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“Other Lovings”: Abjection, Love Bonds, and the Queering of Race

By

Seulghee Lee

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Abdul JanMohamed, Chair

Professor Darieck Scott

Professor Bryan Wagner

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Abstract

“Other Lovings”: Abjection, Love Bonds, and the Queering of Race

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Professor Abdul JanMohamed, Chair

This dissertation discusses the intersection of racial abjection and love bonds in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century African-American and Asian-American literature and culture. The manuscript deploys affect studies and queer theory to discuss works by Audre Lorde, Amiri Baraka, David Henry Hwang, Adrian Tomine, and Gayl Jones, in addition to the cultural phenomena of “Linsanity” and “afro-pessimism.” Whereas most critical readings of failed love in minority literature have emphasized the tragic interpersonal consequences of internalized racism, this dissertation argues that these writers narrate love’s apparent failure in order to explore the positive content emergent in the felt rupture of breakups. Through readings of dissolved love relationships in these authors’ works, I inquire into love’s operation as an affect that always desires more and better sociality. The appearance of love’s failure is precisely what illuminates the ineluctably positive content of love, and I situate this content in the context of recent theoretical discussions of love as narcissistic, not-yet-here, oppressive, or antisocial. The project ultimately argues that blackness, yellowness, and queerness share a privileged access to and familiarity with love’s affective positivity.

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Choi, a continuing source of strength in Seoul, 88 years young. Traveling together in 2008, my grandfather vowed that his final travels to the United States would be my graduation from Berkeley, the promise of which has been a guiding force in finishing this project in a (somewhat) timely manner. This strength continues via the support of my aunts in the United States, Yumi Choi and Chanmi Kim, and then through my cousins: Melody Kim, Hyun-Ji Choi, Peter Won-Bin Choi, HyunSik Choi, Yun-Ji Mary Choi, and DongSik Choi. My aunt from the Lee side, Z. S. Song, has been, from the very beginning, only supportive. Of all my cousins, Kevin Kim merits special mention as a second big brother, always there. The penultimate word of gratitude is for my actual big brother, Nooree Lee, whose words of faith and confidence always bestow both to me in the most timely ways.

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## Introduction

### Love's paradoxes, love's positive content in/as racial abjection, love's queer affect

And look at the stones  
the hearts, the gentle hum  
of meaning. Each thing, life  
we have, or love, is meant  
for us in a world like this.  
Where we may see ourselves  
all the time. And suffer  
in joy, that our lives  
are so familiar.

- Amiri Baraka, "Return of the Native"

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination.

- Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

### 1. Love's positivity: affect and raciality together

Read for love. This is the reading practice I wish to forward in this manuscript, a practice intended as and toward a mode of criticality, despite predictable protestations to the contrary. The charge of facileness, obviousness, or obliviousness in equating love to an ineluctably positive affective content—a content I wish to limn throughout these chapters in its relation to raciality—has become, perhaps, something of a contagion in contemporary critical thought. A host of recent thinkers has emphasized the political dimensions of love, and plenty of thinkers throughout the canon have framed love as indispensable to articulations of racial-sexual minority formations. The thinkers, texts, and cultural phenomena I examine herein have been fair game to such framings, including those who might be called the "usual suspects" of the contemporary period in black studies and who are the linchpin figures of this study: Audre Lorde, Amiri Baraka, and Gayl Jones. But unlike the absolutely essential frameworks of the black nationalist, black feminist, and black avant-garde movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, which separately emphasize the striving toward a racial love not yet here, occluded by and entangled in both the structural oppression and the felt experience of white supremacy, this project aims to argue for the function of love as always already a *positive* affective content latent amidst and despite such experience, as a positivity unyielding to figurations of love as 1) an economy of scarcity, 2) as a mode of false consciousness unwittingly underwriting oppression and/or violent coercion, 3) as a retrospective failure of bond-genesis and community-building, or 4) perhaps most importantly, as *lacking*, its absence becoming equated to the experience of oppression in

minority social formations on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality. The predominant strain in all these critical formulations, this project wishes to assert, is the hermeneutics of suspicion regarding love's ineluctably positive value. Once love is configured against such dominant "critical" formulations, this positive content becomes legible as always already present, constituting the social space inhabited by raciality and queerness (and, more often than not, raciality *as* queerness).

Put simply, this project wishes to argue for love as always already a good thing—as the condition of possibility for social and political life, and as an antidote to the feelings of oppression, coercion, and suffering that structure contemporary lived experience, particularly from the vantage of minority racial-sexual formations. Again, as so much of recent thought on love (and positive affect more generally) tends to emphasize the ways in which love functions as an obstacle to flourishing or as lacking altogether due to the grinding intersectional realities of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and postindustrial capitalism, love might get reduced to an origin-point for obstacle, coercion, and further preclusion. One is left to wonder, then, how love might be redeemed, which is to ask how even vituperative invocations of love might be reversible. The central argument of this project is that love might be redefined and delimited (in and as our reading practice) precisely by way of its apparent failure and seeming absence, most often by way of doomed—even traumatic—interpersonal relationships. Though this reading practice thus makes much of lost love's agony and pain, it is not merely a melancholy indulgence of breakup songs (however much it does, in the spirit of Julia Kristeva, insist on the voluptuousness of melancholy). Rather, what is revealed through reading for love's apparent failure or absence is the sheer always-already-there presence of love. My argument, in turn, is that such positive presence, especially in its serendipitous emergence amidst expectations to the contrary, gives lie to the completeness or permanence of that agony and pain. Here it is all the more significant that this is, again, an argument for a practice of reading, for what comes into relief by way of that evidence of suffering's incompleteness and impermanence is a *heuristic preference* toward this positive content—toward love proper. The preference toward love, in this line of thought, can be conceived simply as the refusal to cede to the all-too-tempting illogical equation of love to cruelty, hatred, and regret—not to mention, in the theoretical register of this project, to the idioms of melancholia and social death.

I arrive at my interventions in these dominant discourses through an idiom of felt embodiment, which is to say an idiom of socialized affect, specifically what might be called "positive" affect. Rather than adhering to a hyper-technical definition of the affective, I follow Mel Chen's recent deployment of affect as an ambit-term that functions for her "without necessary restriction" and as an intrinsically *social* heuristic that "engages many bodies at once":

...I define affect without necessary restriction, that is, including the notion that affect is something not necessarily corporeal and that it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body. Affect inheres in the capacity to affect and be affected. Yet I am also interested in the relatively subjective, individually held "emotion" or "feeling."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2012), 11.

Such a capacious definition of affect is essential to my discussion throughout this project; for what is love about if not “the capacity to affect and be affected,” *in addition* to its station as an “individually held ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’?” The aim of the way I read for love is not necessarily toward redefining love in the technical register of affect, yet affect remains a quintessential term within my reading practice because the term’s own inherent capacity to signal an ontological priority of felt presence. That is to say, if one aim of the project is the registry of a content that was always already there, then it is affect’s stability as a metric of the truth-content of the felt and embodied that allows this registry. In the spirit of Baruch Spinoza, “an affect is precisely a movement which contains in itself a power of transformation.”<sup>2</sup> Love, in this way, occurs on the register of the affective; it is not that love is one of a set of quantifiably “noncognitive, corporeal processes or states” but rather that love inheres, in my view, as an intersection of the qualitative and quantitative, where the ontic stability of social truth meets the felt experience of such truth.<sup>3</sup> In this project, to read for love is to register love’s positivity, and to read for this positivity is to locate an affective content that is positive.

The two epigraphs above illustrate this tautology. In Amiri Baraka’s “Return of the Native,” the speaker finds love as the location of “the gentle hum / of meaning,” a meaning that has been there “all the time.” The speaker trusts such meaning as “meant / for us” by way of a “look” into the collective “hearts;” love’s location is the intersection of empirical evidence (looking) and the collective emotional content of always-plural “hearts” (feeling). Love here functions as the affected wisdom of a collectivity and its relationship to the bad world: “a world like this.” Love inaugurates the “we” itself (its invocation begins as a synonym with “life”), and yet it is also that collectivity’s own realization; love is the condition of possibility for an “us” while it is also the constitutive meaning for the “us” therefrom. Love’s doubleness is then echoed in the double assertion of this collectivity—a love “meant for us” and in which “we may see ourselves / all the time”—therefore eclipsing the singular badness of “a world like this.” What comes next is the preference for “joy” against the ‘suffering’ in and of such a world, which is presented as the reversal of a more predictable Sisyphean formulation of enjoying suffering. The speaker suggests not only that a joy to be suffered is preferable to a suffering to be enjoyed (which is perhaps too close to the formulation of suffering to be suffered), but that such a formulation is, in the end, “familiar,” the collective affective wisdom of and in “our lives” all along.

Such a reversal could be read, I wish to suggest, in as blatantly dehumanizing a formulation of black collectivity as Thomas Jefferson’s. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he infamously equates blackness with mindless passion, articulated in this passage as a love borne from blacks’ “misery enough.” The “love” that brings black collectivity into view for Jefferson precludes the faculty of “imagination” (and thus poetry, the realm of intellectual facility); it is thus, by implication, a love unequal to that of whites and of full-fledged humanity. Yet Jefferson notes that the love legible to him (and “God,” no less) in and as blackness prioritizes “the senses” and “kindles” them. For Jefferson, a love locatable in the senses is precluded from a love linked to the intellect;

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<sup>2</sup> Ljuba Castelli, “Re-Theorising the Individual in a Spinozist Way: Towards a Novel Materialist Ontology of Affectivity,” 3, accessed July 20, 2014, <[www.academia.edu/4924290/Re-theorising\\_the\\_individual\\_in\\_a\\_Spinozist\\_way\\_Towards\\_a\\_novel\\_materialist\\_ontology\\_of\\_affectivity](http://www.academia.edu/4924290/Re-theorising_the_individual_in_a_Spinozist_way_Towards_a_novel_materialist_ontology_of_affectivity)>

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Leys, “The Turn To Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 437.

these two versions of love are mutually exclusive. Jefferson thus fails to grant his own imagination the possibility that imagination itself might be a faculty of the senses, not to mention, of course, this possibility in reverse: that sense is a mechanism of imagination. In short, Jefferson's racist formulation is racist, in part, for its lack of a logic or mechanism of affect.<sup>4</sup>

However poorly Jefferson conceives of both affect and race, he does provide an affect-studies-style insight here that is also the condition for a reversal of the implication that blackness, by the metric of an "ardent" love, is inferior to whiteness. Despite its station as "the peculiar oestrus of the poet," love for Jefferson is definitively locatable in the senses as well. As it is for Baraka, love for Jefferson is the grounds for a racial collectivity rooted in both misery and love. Love's ability to "kindle the senses" reveals that it is its own affective power, a sensateness that speaks back to the particular misery shared "among the blacks." Love is, by implication, not just one among many "senses" but a master sense. Since imagination has already been precluded from the set of senses that Jefferson proposes in this formula, it could be said that love trumps intellect here as well. And it is blackness—not whiteness—that is associated with this particular "ardent" love, the love that trumps poetry precisely in its definitive preclusion from it. If an affected love is considered only in terms of itself (and not by a constitutive preclusion from something else), then Jefferson's formulation is, however surprisingly, in sync with Baraka's notion of a love that both inaugurates and instantiates collectivity. Instead, love's "most affecting touches" come, in Jefferson's estimation, between the sensateness of misery and the love borne from it; as blackness is, by his own admission, the social formation with a privileged relationship to misery, it could be said that blackness thus has an "ardent" and privileged relationship to love.

Our conventional practice of a hermeneutics of suspicion would ask, as I began to do above, whether imagination is a function of sense or the other way around; extended to the project of liberatory antiracism, such a reading practice would probe whether this founding father's racism is constituted by its misunderstanding of affect/knowledge or whether his racism precludes the extension of affect/knowledge to blackness. Yet such a reading practice does not necessarily preclude, I hope, the reversal-oriented queries that come thereafter, such as: 1) why love's preclusion from "poetry" is such a bad thing, if by its own admission love stands ardently alone; and, in turn, 2) why one might be so attached to the idea that such inclusion (into the realm of intelligence divorced from feeling) is necessary for combating white supremacy. These queries are consequential yet apart from the vociferousness of Jefferson's iteration of white supremacist ideology.

In this case, I want to suggest that love is far from the problem within Jefferson's racism. In fact, as love is the one quantity Jefferson grants to blackness, it might be said that his racism unwittingly reveals this privileged relationship between blackness and the presence of love. The point, needless to say, is not so much to attempt to redeem or defend Jefferson's attitudinal racism, nor is it to point out how such personal racism is

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<sup>4</sup> A slightly different way to put the matter would be to say that Jefferson understands the co-extensiveness of imagination to the senses but only grants that understanding of affect to whiteness. His racism, then, is prior to the conceptualization of affect, rather than his racism lacking such conceptualization. Either way, Jefferson's unfortunate tethering of affect to blackness provides a starting-point for a reversal, as I argue in my corollary point, toward a privileged relationship of blackness to love.

symptomatic of, implicated in, and underwritten by an ideology of white supremacy that structures this racist attitude. Rather, what I wish to illustrate with this example is that love provides a pivot-point for a reading practice that disrupts and hopefully furthers our reading of the “misery enough” attributed to the objects of that racism (the structural victims of white supremacy), a suffering too often seen as the affective starting-point for the subjects of minority discourses. These pivots and reversals, as I hope to have shown through the unlikely pair of Jefferson and Baraka, begin from the *a priori* standpoint that love always contains a positive value. Jefferson, in this way, might be on to something to point out that love—borne from “a world like this” (one which designates the quantity and intensity of misery differentially by race)—might appear differentially as well. This is one way to read for love.

