biological or physical "experience" of the body. See, for example, the arguments about rape and violence offered by Mary E. Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth," *Signs* 14 (Spring 1989): 533–57.

27. This is one of the meanings of the slogan "the personal is the political." Personal knowledge, that is, the experience of oppression is the source of resistance to it. This is what Mohanty calls "the feminist osmosis thesis: females are feminists by association and identification with the experiences which constitute us as female" (Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," *Copyright* 1 [Fall 1987]: 32). See also an important article by Katie King, "The Situation of Lesbianism as Feminism's Magical Sign: Contests for Meaning and the U.S. Women's Movement, 1968–1972," *Communication* 9 (1986): 65–91.

28. Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 100, 99.

ber of disciplines, but especially on theories of language "since the primary medium of meaning was obviously language."[29] The question for Toews is how far linguistic analysis has gone and should go, especially in view of the post-structuralist challenge to foundationalism. Reviewing a number of books that take on questions of meaning and its analysis, Toews concludes that

> the predominant tendency [among intellectual historians] is to adapt traditional historical concerns for extralinguistic origins and reference to the semiological challenge, to reaffirm in new ways that, in spite of the relative autonomy of cultural meanings, human subjects still make and remake the worlds of meaning in which they are suspended, and to insist that these worlds are not creations *ex nihilo* but responses to, and shapings of, changing worlds of experience ultimately irreducible to the linguistic forms in which they appear. ["IH," p. 882]

By definition, he argues, history is concerned with explanation; it is not a radical hermeneutics, but an attempt to account for the origin, persistence, and disappearance of certain meanings "at particular times and in specific sociocultural situations" ("IH," p. 882). For him explanation requires a separation of experience and meaning: experience is that reality which demands meaningful response. "Experience," in Toews's usage, is taken to be so self-evident that he never defines the term. This is telling in an article that insists on establishing the importance and independence, the irreducibility of "experience." The absence of definition allows experience to resonate in many ways, but it also allows it to function as a universally understood category—the undefined word creates a sense of consensus by attributing to it an assumed, stable, and shared meaning.

Experience, for Toews, is a foundational concept. While recognizing that meanings differ and that the historian's task is to analyze the different meanings produced in societies and over time, Toews protects "experience" from this kind of relativism. In doing so he establishes the possibility for objective knowledge and for communication among historians, however diverse their positions and views. This has the effect (among others) of removing historians from critical scrutiny as active producers of knowledge.

The insistence on the separation of meaning and experience is crucial for Toews, not only because it seems the only way to account for change, but also because it protects the world from "the hubris of wordmakers who claim to be makers of reality" ("IH," p. 906). Even if Toews here uses "wordmakers" metaphorically to refer to those who produce texts, those who engage in signification, his opposition between "words" and "reality"

29. John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (Oct. 1987): 881; hereafter abbreviated "IH."

echoes the distinction he makes earlier in the article between language (or meaning) and experience. This opposition guarantees both an independent status for human agents and the common ground on which they can communicate and act. It produces a possibility for "intersubjective communication" among individuals despite differences between them, and also reaffirms their existence as thinking beings outside the discursive practices they devise and employ.

Toews is critical of J. G. A. Pocock's vision of "intersubjective communication" based on rational consensus in a community of free individuals, all of whom are equally masters of their own wills. "Pocock's theories," he writes, "often seem like theoretical reflections of familiar practices because the world they assume is also the world in which many contemporary Anglo-American historians live or think they live" ("IH," p. 893). Yet the separation of meaning and experience that Toews offers does not really provide an alternative. A more diverse community can be posited, of course, with different meanings given to experience. Since the phenomenon of experience itself can be analyzed outside the meanings given to it, the subjective position of historians then can seem to have nothing to do with the knowledge they produce.[30] In this way experience authorizes historians and it enables them to counter the radical historicist stance that, Toews says, "undermines the traditional historians' quest for unity, continuity, and purpose by robbing them of any standpoint from which a relationship between past, present, and future could be objectively reconstructed" ("IH," p. 902). Here he establishes as self-evident (and unproblematic) the reflective nature of historical representation, and he assumes that it will override whatever diversity there is in the background, culture, and outlook of historians. Attention to experience, he concludes, "is essential for our self-understanding, and thus also for fulfilling the historian's task of connecting memory with hope" ("IH," p. 907).[31]