## 2. Love in and as racial abjection: love and the abject together

First there was the outbreak of abjection.<sup>5</sup>

- Julia Kristeva

While reading for love as a positive value ineluctably suggests that it can be located as always already existing, such a reading practice also asks where and how the always already existing demands, affords, and insists upon the desire for more and better forms of sociality. This is the paradox of love. It desires despite its fullness; it asks for more precisely from its station of plenty, its lack of lack, its splendor. It could also be said that love desires *because* of its fullness; it knows to desire more from the vantage of a satisfaction already affected, experienced, and embodied. As much as this project emphasizes the serendipitous recognition of a love already present in situations and locations thought to have been defined by lack, it also asks how such recognition-moments are prospective of yet more splendor. This prospective dimension of love is understood throughout the project as a package-deal with its presence as the always-already-existing outlined above, though not every assertion or argument herein emphasizes this paradox equally, with certain readings highlighting unexpected presence and others unexpected desire. There are, of course, instances in which readings of the latter highlight the felt experience of relative poverty, lack, loss, and trauma (even as these readings are positioned with an eye toward giving lie to the affective dominance of such experiences). But nowhere in this project is the desire stemming from and legible in love’s operation as a positive affect—the desire, that is, for more and better forms of sociality—intended to be read as a desire that comes from a completeness of absence. Indeed, the readings herein, particularly the ones that highlight this desire, seek to interrogate the presumptions regarding the ontology of absence as held by the dominant discourses of racial constitution, such as social death and melancholia (which are sketched in full in the following chapters).

Abjection is the alternative theoretical apparatus deployed herein, and the preference for the term is based on its equipment with this paradox proper, especially in the frame of raciality. As an ambit-term, abjection performs a work unmatched by neighboring terms such as “melancholia,” “social death,” and even “racialization.” The

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 263.

condition for this ability is the structural intimacy between abjection and love. In the classic idiom of Julia Kristeva, love finds itself *a priori* embedded in the process of abjection. In most iterations of “love” in Kristeva’s thought, it can be considered non-differentiated from or equiprimordial with abjection itself. Especially illuminating here is Toril Moi’s assessment of Kristeva’s thought regarding the process of subject-formation inaugurated by human birth, in which love as that which “becomes the indispensable element of the cure, the moment of structuring which intervenes in the imaginary chaos, an organizing force produced by the intervention of the ‘father of personal prehistory’ in the very first months of the child’s life.”<sup>6</sup> Love here is an originary substrate permitted by the law, specifically the Name of the Father; what might be called “transference” in other psychoanalytic idioms functions here as its own antinomian “element” kick-started and necessitated by patriarchal law. Though law does slightly-yet-definitely predate love in this formulation, Kristeva could not be clearer about the terms of this love-content henceforth. Love is asserted here in no uncertain terms in three monadic units: particulate matter (“element of the cure”), discrete temporality (“moment of structuring”), and abstract yet material principle (“organizing force”). Love, Kristeva suggests, operates autonomously as much as it is the effect of the law. Love is thus both an effect of the commonplace view of abjection-qua-law *and* an iteration of abjection as originary semiotic process, thereby disrupting the easy logic of cause and effect. That is to say, the part of abjection that emphasizes law is not, in the end, separable from the love thereby necessitated toward “the cure” of abjection’s contagion. Love’s operation as this “organizing force” is equiprimordial with the “imaginary chaos” of abjection. Elsewhere, Kristeva puts the matter ever more bluntly: “Love is a death sentence that causes me to be.”<sup>7</sup> The subject’s very existence *is* the cure amidst abjection’s chaotic contagion.<sup>8</sup> In this way, abjection and love arrive as dance partners to the party that is subject-formation.

In conjoining love to the abject, Kristeva suggests that love is the name for the exclusive recourse the subject takes in order “to be” at all. Hence, the invocation of a “death sentence” in Kristeva’s reversal-formulation brings to mind another reversal, one of special pertinence to this project, as it further suggests that the path-breaking discourse surrounding “the death-bound-subject” could, with very similar precision (and even diction) in the exploration of subject-formation, be revised as ‘the love-bound-subject.’<sup>9</sup> However, according to Kristeva, such an equation of love to abjection is not a reduction of love to bare-life survival or a dialectics of death. Delimiting love as already-present within abjection is not to empty it of its futurity-oriented value. Even in its concatenation with the abject (and in echo of the positivity-content paradox outlined earlier), for Kristeva the subject’s existence-as-caused-by-love does not preclude its desire for ego-ideal, utopian possibility, and the negation of the emptiness in and of representation. In fact, love *enhances* what Kristeva limns as the brightness of such ideals, and such

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<sup>6</sup> Toril Moi, “Introduction,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, “Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 252.

<sup>8</sup> This nominative statement, it should be noted, is also a reversal of the common-sense Kristevan adage that posits abjection as the “death sentence that causes me to be.”

<sup>9</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed’s *The Death-Bound-Subject* is the immediate condition of possibility for such deep excavation into subject-formation, especially under the framing of blackness. This project finds alliance with such “death-bound” analysis, even as it questions the critical mood borne out of the dialectic of death and “the aporetic zone occupied by bare life.” See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005), 19.

capacity for idealization is a constitutive part of the love-bound existence that love causes “to be.” Love demands consideration as an invaluable substrate of the abjection analytic because

theoretical thought has forgotten that it rumbled along over emptiness before lovingly springing towards the solar source of representation, the light that enables us to see and with which we aspire to become equal, idealization upon idealization, perfecting upon perfecting: *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*.<sup>10</sup>

Abjection permits love bonds, which organize the chaos of abjection into the subject-in-process; in turn, love bonds permit the “idealization” that speaks back to abjection. This speaking is a response that builds upon itself—“idealization upon idealization” and “perfecting upon perfecting”—without recourse to any notion of “emptiness” that also might be conferred to abjection. Such is the logic of the love-bound-subject.

Thus, love and abjection are in tandem; they function nearly synonymous to each other. They reverse one another, especially when starting from its commonplace connotations, and they are, perhaps most importantly, together equiprimordial. What this means for my project is that love and abjection are decidedly not conceived of as a dialectic; in fact, the reason abjection remains a keyword in a discussion about race and positive affect is that abjection’s embedment in love (and vice versa) allows the positive content of abjection to come into relief. Love, like abjection, is *a priori*. And the specific social mapping of this embeddedness is what I want to explore as *racial abjection*.

What might be called the framework of racial abjection stems from Hortense Spillers’s conceptualization of black corporeality in her landmark essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Spillers’s account of the “undifferentiated identity” of black embodiment within the originary site of rupture, Middle Passage, emphasizes the positive condition borne from the axiomatic paradox of black studies: the blackness that marks New World African bodies off for permanent subordination is also the *condition of possibility* for subject-formation. Spillers’s vision of the Middle Passage is telling in its pronouncement of the positive content of abjection:

We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as *quantities*.<sup>11</sup>

Like Kristeva, Spillers is invested in emphasizing the positive content of the linguistic and symbolic orders that permit subjectivity, claiming for and within blackness ‘a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility’ made possible by its distance from a patriarchal semiotics interested in rendering black womanhood (even if by exclusion) the domain of “the ranks of gendered femaleness.”<sup>12</sup> Blackness here designates the precise historical

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<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, 257-58.

<sup>11</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 215. [Original work published in 1987.]

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 228. This is, of course, not to suggest that Spillers’s invocation of these ranks are about the easy inclusion of black womanhood within them, as one emphasis of the essay is about the exclusion of black womanhood from “gendered femaleness.” Thus, Spillers echoes the Kristevan paradox of subject-formation

development of marked flesh as commodity-form (“human-as-cargo”) under racial slavery and New World global capital; it also signals the indelible way in which the subject-formation that comes thereby takes social form as if it were natural human differentiation, i.e., “gender” and “race.” For Spillers, within this black abjection—which is to say the sexual othering that constitutes racial subject-formation—is also the possibility of a “different social subject” altogether.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the point of my project is to reiterate and reemphasize the beauty within this formulation of a blackness “not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated,” made possible by conditions of unspeakable conditions of violence, terror, and brutality, which are themselves the very processes of interruption, accounting, and differentiation under the aegis of New World capital. Again, the crux of this project is to emphasize the ways that racial subjectivity can never, in the end, be reduced to that violence, and that such conditions of violence are also the conditions of possibility for an appositional “quantity” of a separate “account” altogether: the love-bound-subject.

In his recent extension of Spillers’s wisdom, Darieck Scott emphasizes the positive content of racial abjection, going so far as to call for the “counterintuitive power” located therein:

[T]he abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can begin to think of as *black* power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. “Power” in this context thus assumes a form that seems repugnant or even nonsensical, for its conditions of appearance are defeat and violation, and thus it seems to be antithetical to the robust self-endorsement that the definition of Black Power in American political history emphasizes.<sup>14</sup>

Scott here describes very specific “conditions of appearance” that form the subject of his study: scenes of sexual degradation and humiliation (for which, in his reversal of Spillers’s emphasis on black womanhood, the sign of racial abjection is masculine instead of feminine). But the conception of positive-directed power in this formula is, in conjunction with Spillers, the immediate condition of possibility for thinking about the love-bound-subject. In the same way “counterintuitive power” comes into view as “repugnant or even nonsensical,” the constitution of love appears in moments and spaces of its apparent absence, thus making the assertion of love in its stead appear, at times, nonsensical.

Scott’s sketch of an allied-yet-problematic view of racial affirmation provides a second rhyme to my reading practice. The strenuous emphasis on “robust self-

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within abjection, for the female subject is “always already caught up in a paradox, an aporia which is the same as that of the speaking subject: both find themselves in a position which is at once subversive of and dependent on the law.” Like Kristeva, Spillers reads this foundational paradox as the condition of possibility, rather than simply an enabling restraint, for subject read by Spillers, as it is for Kristeva, as a positive content, as a condition of possibility. See Moi, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 9.



endorsement” and “ego-protections” that characterizes much of contemporary black studies has often been articulated in the language of love. After all, the centrality of self-love as a precondition for productive political practice (if not a political practice itself) can be said to be the single definitive concern shared between Black Power/Black Arts and black feminism. This notion of affirmative self-love, as chapter one will explore, hinges on the emphasis of a negative-bound constitution of black identity: of loving oneself despite the hatred constituting black existence. One contention of this project is that such an emphasis on negative content—the insistence on one’s dialectical relation to the negative other—might re-inscribe the very notions of negativity (hatred) that one seeks to interrogate and provide an antidote. Such is the liability, I wish to suggest, of thinking in terms of constitutive negative others. Against this tendency, one takes on the absolute fullness of what is projected as that negative space; this is one valence of abjection resplendently defined by Scott, for whom “within the black abject—within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence.”<sup>15</sup> Whether these spaces are limned as scenes of humiliation (Scott’s) or scenes of lovelessness (mine), the task is to probe, delineate, and ultimately *emphasize* the plausibility of the appearance of “counterintuitive” positivity. This emphasis, both as a locatable content and a practice of reading, can in the end be characterized as luxurious or *extravagant*, giving lie to the myths of bare-life suffering that much of so-called antiracist thought identifies with (even if they take on idioms of love).<sup>16</sup> In this way, plumbing the depths of abjection offers an auxiliary utility to the liberatory possibility of an intellectual project of blackness and yellowness, beginning from the recognition of abjection’s paradoxical station as a constitutive process and a condition of possibility for “counterintuitive power.” What is made legible by racial abjection, then, is love as that counterintuitive power.

### 3. Why “racial” abjection? Or, blackness and yellowness together

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup> Again, however opposite in both content and mood and perhaps especially for this directness of reversibility, it is JanMohamed’s *The Death-Bound-Subject* that animates this thought, beginning precisely from the “aporetic zone” stemming from a discourse of bare life. I am particularly indebted to the very end of the book when JanMohamed examines the “utopian possibility” borne from “his inherent potentiality for death,” i.e., the dialectic between the slave’s will to live on and the possibility for the most radical self-abnegation, suicide (292). JanMohamed writes of the slave’s “conditional stand” that allows such possibility: “This willingness to actualize his inherent potentiality for death must thus be understood not as an abject abandonment of life that is felt to be irremediably hopeless (though slaves, as we know, repeatedly, reach the nadir of despair) but as a strong conditional stand: the slaves readiness to assert his will in order to actualize his death in effect says that he is no longer willing to live under the conditions defined by the master and that he is willing to die, *if necessary*, in the process of changing those conditions.” Short of politically romanticizing this willingness to die, JanMohamed postulates that “even when the slave does not have a specific vision of an alternative life, he is implicitly positing a utopian possibility as an alternative, even if that exists only in the form of an empty, ‘abstract potentiality’” (292). I would simply add that such potentiality would only exist in a “full,” material setting from the same space of a “strong conditional stand,” i.e., in the positive-affective substance (the negation of hopelessness) that would give lie to the completeness of “an abject abandonment of life.”

Another way to configure my conception of racial abjection is to put pressure on the term “race” itself. The word “race” remains in the title of this manuscript, but commonplace analytical deployments of the term stray quite far from this project’s central concern, which prefers *blackness* and *yellowness* as signifiers of the positive content that is love. “Race,” then, works here primarily as a conjoining shorthand: to yoke “blackness” and “yellowness” together under one conceptual aegis. Before attending briefly to the logic of “race” and “abjection” together, there are a couple caveats regarding the critical use of “race” that are worthy of declaration. First, I do not intend to emphasize the term, as most of its deployments do, as a historical-sociological container for the ways in which an ideological apparatus coerces, regulates, and manages populations. Since one aim of the project is to explore how love might overcome the material fact of such coercion, regulation, and management—despite the undisputable reality of their being felt in the affective lives of minority subjects—the reality of race’s disproportionate distribution of *material* suffering is taken as an ontological given. The commonplace assertion of the significance of race is taken for granted, for racial abjection begins from the presumption that “race” is *constitutive* of social life.

Second, there is the question of my particular configuration of racial abjection. Blackness and yellowness do not always converge throughout this manuscript, and none of the texts I examine are “about” cross-cultural or intersectional representations of these social formations (with the exception of my reading in chapter three of professional basketball player Jeremy Lin and the 2012 phenomenon of “Linsanity,” which touches peripherally on this intersection). Primarily, my interest in bringing together black and yellow is personal, colloquial, and playful. As an Asian American cultural critic, my commitment to black studies, which predates my interest in Asian American studies and continues to outpace it, is often met with skepticism, suspicion, and (though rarely) downright hostility. As such skepticism always comes from fellow upstarts in the elite academy—and never from non-academics, black and otherwise—it seems to me that a certain stranglehold on critical discourse regarding identity, stemming from the desire for “robust self-endorsement” and “ego-protection” sketched above, is symptomatic of the particular racial hostility of the white elite academy. Ironically, this is a desire I find myself wishing not only to honor but augment, precisely by exploring the ways in which as counterintuitive a pairing of racial formation as black and yellow (more on this in a moment) might reveal parallel—if not non-differentiated altogether—structures of affective constitution, sexual abjection, and love bonds. But such a strategy of pairing does not operate from the attitude of one ego-protection against another; as my commitment to the study of Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, and Gayl Jones is prior to my commitment to David Henry Hwang, Adrian Tomine, and, yes, even Jeremy Lin, such a desire for territorial protection is not available to me anyway. I do not *feel* it. Yet nor do I seek to prioritize the black cultural imagination ahead of Asian America’s, thus simply re-inscribing the limited critical practices of self-endorsement by way of a declared shift in territorial position. I have no investment in such a practice of competition.

My investment in black studies finds its origin in a childhood spent in North Carolina, where blackness was a far more visible minority formation than yellowness (or any other racial formation), and from which I configured my own early relation to (non)whiteness. Such an identity politics as inflected in academic critique could be said to bind a racial tightrope: on the one hand, I wish to think against the grain of racial

territoriality and identity-affirmation, but this exfoliation occurs from the standpoint of the two fabrics most proximate and familiar to my experience and expertise. Thus, this tightrope is, to my feel, as much about the balance of a double comfort as it is about having no singular, effortlessly intuitive standpoint. It is the playful privilege of gliding among these discrete formations under the enabling fantasy of a materialized *non-differentiation* between them. In lieu of claiming a full non-differentiation unmoored by the racial ontology of the here and now, my yoking together of blackness and yellowness is, thus, *intended* as appositional; I have no interest in “comparing” them, not least of which for the reason that the primary mode of “comparison” in critical thought tends to emphasize friction, strife, and historical difference—in a word, contrast. This tendency has made black-yellow relationality appear on a theoretical register predominantly in terms of opposition, and in lieu of a rigorous historical exploration of the minutiae of cultural cross-pollination, the recourse to *apposition* is intended herein to emphasize instead the parallel structures of racial abjection. I have already stated that historical-sociological reality as differentiated and defined by “race” is not the central emphasis herein, and nowhere does such disinterest come into more resonant relief as when backlit by the recent regime of “comparative racialization.” Yet as this regime has thoughtfully brought needed critical attention to blackness-and-yellowness-together, it is worthwhile to discuss, however briefly, its concerns and limitations.

A comparative racialization approach to African American and Asian American social formations begins from the disruption of white-black racial discourse, replacing this dyadic structure by way of what Claire Jean Kim calls “the field of racial positions.”<sup>17</sup> A schematics borne from this field—or even more bluntly, of a “racial triangulation”—helps ask two central questions. The first is historical: how and to what extent did a process of Asian American racialization depend on an originary relation of blackness as the central signifier for race? It is now commonplace to think of Asian American racialization in terms of the dialectic between “an inherited white supremacy constituted in relation to black slavery” and “the original agency” therefrom.<sup>18</sup> Extending this historical reflection, Colleen Lye submits that the “story of Asian American racialization, which is unfinished business of the twentieth century, affords a fascinating test case of the differences between the ‘color-blind’ liberal formalism of the post-civil-rights era and the overt discriminations of jim crow.”<sup>19</sup> The question of how yellowness became negatively constituted against blackness, particularly with the post-1965 era as the judiciary litmus of both formations, can also be stated as the suspicion regarding the positive political content within those constitutions—for instance, the waning of “the original agency” in the term “Asian American.” (This deployment of yellowness as a container for historical failure, not to mention “Asian American” as a useless abstraction, will be interrogated at length in chapter three.) This anxiety regarding the political utility of identity-formations underwrites a similar anxiety regarding the potential for any and all positive alliance borne from yellowness’s formation as “an inherited white supremacy,” leading, in turn, to the second query of comparative

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<sup>17</sup> Claire Jean Kim, “Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” in *Asian American Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects*, ed. Gordon H. Chang (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 39.

<sup>18</sup> Colleen Lye, “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1733.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

racialization: Does yellowness reveal that “race” functions by way of categorizing whiteness/non-whiteness, or blackness/non-blackness?

Recent theorizations of “anti-blackness” argue that critical discourse surrounding “race” is best calibrated by attending to blackness/non-blackness as the founding distinction. For instance, Jared Sexton’s central query concerns whether

the color line demarcating the racial formation obtains most basically between the categories of whiteness and non-whiteness (producing in the multiracial past and present an *array* of color lines and their corresponding racisms) rather than between the categories of blackness and non-blackness (producing a singularity of exclusion from a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness especially but by no means solely). The presumption of the white/non-white color line forecloses on the possibility of thinking about anti-blackness in its specificity (its articulation of racial slavery and its afterlife) and its pervasiveness (its operation beyond the precincts of white supremacy).<sup>20</sup>

Arguing against the additive model of some comparative ethnic studies discourse and some versions of multiculturalism/multiracialism that limn “an *array* of color lines” instead of “anti-blackness in its specificity,” Sexton (and other anti-blackness theorists) emphasize the anoriginary station of blackness as the foundation for the Enlightenment discourse of the human. (The discursive field established by some of these theorists, self-dubbed as “afro-pessimists,” will be discussed at length in the epilogue.) But however surprisingly, such assertions are informed and buttressed by the very comparative methods they seek to replace. For instance, in a recent sociological study of Korean American and black small-business owners, it is concluded that the

channeling of immigrant small business ownership not only constructs pathways for Korean American upward mobility (however restricted), it also undermines the financing of black enterprise and reinforces the anti-black cultural racism that exclusively associates non-blacks with the virtues of hard work, thrift and responsibility (however direct or indirect).<sup>21</sup>

This study, as summarized by Sexton, proposes that the “upward mobility” granted immigrant small businesses occurs by way of a differential in structural racism, which assigns racialized values of “hard work, thrift and responsibility” to yellowness instead of blackness, despite other ways in which Korean American mobility is “restricted.”<sup>22</sup> The consequent claim for a project like Sexton’s is clear: “anti-black cultural racism” continues to exist apart from other iterations of racism, always for the worse.

Yet even given this illumination of the disparate possibilities for commerce and “upward mobility,” one is left to wonder how such a conclusion can be deemed liberatory at all for either racial formation. For one thing, this conclusion suggests that black business ownership is worse off *because* of the relative prosperity of Korean immigrant ownership, thereby avowing a myth of a zero-sum calculus of racial prosperity as administered by the very “precinct of white supremacy” from which anti-blackness theory seeks to veer away. If anti-blackness were as ontologically given as Sexton intends

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<sup>20</sup> Jared Sexton, “‘Curtain of the Sky’: An Introduction,” *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

to suggest, then attention to other minority formations within the “precinct of white supremacy” would not continually have to assert anti-blackness as the anoriginal position. That is, what is left out of this formulation is the logic that Korean America has nothing to do with the *pervasiveness* of antiblackness, as the preclusion of those positive cultural “virtues” to blackness would be “pervasive” anyway, without necessary assignation to another racialized group. In this case, Korean American formation is asserted as the straw-antagonist to “prove” an antiblackness that we knew existed prior to it.<sup>23</sup> In this way, a schema of comparative racialization could be said to foreclose rather than open up liberatory possibility—whether for blackness, yellowness, or both. In the very least, it seems to me yoking together minority formations must not pit one against another. We must treat this as a political given, refusing to indulge a spoils of suffering regarding which minority group has it worse than another. Rather than exempting antiblackness theory, my contention is that such a political starting-point could most *easily* be applied to that field of thought, which already begins from the secure foundation of antiblackness as the anoriginal starting-point for analysis.

It might be said that asserting such a starting-point proves too fanciful, straying too far from the material reality of minority infighting. Indeed, much of the discourse comparing African American and Asian American social formations begins, in Sexton’s predictable vein, from the material gaps between them, especially in a post-1965 context, in addition to lightning-rod historical moments of express strife, such as the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. But if one key task of this mode of critique is to trace the racial differentials of material conditions, then one would have to keep in view the transnational, downright global administration of these conditions, which is an administration of racialization as well. The irony here is that attention to the material gaps and frictions between black and yellow tends to deemphasize the larger material processes of global capital. In the desire to map the material differentials between two structures of oppression, one loses sight of the entire schema. It is not so much that globalization necessarily trumps matters of intra-national strife, nor that comparative racialization’s pitfalls are due to its national scope (nor does my project claim a globalized racialization approach instead). Yet it is, simply put, revealing that the spoils of suffering offered by a comparative racial approach can be trumped within an even bigger materialist purview of racialized administration. Consider, for instance, how much is offered in terms of political possibility in Fred Moten’s reading of the event-spectacle of “*Rodney King*,” which proposes that “it all comes together” in that text-as-event, not only in the convergence of the forces, structures, and effects of racism, imperialism, nationalism multinationalism, and capital; not only in the gathering of those who have been driven to Los Angeles by these forces in the past forty years—white working class refugees and the LAPD descendants, black southern refugees and their descendants (who have become the objects of LAPD surveillance and the targets of LAPD terror),

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<sup>23</sup> Then, of course, there is in this formulation the avowal and presumption that the virtues assigned by white supremacy (“hard work, thrift, and responsibility”) are that positive, and hence desirable, to begin with at all; if the end-game is—again, despite the *relative* prosperity granted small business owners—an “upward mobility” that redoubles white supremacy and antiblackness both, it could be argued that these virtues are nothing desirable for *both* Korean Americans and black Americans.

and those who have escaped U.S.-sponsored terror in South Korea and El Salvador only to find its domestic manifestations in the U.S.<sup>24</sup>

When backlit by Sexton's purview, one wonders how two schematics concerned with the double presence of black and yellow—in a situation admittedly marked by the strife between them—could be more different. Moten's aim in converging these constituent components of *Rodney King* is not to flatten them epistemologically or to posit some equivalence politically but instead to nullify the notion of having to think of them as discrete, competing texts that demand discrete and scarce modes of attention. In short, it is this other mode of materialist analysis that is invested in and potentially offers "a real adisciplinarity within which totality might actually be engaged."<sup>25</sup> When juxtaposed to the schema of comparison, such 'convergent racialization' (as it were) appears much more committed to the task of liberation.

I bring Moten into view here not only because his thought is the condition of possibility for my own (as will be made most explicit in chapter five and the epilogue) and certainly not in the spirit of pitting him against Sexton (a not unproblematic pairing that is discussed in the epilogue). Rather, I bring this passage to light because it is exemplary of a rare moment in "race"-oriented thinking in which black and yellow have been invoked toward a critique of totality. As I hope to have shown, a schema of comparison is used to highlight the so-called material gaps of racialization, whereas my deployment of racial abjection seeks to accomplish the opposite: to suggest a convergence, which, in sync with Moten, would always keep totality in sight. The point here is not so much to limn the possibility of material parallels between racial minority communities, nor is it simply to remind ourselves that their suffering intersects by way of the forces of global capital. Rather, my contention is that convergence, rather than "comparison," is that which brings totality into view, which in turn brings forth possibilities for political alliance toward liberation. Such a convergence begins from a provisional emphasis on non-differentiated racial suffering and on how these parallel or convergent formations are *constituted* by racial abjection.

With these caveats declared, the logic of "racial abjection" can be elaborated in one final way. To conjoin "race" with "abjection" is to propose a new intersectional ambit against what David Eng has characterized as psychoanalytic thought's tendency to posit "some urtext of universal human development, pure individual truth, or absolute descriptive reality."<sup>26</sup> In Kristeva's deployment of abjection, the emphasis on female

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Moten, "Music Against the Law of Reading the Future and 'Rodney King,'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 22. In the name of that universalizing "descriptive reality," psychoanalysis' view of sexual difference flattens other "social categories," according to Eng: "Psychoanalytic theorists have been slow to consider the ways in which diverse social categories underpin, intersect, disturb, or disrupt their investigations of sexuality and sexual difference. Alternative markers of difference—race, ethnicity, class, nationality, language—are often uncritically subsumed into the framework of sexual difference" (5). In turn, race has been another point of focus from which to consider the sociogenic implications of abjection, in which yellowness or blackness are legible, in my idiom, as discrete signs of the abject. As with sexuality, the discourse on race as abjection begins from an indelible connection between subjection and subjectivity. Then the question might be whether an emphasis on race as a particular abject-ness simply replaces one attempt at "pure individual truth" with another. The critical turn exemplified by Eng is not to abandon psychoanalysis altogether but to "recognize that any discussion of sexuality within psychoanalytic theory

sexuation might be said 1) to imply womanhood as the only pertinent particularity in and of abjection, and 2) to suggest an absolute or universalist corrective truth within human experience by way of a womanhood that is silently presumed white. Abjection, Kristeva could be said to ineluctably imply, is applicable equally to women everywhere, thus eliding the ways in which intersectional identity informs the experience of femaleness as well as the ways in which other social categories comprising intersectionality are modalities of abjection themselves, i.e., that “race” is itself a sexual category. While the point of this project is not so much to “replace” a scheme of gender/sex difference with racial difference, nor is it simply to “add” race to an existing formula of an unwittingly ‘raceless’ notion of gender/sexual abjection. Thus, to formulate racial abjection is, on the one hand, to inscribe the legibility (that is, the psychic effects of “race”) to the precise logic of abjection (following Kristeva), augmenting this more commonplace notion of abjection with a “racial” content. But on the other hand, to formulate racial abjection is redundant: if race itself is conceived of as a modality of sexuation, there is no turning back from abjection’s inherent “racial” content. This project at times signals this redundancy by doubling down on the term, often deploying “racial-sexual abjection” to signal the logic I have sketched in this section.