30. De Certeau puts it this way:

> That the particularity of the place where discourse is produced is relevant will be naturally more apparent where historiographical discourse treats matters that put the subject-producer of knowledge into question: the history of women, of blacks, of Jews, of cultural minorities, etc. In these fields one can, of course, either maintain that the personal status of the author is a matter of indifference (in relation to the objectivity of his or her work) or that he or she alone authorizes or invalidates the discourse (according to whether he or she is "of it" or not). But this debate requires what has been concealed by an epistemology, namely, the impact of subject-to-subject relationships (men and women, blacks and whites, etc.) on the use of apparently "neutral" techniques and in the organization of discourses that are, perhaps, equally scientific. For example, from the fact of the differentiation of the sexes, must one conclude that a woman produces a different historiography from that of a man? Of course, I do not answer this question, but I do assert that this interrogation puts the place of the subject in question and requires a treatment of it unlike the epistemology that constructed the "truth" of the work on the foundation of the speaker's irrelevance. ["H," pp. 217–18]

31. Here we have an example of what Foucault characterized as "continuous history": "the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that

Toews's "experience" thus provides an object for historians that can be known apart from their own role as meaning makers and it then guarantees not only the objectivity of their knowledge, but their ability to persuade others of its importance. Whatever diversity and conflict may exist among them, Toews's community of historians is rendered homogeneous by its shared object (experience). But as Ellen Rooney has so effectively pointed out, using the field of literary theory as her example, this kind of homogeneity can exist only because of the exclusion of the possibility that "historically irreducible interests divide and define reading communities."[32] Inclusiveness is achieved by denying that exclusion is inevitable, that difference is established through exclusion, and that the fundamental differences that accompany inequalities of power and position cannot be overcome by persuasion. In Toews's article no disagreement about the meaning of the term *experience* can be entertained, since experience itself lies somehow outside its signification. For that reason, perhaps, Toews never defines it.

Even among those historians who do not share all of Toews's ideas about the objectivity or continuous quality of history writing, the defense of "experience" works in much the same way: it establishes a realm of reality outside of discourse and it authorizes the historian who has access to it. The evidence of experience works as a foundation providing both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions can or need to be asked. And yet it is precisely the questions precluded—questions about discourse, difference, and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination—that would enable us to historicize experience, and to reflect critically on the history we write about it, rather than to premise our history on it.

Historicizing "Experience"

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins an essay addressed to the Subaltern Studies collective with a contrast between the work of historians and literary scholars:

> A historian confronts a text of counterinsurgency or gendering where the subaltern has been represented. He unravels the text to assign a new subject-position to the subaltern, gendered or otherwise.

---

everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in reconstituted unity" (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York, 1972], p. 12).

32. Ellen Rooney, *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), p. 6.

> A teacher of literature confronts a sympathetic text where the gendered subaltern has been represented. She unravels the text to make visible the assignment of subject-positions. . . .
>
> The performance of these tasks, of the historian and the teacher of literature, must critically "interrupt" each other, bring each other to crisis, in order to serve their constituencies; especially when each seems to claim all for its own.[33]

Spivak's argument here seems to be that there is a difference between history and literature that is both methodological and political. History provides categories that enable us to understand the social and structural positions of people (as workers, subalterns, and so on) in new terms, and these terms define a collective identity with potential political (maybe even revolutionary, but certainly subversive) effects. Literature relativizes the categories history assigns, and exposes the processes that construct and position subjects. In Spivak's discussion, both are critical operations, although she clearly favors the deconstructive task of literature.[34] Although her essay has to be read in the context of a specific debate within Indian historiography, its general points must also be considered. In effect, her statements raise the question of whether historians can do other than construct subjects by describing their experience in terms of an essentialized identity.