Hence, “race” is used here (again, beyond its primary utility as a shorthand to bring African American and Asian American texts together), to signify a process of social formation that is an *a priori* sexual category, if not an *a priori* queer one (as I will discuss further in the following section). “Race” is the condition of possibility for the formations of “blackness” and “yellowness” I wish to limn throughout this project, yet it is crucial to stay apprised of the fact that such possibility is already constituted by the dialectic of sexual differentiation/non-differentiation. For to “queer” race henceforth, as this project finally aims to do, is not so much to re-categorize raciality within queerness (or the other way around); the aim is to set race astray, to let it adrift from the moorings of the stiff alignment of normative racial-sexual formation with affirmative, ego-protective identification and rigid (even “anti-social”) socialities.

#### **4. Love as queer modality: affect studies and queer theory together**

Racial abjection thus serves as a framing device for a reading practice of love, providing parameters for love’s legibility. Racial abjection, then, is not unlike preceding deployments of the term in that it is first and foremost *diagnostic*. The love-bound constitutionality that racial-sexual abjection diagnoses does not provide, however, an obvious framework for lived experience. Abjection does not immediately or directly yield a field of feelings, or what Jonathan Flatley has recently called “affective mapping.” Abjection is not—at least not explicitly—linked to affect. A subject might feel excluded, marginalized, pained, and traumatized, yet no one can be said to “feel” abject. Abjection is not a mood, and it is not emotive; to “feel” abject would be to “feel” human—to “feel” the condition of possibility for desire. As abjection entails a diagnostic condition in which

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not only signifies sexuality per se but necessarily accounts for racial difference as well” (13). That is, we must conceive of racialization as a *kind* of sexuation, a mode of queering or emasculating or gender-skewing, that is produced by the larger ambit of abjection while expanding the more intuitive notion of what abjection entails.

love in embedded, a provisional distinction must be made between the love-bound constitution in the subject and the *feelings* of love, which is explored in the project as any of the following: falling in and out love with another person, longing for a lost and/or unrequited love, probing a witnessed collectivity not yet joined, or collectively celebrating a common love-object. My project's emphasis on the positive content of love, as described earlier, is where the twain—between love-bound constitutionality and the feeling of love—meets again. Love is love is love.

My project thus aims ultimately for an analytics of non-differentiation in which positive affect and love-bound constitution are conceived as a package deal. Yet insofar as the provisional distinction might demand an empirical account of their relation, this duality can be configured as a recursive causal chain, i.e., that the subject's experience of love-involved feelings comprises the affective recognition of its love-boundness. In this way, throughout the project there remains something of the spirit of "the commitment to the idea that there is a disjunction or gap between the subject's affective processes and his or her cognition or knowledge of the objects that caused them."<sup>27</sup> Especially against the diagnostic aridity of psychoanalytic thought, to which affect studies was, after all, intended to rejoin, the logic of "affective processes" provides a generative idiom for love's felt experience and lived embodiment that backlight my readings herein. Even my deployment of psychoanalytic terms—such as "surplus," "narcissism," "abreaction," and "melancholia" (not to mention, of course, "abjection" itself)—is intended to buttress a paradigm that slightly yet definitely favors the attention to frothy lived experience of an affective paradigm.

Perhaps the most powerful reason for this preference is the way in which affect attends to queerness. It is no surprise that queer theory and affect studies has intersected in truly generative fashion (though even this intersection reveals the uneasy distinction between psychoanalysis and affect, for psychoanalytic idioms pervade the queer theory in which I am most interested). In the wake of psychoanalytic iterations of the psychic life of sexuation, affect has emphasized "the role of embodiment in (queer) identity formation and change."<sup>28</sup> Again, Mel Chen is my guide here, for whom the "core sense of 'queer' refers, as might be expected, to expectations to the conventional order of sex, reproduction, and intimacy," in addition to the "veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate."<sup>29</sup> Queerness, in this way, is both metaphorical (it is an ambit-term for a "veering-away" from normativity itself), while it also inheres in the inhabitation of particular bodies, feelings, and their alignment in "the conventional order of sex, reproduction, and intimacy." Even as some of the readings herein do not explicitly address or involve queer-identified people, relationships, or socialities, the queerness of the love bonds examined here will, I think, be clearly legible as "queer" in this sense. Such an orientation to queerness, of course, has many antecedents in queer studies, beginning from the adage that queerness is not only or not always about the affirmative identification of sexual "orientation."

Backlit by the various aforementioned modes of non-differentiation I desire, perhaps the most ambitious non-differentiation this project suggests is that between "love" and "queer." This is in an attempt at reversing the spirit of a particularly powerful

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<sup>27</sup> Leys, "The Turn to Affect," 450.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>29</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 11.



and so-called “anti-social” wing of queer theory (discussed at length in chapter one), which emphasizes the death drive (and it is no accident that my engagement with it occurs in the first chapter). The spirit of this segment of queer theory, whose progenitors are Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Adam Phillips, stems from the categorical difference of queerness from non-queerness, in turn celebrating that difference by way of a cathexis to an antisocial relation to the non-queer world, viewing the ontologies therein as imposition rather than limitation.<sup>30</sup> For instance, queerness for Edelman is called on “in the order of the social” as “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.”<sup>31</sup> While the non-assimilationist politics of such a relation of and to “negativity” is no doubt wonderful (as will be made clear with its compatibility with Audre Lorde’s thought in chapter one), I question the attitudinal investment in foreclosing the possibility—not to mention political *necessity*—of forms of “social viability” not yet imagined. Racial-sexual abjection and the love bonds therein, I contend, bring forth the possibility that we cannot settle for anti-sociality; the love bonds I examine offer instead what I call the *mega-social*, a broadened notion of sociality that puts primacy on more, not fewer, forms of relationalities that are necessarily queer precisely in their breadth. We can have the future, too.

Edelman’s anti-social thesis could be contextualized within the recent trend in critical thought of a seemingly relentless focus on cruelty, pain, and anxiety. In addition to valorizing the death drive itself, a compelling trend in contemporary theory has focused on the negative affects therefrom, specifically within queer thought. As Elizabeth Freeman has recently asked, “But why is it that even in queer theory, only pain seems so socially and theoretically generative?”<sup>32</sup> The contention of my project is not only to think of love as a positivity defined against pain but to argue for that positivity as the locus of the social and theoretical. This positivity has not only been located in queer thought but *as* queerness itself. Back to racial abjection for a moment: while it is true that sexuation and raciality are for me linked in the deeply structural (diagnostic) way that abjection brings into view, I do not mean to assert queerness to this analytic simply as a rhetorical bridge between “sexuation” and racial formation. Rather, my focus on mega-social love bonds is made possible only from the standpoint and content of queerness, an affective structure of presentism and futurity bound together. Thus, the final guiding light is the recently-passed José Esteban Muñoz and his heavenly metaphor for queerness, the queer club drug Ecstasy:

Ecstasy is queerness’s way. We know time through the field of the affective, and affect is tightly bound to temporality. But let us take ecstasy together, as the Magnetic Fields request. That means going beyond the singular shattering that a version of jouissance suggests or the transport of Christian rapture. Taking ecstasy with one another, in as many ways as

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<sup>30</sup> See Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), 12.

possible, can perhaps be our best way of enacting a queer time that is not yet here but nonetheless always potentially dawning.<sup>33</sup>

Ecstasy metaphorizes not only the affected temporality of the mega-social but its strategic attitude as well. Muñoz's preference for the grasping for the other in "as many ways as possible" is, in my view, the closest idiom we currently have for the power of love—affected, constituted, and always asking for more—in a time of intellectual crisis, in which even our best, most privileged thinkers trade in the spoils of suffering. My project is, hopefully, an ecstatic gesture toward the opposite—most optimistically, lovingly, a mega-social reach in itself. It indulges in ecstasy, as love does.

## 5. Abjection, love bonds, and the queering of race: all together (chapter summaries)

Chapter one discusses how love makes itself present as narcissism rather than selflessness in Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Through readings of the story's two central erotic relationships, I show how Lorde's protagonist Audre practices a love structured by narcissism. This is in contrast to the image of love commonly associated with Lorde and suggested by black lesbian and feminist criticism, which tends to impute an ethics of selflessness to Lorde's idiom of love. I align this narcissism with Edelman's argument that narcissism is always already social insofar as "the Other, conceptualized as the obstacle to our own coherence, seems always to occasion the narcissistic aggression around which the subject takes shape."<sup>34</sup> Following Edelman, the "narcissism of the Other" that structures Audre's failed relationships suggests a queer love unencumbered by the need to affirm a survivalist identity against the white supremacist and homophobic sociality that abjects it. Yet unlike Edelman's, Lorde's narcissism of the Other rigorously attends to the social, demanding a broadened concept of love that insists on more, not fewer, forms of black queer relationality.

Chapter two extends this concept of love to Baraka to discuss both his racial essentialism and his homoeroticism. I show how Baraka's understanding of blackness as a site of social binding hinges on what he calls the "emotional phenomenon" of love located definitively in the black body. Thus, Baraka's notorious essentialism is in my understanding of Baraka the schematization of positive black affect as the condition of possibility for black sociality. I then show how *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones and Wise, Why's, Y's* exhibit this essentialism as precisely what makes Baraka's love broader than what is usually associated with his politics. Contrary to Marlon Ross' groundbreaking queer reading of Baraka's "homophobic invective," I argue that Baraka's homoeroticism constitutes a wide-sweeping love bound neither to homophobia nor racial separatism.<sup>35</sup>

Chapter three discusses love in the context of yellow racial abjection and Asian American identity. I counter the deployment of Freudian melancholia in the work of David Eng and Anne Cheng with accounts of love's positive affective content in Asian American literary representations of loss. Against melancholia's assertion that identity

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<sup>33</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2009), 187.

<sup>34</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Marlon B. Ross, "Camping The Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000): 290-312.

begins in relation to a lost love-object, I argue that yellowness begins from the love bonds already present in its abjection by and from whiteness. Following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's claim that every act of love is "an ontological event" that "creates new being," I argue that love is the condition of possibility for yellow "being."<sup>36</sup> I then turn to the classic contemporary Asian American play, Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, to demonstrate how yellow love's *a priori* relation to abjection precludes the reduction of yellowness to the felt experience of melancholia. The chapter concludes with a meditation on the 2012 cultural phenomenon of "Linsanity," in which Jeremy Lin, the only Asian American in the NBA, suddenly rose to stardom. The fortuitous pun, "Linsanity," refers to an "ontological event"-as-sports-spectacle, in which the yellow body's anti-melancholic "being" became the symbolic source of a mass affect of celebration.

In chapter four, I address the breakup between the two central Asian American characters in Tomine's graphic novel, *Shortcomings*, to show how the protagonist's melancholic subjectivity is never reducible to subjecthood-as-loss. I argue for a "just-is" melancholia in which the voluptuous mood of melancholia belies its pathological content. Through a reading of a scene in which these characters enter a world of "Oriental accessories," I discuss the relationship between melancholic subjecthood and yellow objecthood. Diverging from Sara Ahmed's assertion that minority identity is oriented by "the contact we have with others as well as objects," I show how Tomine's raced objecthood occupies a queer position outside the bounds of subjecthood's orientations.<sup>37</sup>

Chapter five returns to racial subjectivity by way of Theodor Adorno's conception of failed love as the subject's recognition of the transcendental promise of utopia and grace. This idiom of grace, I argue, functions as an antidote to a recent discussion between Hardt and Lauren Berlant on "love as a properly political concept," in which they each consider the political capability of love in terms of scarcity and economy.<sup>38</sup> In Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, I argue that Ursa's capacity for utopian "dream-making" limns the possibilities of love conceived in terms of plenitude rather than scarcity, which I call Ursa's somatic wisdom. This wisdom reveals the temporal paradox of awaiting grace from the standpoint of a subjectivity already constituted by it. In alignment with Adorno, I describe Jones' preference for attending to the positive content of the somatic as a heuristic optimism, a graceful and love-bound mode of both waiting for and narcissistically demanding better sociality.

The dissertation concludes with an epilogue on this heuristic optimism, commencing again from Adorno. Through a reading of *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, I show how positive content determines critical attitude insofar as the "speculative surplus of thought over mere existence is its freedom."<sup>39</sup> For Adorno, this freedom-driven surplus provides the metric by which to measure the efficaciousness of thought itself. This metric is then discussed in the context of contemporary method surrounding race, specifically the current critical debate between Frank Wilderson's "afro-pessimism" and Fred

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 181.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006), 94.

<sup>38</sup> See Lauren Berlant, "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 683–691; Michael Hardt, "For Love or Money," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 676–682.

<sup>39</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 99.

Moten's "black optimism." Jared Sexton describes this contest as one between two "unthought dispositions," and it is the latter disposition that I characterize as both the more difficult and more generative disposition to occupy in present-day thought.

## 1. “Other lovings”: *Zami*’s generous narcissism

Love’s a lazy slave and won’t come to her name being called and called, is—finally—a poor interlocutress.<sup>1</sup>

- C. S. Giscombe, “Ballad Values”

### i. The affirmative and affirmed Audre Lorde

We commonly understand Audre Lorde as the founder not only of intersectional identity as a heuristic field, but as the dialectician of the love bonds generated by intersectionality. To be a “Black Lesbian Feminist Warrior Poet Mother” is to affirm a self comprised of composite historical marginalizations by coming to love oneself on the basis of the composite. For many critics, this embrace of the composite is characterized by a romantic emphasis on recuperative wholeness. Barbara Smith notes in her famous essay on black lesbian writing in the 1980s that Lorde “provides a vision of possibility for Black lesbians surviving whole, despite all, which is the very least we can demand from our literature, our activism, and our lives.”<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Lorde envisions “our lives” and our “surviving whole” within a black queer idiom of love—of self-love, erotic love, and community love bonds—from a standpoint not only of survival but also of love’s status as surplus, a surplus that always includes and exceeds mere survival. Lorde recognizes the affective presence of this surplus—love—as a confirmation of the *positive* link between intersectional abjection and “the possibility for Black lesbians surviving.” In her magisterial “biomythography,” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde’s protagonist learns to love herself not despite but within her lived experience of black lesbian love, a felt experience that begins in the irruption of ego and identity and that refuses any ideal of the self imposed from without by fantasies of wholeness. Lorde’s strenuous affirmation of the self cannot be reduced to a demand for survival or a decree of wholeness, for one of its defining virtues is its circumvention of such logics of demand and avowal. Echoing the motif of “ego-shattering” in queer theory, Lorde counters the imposition of wholeness (or “ego-shoring”) with a conception of love as narcissistic. Yet unlike this strain of queer theory and on behalf of the intersectional abjection to which Lorde attends, *Zami* mobilizes the logic of narcissism toward a concept of love as always open to and demanding of more and better sociality.

Which is to say, Lorde’s vision of narcissism is always about the social world she wants. Felt first as self-love, the experience of love’s surplus is the mechanism by which one comes to love the other. This constitutive movement of love amidst the self, the other, and the collective is the very grammar of Lorde’s prosody of love. Moving with a revealing facility from “I” to “you” and then to “we,” Lorde writes in one of her most influential essays, “Eye to Eye,”

I can look into the mirror and learn to love the stormy little Black girl who once longed to be white or anything other than who she was, since all she

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Giscombe, *Prairie Style* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Smith, “The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s,” in her *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings of Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998), 72.

was ever allowed to be was the sum of the color of her skin and the textures of her hair, the shade of her knees and elbows, and those things were clearly not acceptable as human.

Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that “Black is beautiful.” It goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of Black beauty... I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving. You have to learn to love yourself before you can love me or accept my loving. Know we are worthy of touch before we can reach out for each other.<sup>3</sup>

Audre Lorde is, one might say, the self-love theorist *par excellence* in American letters. Lorde’s self-love is so compelling in part because it is useful politically, as it undergirds a conceptualization of love that extends to community structures; to love yourself is the condition of possibility for loving others in order to build a politics on the basis of intersectional identity: to “reach out for each other.” This reaching out, however, is not derivative of her individual struggle to survive, nor is it any altruistic abnegation of the self on behalf of the imagined social. After all, it is “reach,” which denotes the immediacy of felt attraction as well as the narcissistic desire to build a love-bound sociality that includes her self-love. Hence, toward the end of *Zami*, the protagonist Audre declares the positive link between her desire and the conditions of “a world” that make it possible: “Any world which did not have a place for me loving women was not a world in which I wanted to live, nor one which I could fight for.”<sup>4</sup> Whereas critics such as Smith have emphasized this “fight,” construing Lorde’s text as one such “place” in order to equate her conception of love with the struggle for space and survival, I wish to read *Zami* as the emergence of the location of surplus as well. More than a reaction to the absence of a “place” of lesbian love, the text is where Lorde’s self-love makes its presence felt as the opening of that queer social place.

Thus, in addition to providing one of the earliest “critical assessments of queer cultural unity” in pre-Stonewall queer life, *Zami* itself shows how narcissistic love functions to open up the space of “queer historical experience.”<sup>5</sup> Lorde affirms love bonds as an antidote against the historical, material, and lived experience of black queer abjection; as these love bonds are already embedded in abjection, Lorde’s vision of love entails the subject’s cathexis to cognate abjections. The subject desires recognition from and thus bonds to similarly constituted others. As Sara Ahmed’s formulation of the political economies of affect has it, “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”<sup>6</sup> In this sociogenic binding “between the individual and the collective,” *Zami* concretizes “the relationship between the psychic and the social,” creating through the explicit language of love “a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence).”<sup>7</sup> In this way, Lorde’s text commemorates a “queer unity” particular to her

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<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley and Toronto: Crossing Press, 2007), 174-175. [Original work published in 1984.]

<sup>4</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Berkeley and Toronto: Crossing Press, 1982), 197.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2001), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22:2 (Summer 2004): 119.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

intersectional self-identification yet also seeks to limn the conditions of possibility for the “collective” that is the very consequence of love’s “intensity.” This might seem an obvious point: Lorde is interested in community structures at the margins of mainstream society, and any kind of community “binding” or “unity,” whether marginal or dominant, comports an affective dimension. Yet Lorde’s vision of “collective coherence” begins from a historical position (black queer womanhood) that cannot assume a unified minoritarian posture; in this way, Lorde’s version of *agape* stands apart from, say, the “race love” of W. E. B. Du Bois or the “antidote” love of James Baldwin. For Lorde, that is, *agape* begins from accounting for a stable and loved intersectional self.

Even for critics who focus on intersectionality as the starting-point for Lordean love, emphasis tends to fall on love’s capability to recuperate the supposedly broken self of intersectional abjection. It is tempting to attach to Lorde in general and *Zami* in particular this familiar affirmative love ethic and thus to read the text first and foremost as a feminist and queer romance of subject-recuperation. What these critics share is the intuition that this triumphalist romance is intimately connected to Lorde’s conception of embodiment. Elizabeth Alexander, for instance, goes as far as to identify redemptive subject-formation in Lorde with sexual experience: “Making love, how the body acts, is a counterpart or antidote to what has been done to it. Making love (the erotic) as a creative act (as power) is a self-making and self-defining act.”<sup>8</sup> But what Alexander’s equation of the erotic to lovemaking obscures is the way in which “self-making and self-defining” is for Lorde also the opening up of a space of queer sociality. Overlooking the imbrication of *agape* within Lordean *eros*, Alexander tends to reduce Lorde’s notion of the social to “the ills of an oppressive world”: “The heart and soul express themselves through the body. The body manifests the ills of an oppressive world that is especially punishing to women and poor people and people of color. The body is a very specific site in Lorde’s work, the location where all this takes place.”<sup>9</sup> The body is for Lorde, indeed, a “very specific site” where a singular mode of knowledge commences, but it is Audre’s intersectional experience of “the ills” (of racial-sexual abjection) that has empowered what Alexander rightfully celebrates as the queer glory of her erotic “self-making and self-defining.” Moreover, if lovemaking were simply affirmed in this scene as an erotic antidote against a sociality of “oppressive ills,” then the text would not strain as it does under the weight of Lorde’s representations of Audre’s affective experience marked by disappointment and sadness.

Readings like Alexander’s impute to Lorde a thematics of the body as a site of new knowledge—as, basically, a text friendly to affect theory. And *Zami* is, no doubt, a harbinger of affect studies, though I would like to push the affective reading farther to account for how this knowledge, grounded in the body, concerns not individual wholeness and identity but rather new “figurations” of selfhood and sociality that turn to the body to rethink what identity is in the first place. This hermeneutical turn to the body and its affects provides what Eve Sedgwick once described as “a switch point for the individuation of imaging systems, of consciousness, of bodies, of theories, of selves—an individuation that decides *not necessarily an identity*, but a figuration, distinction, or

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Coming Out Blackened and Whole’: Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*,” *American Literary History* 6:4 (1994): 709.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 711.

mark of punctuation.”<sup>10</sup> As love in Lorde’s thought allows a rethinking of identity-as-individuation, it functions as a positive affect that, however surprisingly, decides “a figuration, distinction, or mark of punctuation” rather than, as Alexander might have it, an affirmed identity.

For Sedgwick (and thus for the very beginning of the deployment in the humanities of Sylvan Tompkins’ model of the affects) the feelings that “produce bodily knowledges” are exemplified by disgust and shame but *not* those we might typically associate with affirmation, such as, within Tompkins’ original set of eight, enjoyment and interest.<sup>11</sup> Yet in Sedgwick these negative affects lead toward the recognition—the bodily knowledge—of their positive condition of possibility, which she describes as nothing other than “a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest.”<sup>12</sup> That is, for Sedgwick, positive affect appears as the recursive knowledge of negative affect. In a brilliant addendum to (blackening and further queering of) this logic, *Zami* makes Audre’s *self*-love the “scene” whose positive offering of enjoyment and interest permeates affective experience, and whose positivity, in keeping with Sedgwick, shows through most of all in the text’s representations of negative affect, namely in Audre’s failed love relationships. As I will argue, Audre’s failed relationship with Muriel is ultimately suffused with the positive content of love, more than her relationship with Afrekete, precisely because the love bond with Muriel has been rooted all along in Audre’s self-love.

In this way, Lorde suggests that love itself is a “bodily knowledge” and that its positivity might be particularly useful for illuminating racial-sexual abjection. Following this logic, such illumination occurs not through the direct affirmation of abject identity but through a “figuration” that reveals its condition of possibility as positive affect. Smith’s and Alexander’s readings of *Zami*’s representation of intersectionality ingeniously delineate the particular ways in which the intersectional body *knows*, but they align this affective self-knowing, whether consciously or by ineluctable implication, with the affirmation of Audre’s identity itself, rather than with a reimagining of identity as “a figuration, distinction, or mark of punctuation” vis-à-vis the conditions of possibility for identity as such. Lorde’s representation of the abjection of black queerness and its narcissistic love is much closer to “not necessarily an identity” than a stable one: this is the crux of the argument I wish to make in this chapter, and it begins from the simple observation that the text represents Audre’s ostensible failures in love much more compellingly than its successes. By discussing Audre’s love relationships—specifically, how they are structured by a Lordean narcissism—I want to suggest that Lorde is ultimately invested in the ways that self-love, rather than simply affirming individual identity or embodiment, exposes the always already social content of racial-sexual abjection.

## ii. Audre’s successful failed loves and *Zami*’s narcissism

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003), 116-117.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



The arrival of Audre's relationship with Afrekete only at the end of *Zami* suggests a long-awaited affirmative resolution to the "biomythography," and it is also commonly read as an affirmative resolution to Audre's recuperated self. Audre's phrase, "each of us both together," elegantly captures the fleeting connection that forms this brief relationship, a textual tryst of merely nine pages.<sup>13</sup> The beauty of this encounter is found in its truncation: "We had come together like elements erupting into an electrical storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange."<sup>14</sup> Near the novel's end and after immense heartbreak, Audre's self is "reformed" and "reshaped" through a "brief and drenching" love. Through Afrekete, we have seemingly found synthetic resolution to a dialectic of self-love and the love of others, which leads directly to the next dialectical turn: literally, the home-space of the brief Epilogue, the "place where work begins."<sup>15</sup> M. Charlene Ball characterizes this synthesis by the language of wholeness, claiming that Afrekete's "wit, verbal-self assurance [and] sexuality" function collectively as a pivot-point in a "mythic narrative" in which "everything in it is chosen for mythic meaning... What Kitty/Afrekete brings is wholeness."<sup>16</sup> It appears that Afrekete's presence functions not only as a tidy conclusion to Audre's narrative but as the catalyst for theoretical resolution and new beginnings.

The immediate trauma that Audre is dealing with when she meets Afrekete is the failure of the most thoroughly developed love relationship in the novel. The condition Audre seems to occupy here is mourning: "But another piece of myself turned over in the darkness, filled with a great sadness."<sup>17</sup> Audre and Muriel arrive at the bitter conclusion that "obviously, love was no longer enough of an answer," raising the question of what kind of "answer" that relationship had provided to begin with—of what her hard-won understanding of a sustained and embodied love might mean after its end.<sup>18</sup> Yet surprisingly, this embodied love commences from bodily separation. Living apart, Audre's love for Muriel has unfolded through correspondence; the letters she receives are "long and beautiful" as well as "lyrical and revealing."<sup>19</sup> Audre becomes convinced through this exchange that "I could take care of Muriel. I could make the world work for her, if not for myself."<sup>20</sup> This is a romance wholly unaware of the absence of intersubjectivity. Audre goes on: "With no intent and less insight, I fashioned this girl of wind and ravens into a symbol of surrogate survival, and fell into love like a stone off a cliff."<sup>21</sup> Audre has constructed a vision of Muriel that aligns her in a symbolic order that Audre herself "fashions," no one else. Lorde's usually precise love-talk unravels here into cliché metaphors of blindness ("less insight") and vertigo ("like a stone off of a cliff"). Audre may be in love like no time before, but the object of this love is undoubtedly Audre herself; Audre can be said to be in love with love—in love with herself—more

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<sup>13</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 249.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>16</sup> M. Charlene Ball, "Old Magic and New Fury: The Theophany of Afrekete in Audre Lorde's 'Tar Beach,'" *NWSA Journal* 13:1 (2001): 69, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 230.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

than she is in love with Muriel. In a narrative so preoccupied with body-contact, the fact that there is a literal distance here concretizes this point. This relationship with Muriel turns out simply to be Audre's romance of the self.

Yet this narcissistic love that defines the Audre-Muriel relationship is, in fact, what makes the relationship function. Later on, we learn that what Audre finds attractive in Muriel is that they, in fact, share this narcissistic conception of love. Audre sketches love as paradoxically voluntary but also as a quest for control, generously given but greedy in its desire to shore up the ego:

Muriel and I talked about love as a voluntary commitment, while we each struggled through the steps of an old dance, not consciously learned, but desperately followed. We had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers, both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given.<sup>22</sup>

Love's selfishness—its desire “for control”—is precisely what allows Audre and Muriel's attraction to become *Zami*'s only sustained relationship. This “desperation” speaks to the double desire for the “warm places of survival” alongside the “open” places, yet here only the desire for such open places—not the places themselves—can be articulated. Ultimately, this is a love that operates out of fear of the other; Audre cedes “control” when her love for Muriel is abstract and disembodied, which quickly turns into a romance of romance, a loss of control but only of one's own ego. When actually confronting Muriel, she prefers to stay in the “home” of her ego-romance, afraid to leave the house. The texture of Audre's longest love relationship thus suggests a very different picture of how *Zami* conceives of love bonds than previously theorized, suggesting an intersection of affect with a psychoanalytic hermeneutics of narcissistic desire (to which I will turn momentarily).