Spivak's characterization of the Subaltern Studies historians' reliance on a notion of consciousness as a "*strategic* use of positivist essentialism" doesn't really solve the problem of writing history either, since whether it's strategic or not, essentialism appeals to the idea that there are fixed identities, visible to us as social or natural facts.[35] A refusal of essentialism seems particularly important once again these days within the field of history, as disciplinary pressure builds to defend the unitary subject in the name of his or her "experience." Neither does Spivak's invocation of the special political status of the subaltern justify a history aimed at producing subjects without interrogating and relativizing the means of their production. In the case of colonial and postcolonial peoples, but also of various others in the West, it has been precisely the imposition of a categorical (and universal) subject-status (*the* worker, *the* peasant, *the* woman, *the*

33. Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World," *In Other Worlds,* p. 241.

34. Her argument is based on a set of oppositions between history and literature, male and female, identity and difference, practical politics and theory, and she repeatedly privileges the second set of terms. These polarities speak to the specifics of the debate she is engaged in with the (largely male) Subaltern Studies collective, historians working within a Marxist, especially Gramscian, frame.

35. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," *In Other Worlds,* p. 205. See also Spivak (with Rooney), "In a Word. *Interview,*" *differences* 1 (Summer 1989): 124–54, esp. p. 128. On essentialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, 1989).

black) that has masked the operations of difference in the organization of social life. Each category taken as fixed works to solidify the ideological process of subject-construction, making the process less rather than more apparent, naturalizing rather than analyzing it.

It ought to be possible for historians (as for the teachers of literature Spivak so dazzlingly exemplifies) to "make visible the assignment of subject-positions," not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed. To do this a change of object seems to be required, one that takes the emergence of concepts and identities as historical events in need of explanation. This does not mean that one dismisses the *effects* of such concepts and identities, nor that one does not explain behavior in terms of their operations. It does mean assuming that the appearance of a new identity is not inevitable or determined, not something that was always there simply waiting to be expressed, not something that will always exist in the form it was given in a particular political movement or at a particular historical moment. Stuart Hall writes:

> The fact is 'black' has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as 'black'. Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s.[36]

To take the history of Jamaican black identity as an object of inquiry in these terms is necessarily to analyze subject-positioning, at least in part, as the effect of discourses that placed Jamaica in a late twentieth-century international racist political economy; it is to historicize the "experience" of blackness.[37]

Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not

36. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *Identity: The Real Me,* p. 45. See also Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward,* ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), pp. 143–77. Fields's article is notable for its contradictions: the way, for example, that it historicizes race, naturalizes class, and refuses to talk at all about gender.

37. An excellent example of the historicizing of black women's "experience" is Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, 1987).

to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between "experience" and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy.[38] And subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being "subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise."[39] These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict we readjust our vision to take account of the conflict or to resolve it—that is what is meant by "learning from experience," though not everyone learns the same lesson or learns it at the same time or in the same way). Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two.

The question then becomes how to analyze language, and here historians often (though not always and not necessarily) confront the limits of a discipline that has typically constructed itself in opposition to literature. (These are not the same limits Spivak points to; her contrast is about the different kinds of knowledge produced by history and literature, mine is about different ways of reading and the different understandings of the relationship between words and things implicit in those readings. In neither case are the limits obligatory for historians; indeed, recognition of them makes it possible for us to get beyond them.) The kind of reading I have in mind would not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction. It would not render process as linear, nor rest explanation on simple correlations or single variables. Rather it would grant to

38. For discussions of how change operates within and across discourses, see James J. Bono, "Science, Discourse, and Literature: The Role/Rule of Metaphor in Science," in *Literature and Science: Theory and Practice,* ed. Stuart Peterfreund (Boston, 1990), pp. 59–89. See also, Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), pp. 1–23.

39. Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson, "The 'Subject' of Feminism," *m/f,* no. 2 (1978), p. 52. On the constitution of the subject, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* pp. 95–96; Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, 1989); and Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (New York, 1989).

"the literary" an integral, even irreducible, status of its own. To grant such status is not to make "the literary" foundational, but to open new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality as complex, contradictory processes.

The reading I offered of Delany at the beginning of this essay is an example of the kind of reading I want to avoid. I would like now to present another reading—one suggested to me by literary critic Karen Swann—as a way of indicating what might be involved in historicizing the notion of experience. It is also a way of agreeing with and appreciating Swann's argument about "the importance of 'the literary' to the historical project."[40]

For Delany, witnessing the scene at the bathhouse (an "undulating mass of naked male bodies" seen under a dim blue light) was an event. It marked what in one kind of reading we would call a coming to consciousness of himself, a recognition of his authentic identity, one he had always shared, would always share with others like himself. Another kind of reading, closer to Delany's preoccupation with memory and the self in this autobiography, sees this event not as the discovery of truth (conceived as the reflection of a prediscursive reality), but as the substitution of one interpretation for another. Delany presents this substitution as a conversion experience, a clarifying moment, after which he sees (that is, understands) differently. But there is all the difference between subjective perceptual clarity and transparent vision; one does not necessarily follow from the other even if the subjective state is metaphorically presented as a visual experience. Moreover, as Swann has pointed out, "the properties of the medium through which the visible appears—here, the dim blue light, whose distorting, refracting qualities produce a wavering of the visible"—make any claim to unmediated transparency impossible. Instead, the wavering light permits a vision beyond the visible, a vision that contains the fantastic projections ("millions of gay men" for whom "history had, actively and already, created . . . whole galleries of institutions") that are the basis for political identification. "In this version of the story," Swann notes, "political consciousness and power originate, not in a presumedly unmediated experience of presumedly real gay identities, but out of an apprehension of the moving, differencing properties of the representational medium—the motion of light in water."

The question of representation is central to Delany's memoir. It is a question of social categories, personal understanding, and language, all of which are connected, none of which are or can be a direct reflection of the others. What does it mean to be black, gay, a writer, he asks, and is there a realm of personal identity possible apart from social constraint? The

40. Karen Swann's comments on this paper were presented at the Little Three Faculty Colloquium on "The Social and Political Construction of Reality" at Wesleyan University in January 1991. The comments exist only in typescript.

answer is that the social and the personal are imbricated in one another and that both are historically variable. The meanings of the categories of identity change and with them the possibilities for thinking the self:

> At that time, the words "black" and "gay"—for openers—didn't exist with their current meanings, usage, history. 1961 had still been, really, part of the fifties. The political consciousness that was to form by the end of the sixties had not been part of my world. There were only Negroes and homosexuals, both of whom—along with artists—were hugely devalued in the social hierarchy. It's even hard to speak of that world. [*M,* p. 242]

But the available social categories aren't sufficient for Delany's story. It is difficult, if not impossible to use a single narrative to account for his experience. Instead he makes entries in a notebook, at the front about material things, at the back about sexual desire. These are "parallel narratives, in parallel columns" (*M,* p. 29). Although one seems to be about society, the public, and the political, and the other about the individual, the private, and the psychological, in fact both narratives are inescapably historical; they are discursive productions of knowledge of the self, not reflections either of external or internal truth. "That the two columns must be the Marxist and the Freudian—the material column and the column of desire—is only a modernist prejudice. The autonomy of each is subverted by the same excesses, just as severely" (*M,* p. 212). The two columns are constitutive of one another, yet the relationship between them is difficult to specify. Does the social and economic determine the subjective? Is the private entirely separate from or completely integral to the public? Delany voices the desire to resolve the problem: "Certainly one must be the lie that is illuminated by the other's truth" (*M,* p. 212). And then he denies that resolution is possible since answers to these questions do not exist apart from the discourses that produce them:

> If it *is* the split—the space between the two columns (one resplendent and lucid with the writings of legitimacy, the other dark and hollow with the voices of the illegitimate)—that constitutes the subject, it is only after the Romantic inflation of the private into the subjective that such a split can even be located. That locus, that margin, that split itself first allows, then demands the appropriation of language—now spoken, now written—in both directions, over the gap. [*M,* pp. 29–30]

It is finally by tracking "the appropriation of language . . . in both directions, over the gap," and by situating and contextualizing that language that one historicizes the terms by which experience is represented, and so historicizes "experience" itself.

Conclusion

Reading for "the literary" does not seem at all inappropriate for those whose discipline is devoted to the study of change. It is not the only kind of reading I am advocating, although more documents than those written by literary figures are susceptible to such readings. Rather it is a way of changing the focus and the philosophy of our history, from one bent on naturalizing "experience" through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent. How have categories of representation and analysis—such as class, race, gender, relations of production, biology, identity, subjectivity, agency, experience, even culture—achieved their foundational status? What have been the effects of their articulations? What does it mean for historians to study the past in terms of these categories and for individuals to think of themselves in these terms? What is the relationship between the salience of such categories in our own time and their existence in the past? Questions such as these open consideration of what Dominick LaCapra has referred to as the "transferential" relationship between the historian and the past, that is, of the relationship between the power of the historian's analytic frame and the events that are the object of his or her study.[41] And they historicize both sides of that relationship by denying the fixity and transcendence of anything that appears to operate as a foundation, turning attention instead to the history of foundationalist concepts themselves. The history of these concepts (understood to be contested and contradictory) then becomes the evidence by which "experience" can be grasped and by which the historian's relationship to the past he or she writes about can be articulated. This is what Foucault meant by genealogy:

> If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process.[42]

41. See LaCapra, "Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," *History and Criticism*, pp. 71–94.

42. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), pp. 151–52.

Experience is not a word we can do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether. But *experience* is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is "unassailable."[43] Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning. This entails focussing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of "experience" and on the politics of its construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project *not* the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. Such an analysis would constitute a genuinely nonfoundational history, one which retains its explanatory power and its interest in change but does not stand on or reproduce naturalized categories.[44] It also cannot guarantee the historian's neutrality, for deciding which categories to historicize is inevitably political, necessarily tied to the historian's recognition of his or her stake in the production of knowledge. Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects; it instead interrogates the processes of their creation and, in so doing, refigures history and the role of the historian and opens new ways for thinking about change.[45]

43. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, and Dominance in the Writings of Women's History," typescript.

44. Conversations with Christopher Fynsk helped clarify these points for me.

45. For an important attempt to describe a post-structuralist history, see de Bolla, "Disfiguring History," *Diacritics* 16 (Winter 1986): 49–58.

Chela Sandoval
Revolutionary Force: Connecting Desire to Reality (2000)

Gina Athena Ulysse
Papa, Patriarchy, and Power: Snapshots of a Good Haitian Girl, Feminism, and Dyasporic Dreams (2006)

Lauren Berlant
Cruel Optimism (2011)

Franco Bifo Berardi
Necro-Capitalism (2017)

Sara Ahmed
The Performativity of Disgust (2004)

Kathleen LeBesco
Queering Fat Bodies/Politics (2001)

Joan W. Scott
The Evidence of Experience (1991)

———

manuel arturo abreu
poetry press release for unrealized show ("The Last Airdancer") (2017)

Dolores Dorantes
Copia (fragment) (2021)

Meena Kandasamy
Kingdom of heaven (2011)

Rasaq Malik Gbolahan
What Crosses the Sea (2021)

Marwa Helal
intimacy v. isolation ixix. (2019)

Anna Maria Hong
I, Sing (2018)

Ariel Yelen
What Is This Air Changing, This Warm Aura, These Threads of Vibrating Rows of People (2022)