This reading of the Muriel relationship impacts Afrekete's subsequent presence in possibly two divergent ways. One: Audre's love was doomed as a failure from start to finish, and thus Afrekete is, as others have suggested, the redemptive turn that turns finally to *agape*, feminism, and ‘home’-talk. Against the ‘voluntarism’ of Audre's and Muriel's love-pact, Afrekete offers a love entirely involuntary. This is how critics have tended to deal with Afrekete's presence in the narrative; she serves as the linchpin of erotic love's penultimate redemptive success following the shattering sadness of breaking up with Muriel. In this vein, it is through Afrekete that we might characterize Audre's subjectivity as mournful rather than melancholic; the tryst with Afrekete has restored the ego, suggesting a conclusive and non-pathological “reaction to the loss of a loved object.”<sup>23</sup> If we buy this reading of Muriel and Afrekete, we could even extend this take on *Zami* as a provocative antithesis to Anne Cheng's equation of racialized subjectivity to melancholia, wherein the raced subject is “imaginatively reinforced through the introjections of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity.”<sup>24</sup> Lorde might rejoin that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1974), 245.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), xi.

these “introjections” can only be represented within the same social web that birthed the raced subject anyway, and thus introjections of a reclaimed “perfection” and, indeed, an *articulable* loss constitute recognitions of its unconscious would-be melancholia, routing this originary loss instead to be legible only as a kind of mourning. In this reading, Lorde sways Audre’s subjecthood away from a sense of permanent loss (her heartbreak over the abiding love of and for Muriel) precisely through the articulation of a rebuttal to “never perfection” that arrives neatly near the narrative’s end in the form of a mythic-but-concrete, utopian-but-“possible”-perfection: Afrekete.

But a problem arises here that becomes clearer if I speak outside the text a bit further. Again, according to this reading’s own terms, Audre’s and Muriel’s dalliance is a redemptive love only if conceived of as “involuntary.” This lack of choice, however, seems like a dire contradiction in any consideration of Lorde’s life project. One can espouse commitments and transform oneself and one’s community, but one must always choose to do so and be aware of one’s motives in doing so. Consider the words from the brief epilogue: “I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this space of choosing is the primary freedom Audre Lorde found in a life spent probing intersectional limits, the “inescapable conclusions or conviction I had come to about my own life, my own feelings, that defied thought,” as she described in an interview with Adrienne Rich.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, we can endorse a reading of the text incongruent to our conception of its author. But it seems to me, too, that this involuntary-love-reading works because we want it to work, because we as affirmative readers—cathected to a redemptive view of intersectional abjection—would rather believe Audre falls in and out of love, rather than the possibility that she might never have been in love in the first place. For if Audre’s relationship with Afrekete can only be read as a revision of and rebound from Muriel, then we must contend with the question of what happens to Audre’s (and our) romance with Afrekete from the retroactive recognition that the first relationship was not really a loss. We agree with Audre and Lorde herself that narcissistic love is not an ideal of love we want to hold on to; then we recognize that we must mourn not only the loss of an intimacy that structures our affective experience (and thus the endurance of the Muriel relationship matters), but we must also, more importantly, grapple with the larger failure of why the possibility of love turned that way in the first place. Why does the ideal of an intersubjective, embodied love so easily turn into a romance of the ego?

If Muriel and Afrekete represent in the symbolic register divergent approaches to adjudicating Audre’s subjectivity—the relation “between the ego and its images”—then narcissism is not an obstacle to a view of love but rather its starting-point.<sup>27</sup> As Lacan writes in Book XX of the *Seminar*, “love, in its essence, is narcissistic, and reveals that the substance of what is supposedly object-like (*objectal*)... is in fact that which constitutes a remainder in desire, namely, its cause, and sustains desire through its lack of

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<sup>25</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 256.

<sup>26</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, translator’s note to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Book XI (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan)*, by Jacques Lacan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), 280.

satisfaction (*insatisfaction*), and even its impossibility.”<sup>28</sup> On this view, Muriel represents the intractability of desire for Audre (the refusal to ‘split’ and ‘part’ in the Real) and the continuance of an ego always already split and parted, unsatisfied neither by Muriel nor Afrekete. Thus, in addition to a discourse of affect, Lorde models the intransigent narcissism—the “remainder in desire” called love bonds—of traditional psychoanalysis.

In his routing of Lacan, Lee Edelman writes in *No Future* about narcissism always being “a narcissism of the Other”:

We might express the double dynamic at work in narcissism as follows: narcissism as always a narcissism of the Other. By this I mean not only that the Other, conceptualized as the obstacle to our own coherence, seems always to occasion the narcissistic aggression around which the subject takes shape, but also that narcissism bespeaks the ascription to the ego of recognizable and defensible form only insofar as narcissism is invested from the outset, which is to say, primally, in the nondifferentiation of ego and id, in the unsymbolizable Real of the drive that imperils the ego as object.<sup>29</sup>

Following Edelman, the question for us might be to what extent we read Audre’s relationships as the platform for this aggressive subject-shaping and ultimately the “nondifferentiation of ego and id.” Muriel and Afrekete are still the symbolic interfaces of “the unsymbolizable Real,” each, in their own ways, representing the potential to “imperil the ego as object.” This romance of the self (which, again, we are tempted to evaluate as not-love) imperils Audre’s subjectivity not because of a nasty intersubjective break-up with the beloved (which would subsequently suggest mourning proper), but because the cathexis represented in the break-up was hardly a romance of the Other to begin with. This romance of the self works to dislodge the romantic ideal of subject-object parity and reveals Audre’s ego to be disrupted at its very core, approaching what Judith Butler calls “the part that loss plays in subject formation,” the originary melancholia equated to “the loss of the ability to love, the unfinishable grieving for that which founds the subject.”<sup>30</sup> But in *Zami*’s representation of a subject-in-process, it is Muriel who represents this non-love love that founds or inaugurates her subjecthood. Butler goes on to pose, “But what happens when a certain foreclosure of love becomes the condition of possibility for social existence? Does this not produce a sociality afflicted by melancholia, sociality in which loss cannot be grieved because it cannot be recognized as loss, because what is lost never had any entitlement to existence?”<sup>31</sup> Through Muriel, Lorde seems to reply that the melancholic subject (or, the subject founded by melancholia) can and must still recognize what love looks like within “social existence.” The subject recognizes that this enabled and “afflicted” cathexis still occurs, that she is bound to others not only by the “foreclosure that constitutes an unknowability” but also by the recognition of a love that aggressively—narcissistically—demands its “entitlement to existence.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Book XX (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan)*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1999), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004), 51.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 24.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Another idiom for this, echoing Lacan, comes from Kristeva, who concludes her description of this aggressive subject-formation in this ambit-defining nominative: “...let us once more admire the exceptional

Which brings us to the question of how Audre’s “brief and drenching” love for Afrekete is also structured by the narcissism of the Other. Critics like Ball have tended to figure Afrekete as the carrier of “wholeness” and the apotheosis of a womanist “mythic narrative” that almost immediately converts Audre into ‘Zami.’ Yet Ball notes that Afrekete, in addition to the mythic agent that catalyses Audre’s final transformation, also provides a mirror relationship.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, more than any of the “strangers and sisters” that embody “woman’s power” throughout Audre’s narrative, it is the figure of Afrekete that invites an obvious reading of a relationship shot through with narcissism.<sup>34</sup> Revealingly, this invitation extends to the description of their “brief and drenching” love as well, as the language used to describe their lovemaking equates commingling bodies to interchangeable “shiny mirrors”: “We slipped off the cotton shifts we had worn and moved against each other’s damp breasts in the shadow of the roof’s chimney, making moon, honor, love, while the ghostly vague light drifting upward from the street competed with the silver hard sweetness of the full moon, reflected in the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide.”<sup>35</sup> With its high Lordean romantic glamour, this account of narcissism reads as more deliberate and obvious in contrast to the abovementioned passages surrounding Muriel. But as the Audre-Muriel relationship attests, narcissism of the Other demands a fundamental incoherence in the mirror image, rather than a satisfying fit of “shiny mirrors.” That is, what is missing from this union between Afrekete and Audre that would make it the true narcissism—the narcissism of the Other—is, in fact, a failure to recognize oneself:

Since something always appears to be missing from any representation, narcissism *cannot* consist in finding satisfaction in one’s own visual image. It must, rather, consist in the belief that one’s own being exceeds the imperfections of its image. Narcissism, then, seeks the self beyond the self-image, with which the subject constantly finds fault and in which it constantly fails to recognize itself. What one loves in one’s image is something *more* than the image (‘in you more than you’).<sup>36</sup>

With Afrekete’s “mythic meaning” being that of concatenating love to “wholeness,” we have an unmistakable negation of this mapping of narcissism. Rather than finding what exceeds herself, Audre finds in Afrekete instead a mirror-relationship that is, ultimately, all about “finding satisfaction in one’s own visual image.” On this view, Audre’s self-conscious account of narcissism turns out not to be narcissism at all. Instead, Afrekete offers us abiding sustenance: “I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo.”<sup>37</sup> What Afrekete offers Audre is the promise of restoration following the abject love of Muriel, i.e., the true narcissism, the narcissism of the Other.

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balance between a voracious self and a tyrannical ideal, an unsatisfied desire and a nevertheless assured possession. Such a taut peace, painful harmony narcissism of the body-Self, infinitely swollen only to be emptied for the benefit of a violent identification with a sublime alter ego—that is love.” See Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 169.

<sup>33</sup> Ball notes this mirror-relationship at the level of dress: “The details of Kitty’s appearance also link her with Audre herself. Although Kitty, being femme, wears a skirt, her belt matches Audre’s” (66).

<sup>34</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 254.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>36</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 253.

As critics have noted, Afrekete represents a mythological love-goddess that leaves us restored, recovered, and recuperated; she leaves Audre, we could say, deeply ‘satisfied in her own visual image.’ Critics also note that Afrekete functions as a mythic “female trickster... a female avatar of Esu/Elegbara,” as well as the “the goddess to whom Lorde entrusts herself and all of us.”<sup>38</sup> Yet if we insist on a narcissism of the Other as the linchpin to a deeper conception of love bonds mapped elsewhere by Audre, then Afrekete merely tricks Audre—and “all of us”—into a nostalgic delusion of restoration, recovery, and recuperation, of wholeness in and as subjecthood. *Zami* signals that rather than quickly restoring and loving ourselves again, we ought to question why we put so much primacy on the romance of a restored, recovered, and recuperated self in the first place. Lorde suggests instead that by holding abeyant this romance we might arrive at a deeper conception of self-love—the narcissism of the Other—that precisely attends to new, transformed subjectivity rather than a given social identity. Thus, it is Audre’s relationship with Muriel—that which so easily doesn’t look like love at first—that stands ultimately as the model of love bonds to be redeemed in *Zami*. In this way, even Sarah Chinn’s illuminating affective reading of Lorde’s work in general and *Zami* in particular doesn’t go far enough. Chinn poses that contra the patriarchal metaphors of vision shot through the Enlightenment, “Lorde’s theory of sexuality does not reject the visual but instead reformulates it as one way of knowing another person, as a poor way at that. Ultimately, Lorde represents lesbian sexuality as a conduit for entering into some kind of communion with an other, a way authentically to love others and oneself.”<sup>39</sup> Following Chinn’s own logic, I cannot avoid coming to an opposite conclusion: it is precisely the visual metaphors of Afrekete and Audre’s lovemaking, however “reformulated” they are, that signal the possibility that lesbian sexuality, too, has its own limits as the medium of an idealized intersubjective “knowing.” To desire to love oneself wholly and “authentically” might serve as a Sisyphean ideal against the originary establishment of melancholic subjecthood, but Audre seems to recognize that such an ideal—the ideal of ‘shiny mirrors’—is already “a poor way” to approach what it means to experience, engage, and possibly transform the self.

Much earlier in *Zami* Audre sketches this definition of eros:

I made an adolescent’s wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, closer to my own strength, which was after all not so very different from my mother’s. And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving. How to cook the foods I had never tasted in my mother’s house. How to drive a stick-shift car. How to loosen up and not be lost.<sup>40</sup>

This is the free-ranging romanticism that emphasizes quotidian experience and that receives its full polemical due in Lorde’s famous essay, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in which she says that “there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.”<sup>41</sup> For Lorde, the hermeneutic strictures of the erotic are as limited as we imagine them to be. But in

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<sup>38</sup> Ball, “Old Magic and New Fury,” 69; Sarah E. Chinn, “Feeling Her Way: Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch,” *GLQ* 9:1-2 (2003): 192.

<sup>39</sup> Chinn, “Feeling Her Way,” 184.

<sup>40</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 58.

reflecting on the formative bonds and fissures of her adolescence, Audre seems to offer an alternative reading of what this “other loving” might be. Chinn claims that “Lorde’s project in *Zami* and in her other writings is not utopian but reparative,” but it seems to me that in the recourse to the language of sustenance and object-relations, “reparation” is just as much a fantasy as utopia.<sup>42</sup> Audre seems to remind us that the love of the quotidian (cooking, driving, and loosening up), rather than extending an all-ranging romantic view of the subject’s capacity to love, is actually the desperate recourse to the self—a turn to the narcissism of the Other—that is ultimately required by the ineluctable failure of such a romantic view.

### iii. Lordean narcissism’s alliance with affective critique

It is with this textual demand for “other loving” that I would like to discuss two potential limitations of my contrarian reading of Audre’s love relationships in *Zami*. I imagine both of these rebuttals in the fold of matters outside the text, which, again, I find to be fair ground for critique, given the extent of our own “mythography” of Audre Lorde. The first is that this reading of *Zami* might dishonor the life project of Lorde’s that I mentioned earlier: that Lorde’s interest in survival and “reparation” from the standpoint of her intersectional identity merits at least a minor romance of the ego, self-definition, and intersectional identity, not to mention of the agency (the “choosing”) accorded to love bonds explicitly announced as non-narcissistic. After all, though the text is not an autobiographical memoir, it is still an autobiographical document that aestheticizes experiences culled from Lorde’s life. And by *Zami*’s close, Audre has made it to the epilogue with her “forward visions” of self and womanhood intact—no small victory.

Secondly, if one aim of my reading is to attempt to read for love as positive affect, then these interpretations of Muriel and Afrekete may revert us, in their recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis, to the critical problem that gave rise to the need for affect studies in the first place. As Sedgwick writes of her turn to a reading for “affect and texture,” “Attending to psychology and materiality at the level of affect and texture is also to enter a conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends.”<sup>43</sup> It is not difficult to imagine an Edelmanian reading of Lacanian narcissism—with its explicit universalizing tendency, for instance, to read for “the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within”—as the ideal exemplar of what Sedgwick implies is the misstep of psychoanalysis’ own attendance ‘to psychology and materiality.’<sup>44</sup> However valid a reading toward the “non-differentiation of ego and id” might be, it remains detached from both lived cultural practice and the affective experience of love bonds, which in turn links this criticism back to the first: that I risk dishonoring or betraying Lorde’s noble political project of a ‘reparative’ black feminist queer consciousness, including (especially) its erotic vectors.

Yet if my reading of narcissism in Lorde’s novel seems detached from the texture-of-lived-culture aims of affect theory, I would rejoin that via the large ambit of love’s positivity might the twain meet. It is precisely through a “non-differentiation of

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<sup>42</sup> Chinn, “Feeling Her Way,” 197.

<sup>43</sup> Sedgwick, *Touch, Feeling*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 9.

ego and id” that we might, in good Lordean fashion, also thematize her non-distinction between *eros* and *agape*. Returning to where I began, if the most common association with Lorde and an intersection-based “queer unity” is rooted in an affirmative self-love, then a re-conceptualization of that self-love as one constituted by “narcissistic aggression” vis-a-vis the threat of the “Real of the drive that imperils the ego” means, from the outset, that this founding self-love, no matter how un-affirmative it now appears, is always already attendant to the Other. Thus, to know erotic love—to experience the relationships that we already understood to immediately affirm and constitute the cathexis of the self, to narcissistically shore up the ego—is already to intimate the *agape*-love of Ahmed’s ‘collective coherence.’ So when Lorde writes in “Eye to Eye” that “I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your being,” the “before” is misleading; for, according to *Zami*, to love myself is, simultaneously, to love the other. And to love the other is to attend to your being out of narcissistic ego-imperilment; thus, to “accept your being” is to accept mine as well. In the formulation Lorde mounts in the essay, she includes this structure of aggressive mutuality; the next sentence reads the same as the above, except it flips subject-positions from “I” to “you”: “You have to learn to love yourself before you can love me or accept my loving.” In turn, rather than teleology (a notion of self-love as preconditional to loving others) and reciprocity (a notion of mutual intersubjective “accepting”), the synthesis of these statements leads instead to an affected *agape* of grasping and groping for the other: “Know we are worthy of touch before we can reach out for each other.”

Audre outlines the psychic bounds for this ‘reaching out for each other’ at the very beginning of the narrative: “My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving. But his is a distant lighting. Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home.”<sup>45</sup> From the very start of Audre’s narrative, the “images” of the symbolic register constitute the space of “home” out of the “chaos” of the Real. This “home,” however, is itself not an unchaotic space full of comfortable, ‘accepting’ lovings. Instead, the ephemeral, “flaming” symbolic abrasively coexists with the concrete, “dyke”-like borders where the demands of ego-alignment and id meet. Over against the “distant lighting” of the patronymic Name of the Father (within the text as a literal father), here again are the id and ego demanding separation, and Audre adjudicates this differential through a recourse to the non-distinguishable, concomitant erotic love for and collective love of women, a queer unity that is the ineluctable love-bound consequence of the “chaotic” abjection that produced it.

Which brings us, finally, to *Zami*’s prologue, in which Audre claims another non-distinction in terms of her sexuality: “I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving.”<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, this simultaneous want to occupy the position of the penetrated and the penetrator is Audre’s predictable, earnest explanation of the structure of desire that for Lorde constitutes lesbian identity. Yet immediately following this passage, her language reveals how this structure is ultimately about social love. Audre tells us she has “felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong

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<sup>45</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed.”<sup>47</sup> Cutting against the patronymic symbolic order, Audre expresses an I-ideal here that demands the ego be reshaped—‘elongated and flattened’—in order to allow an “elegantly strong” social ideal to flex in a mellifluous feedback loop—“back and forth flowing”—with the “eternal core” of the I. Thus, Audre’s “I” and her implied “we” are generated by the same mechanism; “the cause of our loving” is also always already its effect.

#### iv. “Mega-social” love bonds and Lordean non-differentiation

For reasons of political sympathy, I have already noted an anxiety about brushing off commonsense and affirmative readings of Lorde. Then again, perhaps what I find most valuable about my formulation of how love works in *Zami* is that even if the readings pan out very differently from the “Lordean” readings, it still syncs with the aims of the affirmative takes on Lorde’s conceptions of love. I hope to have shown a thorough disagreement with the idealism shot through readings of Lorde in general (Smith, Alexander) and *Zami* in particular (Ball, Chinn), which can be summed up thusly: Lorde deploys embodiment and sexuality as an alternate mode of knowing, and this knowing is a form of ego- or identity-affirmation, which is useful against the particular melancholia of a social identity constituted by cognate social abjections. My point is that Lorde seeks instead to problematize the affirmation of love as recuperative; for her, such an idealized love is what C.S. Giscombe calls (from the epigraph to this chapter) “a poor interlocutress.” However, though my anti-affirmative reading does not share in the epistemic and ontological assumptions of these other readings, I still hope to forge alliance with their core attitudinal and tonal investments. In this spirit I want to close with two provisos to my reading, the first of which is also a prognostication regarding the intersection of affect and queer theory methodologies.

The first deals with the polemical uses for “a narcissism of the Other.” In Edelman’s queer polemic, the non-differentiation of ego and id are used ultimately to affirm the death drive as the primary steering trajectory of queerness in relation to non-queerness. Queerness for Edelman, “in the order of the social” (and thus the representational) is called on as “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability,” as these forms are constituted by reproductive futurism, whose synecdoche is the figure of the Child.<sup>48</sup> Against this backdrop, the discourse of narcissism, “construed in terms of sterility and nonproductive sameness,” calls for a wholesale rejection of these viabilities, which is brought into relief vis-à-vis “the selflessness we associate with the care and nurturing of children.”<sup>49</sup> From the narcissism of the Other begins the counter-dominant logic of a future-negating, anti-social politics of queerness.<sup>50</sup> But Lorde’s use of the narcissism of the Other stakes opposite grounds in this territory of queer theory’s postures, for her version leads positively to a broadened love concept that puts primacy

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>50</sup> Edelman suggests too that narcissism also signals the subject’s pleasure-driven affective logic within this political logic, for narcissism, “construed in terms of sterility and a nonproductive sameness, takes in and takes on, perhaps too well, the Other it loves to death, pushing beyond and against its own pleasure, driving instead toward the end of forms through the formalism of the drive” (59).

on more, not fewer, forms of relationality and bonding that might be called queer. Lorde's version, that is, has Edelman's anti-social non-differentiation leading not to hedonistic self-shattering but to another non-differentiation which we might call mega-social. One obvious reason to find Edelman's polemic limited is that it throughout assumes a position of queerness that takes for granted the positions of queer experience represented by Lorde. Against the unacknowledged double privilege of being able to demand politically and to afford socially anti-sociality, Lorde's routing of the narcissism of the Other toward a call for bigger concepts of love and queer bonds is a political strategy that attends to the affirmation of intersectional identity borne from racial-sexual abjection.

In the registers of psychoanalysis and affect theory, it seems to me too that this kind of mega-social thinking is where the intersection of these two hermeneutics limns itself most productively. In Butler's recent thought, for instance, she speaks of "bodies in sociability or indeed sociality (which is not always sociable), but where pleasure is clearly also at play."<sup>51</sup> Like Ahmed's work as well as the recent work of Elizabeth Povinelli, Butler is interested here in not only the social constitution of the body but also the way affect manages or adjudicates the relationship between "the 'being' of the body" and the social institutions to which it is subjected.<sup>52</sup> Like Lorde, what interests Butler is an ambitious non-differentiation between the psychic and social: "It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes, or the social networks that form its conditions for subsistence. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form; it is to be this very exposure. That is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology."<sup>53</sup> And like Lorde, Butler deploys the idiom of affect toward this non-differentiation, for

the fact that one's body is never fully one's own, bounded and self-referential, is the condition of passionate encounter, of desire, of longing, and of those modes of address and addressability on which the feeling of aliveness—and pleasure, to be sure—depends: sensateness, receptivity, activity. But the entire world of unwilled contact also follows from the fact that the body finds its survivability in social space and time, and this exposure or dispossession is precisely what is exploited in the case of unwilled coercion, constraint, physical injury, violence. Contact, unwilled,

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, "Remarks on 'Queer Bonds,'" *GLQ* 17:2–3 (2011): 382.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* Indeed, cultural anthropologists Ahmed and Povinelli have separately led the way in recent thought on not only the administration and management of positive affect but also the constitutive-ness of both affect and emotion for the subject under liberalism. In this dialectic, Povinelli argues in *The Empire of Love* that "[t]he intimate event holds together what economic and political self-sovereignty threaten to pull apart, and it does so while providing an ethical foundation to a specific form of sex." See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006), 190. Elsewhere, Povinelli, in true Lordean fashion, diagnoses "the organization of 'identity' (whether sex, sexuality, gender or race) on the basis of a fantasy of self-authorizing freedom," for which love relationships appear as the event *par excellence*. While Butler might quibble with Povinelli's emphasis on the historical particularity of liberalism and liberalism's specific administration of identity and fantasy, they might concur that the structural management of domination comports an affective dimension—the most *obvious* of which might be love—and that even counter-dominant conceptions of love can function repressively as they propagate the delusion of "autological freedom." See Kim T. DiFruscia, "Shapes of Freedom: An Interview with Elizabeth A. Povinelli," *Altérités* 7:1 (2010): 90, 91.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, "Remarks," 382.

unexpected—it crosses at least two ways, in the direction of insupportable pain and injury, in the direction of sudden discovery, falling in love, unforeseen solicitude.<sup>54</sup>

Here, the drier Foucaultian talk of bodily subjection (“modes of address and addressability”) is configured in direct relationship with the affective (“sensateness, receptivity, activity”). Affect is the mechanism that inaugurates this mode of thinking about abjection, a modality that begins from ‘boundedness’ and “injury” but also accounts for surprise (the “unexpected,” the “sudden discovery”), disgust (“insupportable”), and even “falling in love.”

With Butler’s “insupportable pain and injury” in mind, I turn to my second affirmative proviso, which is that my understanding of Lorde’s love ethic as being inherently narcissistic does not negate the desire for solace, reparation, recuperation. While I am interested in how I think Lorde ultimately refutes notions of both unaggressive ego-ideals and stable social identities rather than claiming them as part of “forward visions,” I do not think this approach precludes the notion of survival—of the desperate need for those forward visions—that the friendlier critics bring to bear. The alternative to thinking so strenuously about survival is to place primacy on the constitutive structure of surplus pleasure; in our reading practice, we need to imagine the lived reality of abjection in ways that don’t simply let us wallow in the already-there critical pleasure of ostensibly negating that abjection by myths of bare-life wholeness. We need critical practice that emphasizes the representation of that abjection as including the possibility of pleasure; the ambit of love is one such entry-point. In *Zami* I think we have an emphatic exemplification of what Kristeva calls “[t]he creation of a prosody and of a highly symbolic text around the ‘black mark’ or ‘black sun’ of melancholy [that] is also depression’s antidote, a provisional well-being.”<sup>55</sup> Here is Audre before the prologue: “To the battalion of arms where I often retreated for shelter and sometimes found it. To the others who helped, pushing me into the merciless sun—I, coming out blackened and whole.”<sup>56</sup> Between these stunningly similar excerpts, the sun’s merciless melancholy yields a ‘wholeness’ that is actually closer to “provisional well-being” than an idealized complete selfhood. And it is this provisional status allowed under the ambit of the ‘black mark’ of racial-sexual abjection that enables the subject to continue onward, which is to exist in and as the enabled, blackened well-being of abjection, in order to create further within the line of “highly symbolic texts.” This positive content emergent from abjection is also the content of love, suggesting a non-differentiation between the two, at least in the affected and “provisional” moment of “coming out.” Following Lacan again momentarily, Lorde’s view of abjection disallows her to forget that “speaking of love is itself a *jouissance*.”<sup>57</sup>

In Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*, she explains this want of survival in terms that are full of such *jouissance*:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>55</sup> Julia Kristeva, “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” *New Formations* 3 (Winter 1987): 12.

<sup>56</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1985), 154.

The novel is finished at last. It has been a lifeline. I do not have to win in order to know my dreams are valid, I only have to believe in the process of which I am a part. My work kept me alive this past year, my work and the love of women. They are inseparable from each other. In the recognition of the existence of love lies the answer to despair. Work is that recognition given voice and name.<sup>58</sup>

With no other novel-like work published in her lifetime and with the appearance of *Zami* just two years after this journal entry, it is presumable that the finished novel Lorde describes in this entry is this text. The composition of *Zami*, then, itself represents a schematization of non-differentiation, represented in this passage in joyful abundance: “voice” and “name”; self-definition (“my work”) and social cathexis (“love of women”); “process” and completion (“finished at last”); and, as well, survival (“lifeline”) and surplus (“win”). Lorde desires raw, sheer survival, but survival itself is a kind of pleasure, a chance to win. In this way, Lorde could be read to anticipate both Lordean readings of recuperated wholes and their objections. Yet the one differentiation she upholds here is the negation of “despair” offered by “the existence of love.” Embodying the “provisional well-being” against the disease that would ultimately take her life, Audre Lorde insists on the loveliness of trying to grapple with the felt realities of both.

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<sup>58</sup> Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1980), 13.

## 2. “Exotic fagdom”: the Baraka of surplus love

...in all love there resides an outlaw principle, an irrepressible sense of delinquency, contempt for prohibitions and a taste for havoc.<sup>1</sup>

- Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

### i. The sociogenic delimiting of racial-sexual abjection

Audre Lorde’s queer deployment of narcissism works not only to reverse the analytic edge of the term itself but also to intervene in the register of social identity, specifically the discourse of identitarian postures associated with the hagiographic “Audre Lorde.” By highlighting racial-sexual abjection in conceptual rhyme with Lorde’s conception of intersectionality, it becomes clear that intersectionality functions beyond the dominant critical focus on minoritarian identities to be redeemed and made whole. Investigating the love relationships in *Zami* reveals that Lorde 1) desires as much ego-shattering as ego-shoring in the affected constitution of her intersectional subjectivity; 2) understands there is no wholeness to be found in subjectivity nor agency; and, perhaps most importantly, 3) poses intersectionality as, indeed, a subjective claim but to an external, objective, and constituting social matrix, the process of which is racial-sexual abjection and whose social mapping appears as intersectional identification. That investigation begins from love’s prismatic operation as the negotiation of that matrix (and thus the interplay between between subjectivity’s process and identity’s mapping), only to reveal a schema of non-differentiation that adjoins mapping to process as well as the desire for survival to the desire for surplus. Lorde’s “existence of love” could be said to be the affected proof of such non-differentiation, revealing that love operates as both the psychic negotiation of the social matrix but also its embodiment in the socius, which is to say the affective structure of such negotiation as felt in space and time, i.e., socialized. It could be said, then, that Lorde shows how love bonds comprise a kind of affective recognition of the subject’s ontogenesis, even while such a recognition could also be said to prove that ontogenesis is always already sociogenic. While the aim of this chapter is to explore the contours of that love-bound embodiment (through the work of Amiri Baraka and his conceptions of racial essentialism and homoeroticism), a brief discussion on this ontogenesis-sociogenesis (non-)distinction will make the stakes of Baraka’s thinking on love-bound embodiment clearer.

Poststructuralist discourse has provided various accounts of the recognition-moment sketched in chapter one by a sociogenic outcome (a represented identity) of its ontogenic origin (a subject-in-process), in which love functions as a hermeneutic pivot. In the stunning introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler discusses the “loss that predates the subject,” described in no unclear terms as “the loss of the ability to love, the unfinishable grieving for that which founds the subject.”<sup>2</sup> Butler emphasizes what we

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 54. [Original work published in 1926.]

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 24.

might call the architecture of subjecthood, bringing into relief the foundational structure of the subject, specifically how subjecthood as such is founded upon a “predated” and lost love-object. “Love” continues its compelling work as an ambit-term here, a precondition to and thus inclusive of the other terms in Butler’s formulation (“loss,” “ability,” “grief,” and “foundation”), suggesting that love itself, in echo of Lorde’s non-differentiations, is the word for both the subject’s coming to existence as well as the subject’s always retroactive recognition of that existence. Butler’s claim is that a failed love composes the originary claim of the subject as such; the subject is, therefore, founded by a social matrix outside itself, and its binding as a subject is already extra-subjective. In deference (and apology) to Abdul JanMohamed, the subject is structurally bound to a term that not only comes from outside itself or precedes it but which is the very condition of possibility for its existence: the “love-bound-subject.” Yet unlike the love-bound-ness described in my introduction, in Butler’s schema such love-bound-ness begins from absence, an always already foreclosed pre-subjective love.

In light of Audre’s non-differentiated bonds of love, this subject, however constituted by such “foreclosure,” can be said to proceed in strenuous negotiation with the ‘knowables’ embedded in this formulation, i.e., sociogenic differentials as mapped by racial-sexual abjection. This is the tension Butler indexes in the very same passage as the category of “social existence”:

But what happens when a certain foreclosure of love becomes the condition of possibility for social existence? Does this not produce a sociality afflicted by melancholia, a sociality in which loss cannot be grieved because it cannot be recognized as loss, because what is lost never had any entitlement to existence?<sup>3</sup>

The implied answer to this final rhetorical question is, indeed, a resounding “yes,” i.e., that the sociality borne from Butler’s formulation is ineluctably melancholic. Yet Butler’s assertion of “social existence,” as sheer and melancholic as it may be read, cannot be interpreted here as some acquiescence to the ‘fact’ of a sociality that survives against the death-bound odds nor as the nihilistic outcome of an unmoored and directionless social matrix. Rather, Butler’s paradoxical assertion of a category of sociality borne from an already paradoxical constitutive lack—the subject—suggests a joyful and jubilant non-differentiation of ontogenesis and sociogenesis. The subject’s very cognizance of that traceable lack can be said to give lie to the completeness of its ontogenic origin; if one were *that* melancholic, how could one trace its opposite and, in turn, long for it? Additionally, as such cognizance of the melancholic trace can only occur in the sociality in which the subject is embedded, nor can this completeness be extended to the category of social existence. Butler’s version of sociality, that is, is the outcome of framing melancholia as generative. Even melancholia can, in this way, be thought of as a positive condition of possibility. (From its use in Freud to its recent deployment in Asian American studies, melancholia will be explored at length in chapter three.) In this instance, melancholia is the mechanism by which ontogenesis and sociogenesis appear as a package deal.

Affect studies has been, at least in part, a rejoinder to the ways in which such an idiom of subject-foundation might fail to account for the lived experience of love and melancholia, not to mention the other keywords of Butler’s formulation, including grief,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

loss, and ability. A turn to affect would thus mean revivifying such terms through emphatic insistence on the structures of feeling that constitute them. Put simply, it is affect by which the melancholic subject (that is, to reiterate Butler, the subject founded by melancholia) can recognize its lost love. In turn, affect studies might point out that my reversal of Butler's formulation (which in this case is only a reversal of spirit, not content) misses the point: the subject's recognition is marked by the pain, grief, and frustration of loss, rather than its enjoyable fullness. It would read Butler's paradox as the station of a subject that, quite simply, does not *feel* loved. Yet the very fact Butler still calls it love shows that love was its beginning, its pre-dating mechanism. That is to say, a "foreclosure of love" is still a reading of love's content. Ironically, it is this focus on the very architecture of subjecthood by which Butler intimates a frothy possibility for imagining the subject; it is precisely by a discourse of subjection, power, ability, and loss that one can get at the positive-station of the subject (if not its exact position as a subject affected immanently by positive feelings).

Beginning from this counterintuitive possibility emergent from Butler's discourse of architecture, there are several hermeneutic outcomes for this non-differentiation between ontogenesis and sociogenesis. The first is that if the subject is already constituted socially—that its ontogenesis is mutually constitutive of the sociogenesis in which it finds itself—then it follows that less critical attention might be paid to matters of its representation in language. That is, the usual explanations for representationality and signification have less force, for the social mappings of the subject's embedment in its sociality do not need to be so strenuously 'proven.' The subject is already socialized—that is, it is already entered into a schema of representation. The subject's position of being linguistically capable and thus assertable in representation gives so easily to a notion of subject-as-political-agent. And perhaps such lessened emphasis on representationality makes the clearest sense when extended to the schema of racial-sexual identity. Notions of racial identification—that is, identity politics—tend to emphasize the political agency made possible after the raced subject is grounded in a sociality of its choosing (and not), i.e., it can choose to commit to the struggle of others bound by the same strictures accorded to its racial formation. This enterprise relies on the notion that the subject's capacity to be represented becomes reflexive to its ability to represent itself autonomously. In turn, this representational schema gives way to a liberal notion of 'agency' afforded by identification—the will of an autonomous agent—which overcomes its sociogenic parameters and reconstitutes them by such heroic agency. This is a liberal model of political mapping that doubles down on the nihilistic notion that a subject's range of freedom is, in the end, primarily within itself.<sup>4</sup>

Thinking in terms of identity-formation and identity politics can be said to over-rely on the wish for the horizon of this notion of political agency. Yet horizon nor the wish for it is hardly the problem in this formulation; agency itself is. In fact, the conceptual overlap between ontogenesis and sociogenesis might be said to *further* that

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<sup>4</sup> One precise idiom by which to frame the problem of liberal agency is David Eng's, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Eng describes with great clarity how "subjectivity" and "agency" are separate concepts that predictably become erroneously conflated when "the identity politics of race" and "questions of subjectivity" are discussed in tandem, as the "illusory goal" of the "theoretical project of psychoanalysis" becomes part and parcel of the *telos* of a notion of political agency. See David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 25.

desire for an empowered subjecthood, precisely by preferring the notion of a subject whose very existence is *structured* by its sociogeny over against the romantic notion of a subject that can present itself as whole (in echo of chapter one). Especially in minority identity-formations, the space of choosing occupied by the subject once it is within its sociogenic negotiation is a particularly powerful one; it kick-starts an ennobled politics (of representation), which even attributes agency to affective and emotional life. That is, it is under this liberal concept of political agency that gives James Baldwin's concept of "the torment and necessity of love" its force. I will return to Baldwin momentarily, but the contention of this chapter, with echoes of Lorde's non-differentiations, is to argue for the ontology of the subject as already always a *social* one. The primary payoff of this reversal of the ontogenesis-sociogenesis schema is another stripe of social non-differentiation: it shows the sheer *survival* of a sociality, even if founded by the sociogeny of loss, as *surplus* itself; the flourishing of a sociality *is* the jubilant fact of having overcome that founding foreclosure.

Such jubilation in and as "social existence" can be said to be the remainder left over from thinking about the sociogenic binding of racial difference. As I discussed in the introduction, this could also be thought of as the positive-bound love content that is "blackness" in contradistinction to "race." While it is true that the preference for the term then takes generative recourse to an idiom of embodiment, consider how this view contrasts to the more predictable concept of racial "embodiment" that asserts the force of "race" to already-present capillary structures (not to mention the affective lives) of racialized subjects. A non-differentiation between ontogenesis and sociogenesis reveals instead that the substance that is blackness, even as it presides in bodies, is *anterior* to feelings. This chapter drives this logic of anteriority toward embodied blackness itself—that is, to the "bodies and organs" that for Amiri Baraka, always come *after* racial "feeling". It is not that "race" has posterior effects to blank bodies; rather, it is blackness that is always already present in and as the body. Baraka's idiom of racial essence, then, posits a non-elective, dependable, and *constituted* love in the black body. The preponderance of this modality of love is, however surprisingly, made possible both by Baraka's moderation of racial separatism and his turn to an internationalist frame for his politics. This chapter, in turn, will argue that Baraka's racial essentialism—which is to say its queer, love-bound content—is legible only by way of a queer, *open* aesthetics of location.

## ii. Baraka's global feel

Baraka's internationalist Marxism—the final ideological banner of his politicized aesthetic—represents the apotheosis of what Fred Moten calls Baraka's "antinomian opening of the field."<sup>5</sup> In recent years Baraka was interested in the affirmation of black diasporic identity around which to coalesce politically toward global revolutionary upheaval, and this entailed a spatial imaginary much broader than his black cultural nationalism had allowed. Out of an "endless dialectical struggle with despair as inevitability," Baraka's open declared solidarity with a spatially broad black radical tradition, including figures like Ngugi Wa'Thiongo and Aime Cesaire, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten, "necessity, immensity, and crisis (many edges/seeing things)," *Floor: Poetics of Everyday Critique* 1.1 (2011): 3.



movements like Negritude and Negrismo.<sup>6</sup> “In the Tradition,” arguably Baraka’s most accomplished poem from the 1980s, makes note of “our family strewn around the world has made more parts of / that word / blue and funky, cooler, flashier, hotter, afro-cuban james / brownier / a wide panafrican / world,” and includes a roll call of a transnational tradition of black radicalism: “we can say / Cesaire, Damas, Depestre, Romain, Guillen / You want Shaka, Askia, (& Roland Snellings too).”<sup>7</sup> Marxism provides the hermeneutic to link up with these traditions, which in turn backlight a world-concept of black revolution. Baraka thus writes in a 1998 essay: “No one lives anywhere at anytime to be oppressed.”<sup>8</sup> Can one imagine these words coming from Baraka’s typewriter during the Black Arts Movement?

Yet this internationalist turn in Baraka’s thought has also entailed a renewed emphasis on specifically black American culture. The Black Arts cadre’s renunciation of most black literature penned before 1965 meant, upon the moderation of their views and the end of the movement, an opening up of an entire literary tradition (of which Baraka was already a part). In addition to the embrace of literary forbears such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright and his contemporaries in the black literati, including Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry (for whom he would write elegiac essays), Baraka’s about-face regarding black forbears in “In The Tradition” begins in a specifically American vein, the “Tradition / of Douglass / of David Walker / Garnett / Turner / Tubman /... of Kings, & Counts, & Duke / of Satchelmouths & SunRa’s / of Bessies & Billies & Sassys & Ma’s.”<sup>9</sup> In a path-breaking essay on Baraka’s later period, David Lionel Smith characterizes this deployment of litany as a synthesis of some of Baraka’s most characteristic qualities as a distinctly African American thinker, as it “combines the use of Afro-American music and American popular culture, which characterized much of his early work; the use of Afro-American vernacular speech motifs from his nationalist phase; and the emphasis on struggle and historical consciousness from his Marxist phase.”<sup>10</sup> This poem thus signals a renewed cognizance of specifically “Afro-American” culture yet also the internationalist “struggle and historical consciousness” of black diaspora strivings. Neither Baraka’s turn to a black American past nor his subsequent notion of internationalist blackness is founded by an interest in American identity as a whole. Rather, African American identity for Baraka is based upon its negation and is precisely that which survives American imperial hegemony. Kwame Dawes explains in his introduction to Baraka’s *Somebody Blew Up America* that for Baraka the “aim is not to name the enemy by describing him, but to suggest that the enemy is best defined by what he destroys and who he destroys.”<sup>11</sup> Baraka exemplifies this best in a poem titled, “Why Is We Americans?”: “but how is we then, by that / americans? by what... / by burn

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<sup>6</sup> Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>7</sup> Amiri Baraka, “In The Tradition,” in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1999), 305.

<sup>8</sup> Baraka, “Black Reconstruction: Du Bois and The U.S. Struggle for Democracy and Socialism,” in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 550.

<sup>9</sup> Baraka, “In The Tradition,” 303.

<sup>10</sup> David L. Smith, “Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art,” *boundary 2* 15:1-2 (Autumn 1986-Winter 1987): 252.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Dawes, “Introduction,” in Amiri Baraka, *Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems* (Philipsburg, St. Martin: House of Nehisi, 2003), xxiv.

/ by scar / by slavery / by ghetto and darkness in the / night of pain / for race a dumb idea, to be a / thing that is bet upon / How we be then them. how we / be that.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, African Americans are not Americans but rather an anti-national bloc within the bounds of the nation-state with its own features, enablings, and community structures. At the same time, Baraka imagines an affected commons shared in the African diaspora, an alliance with the “wide panafrican world.” If “race a dumb idea” in the context of slavery and its afterlife—of “darkness in the / night of pain”—then one way to get at this riddle is to ask what “race” means for Baraka in the register of positive affect. How does this positive-directed imagining of affective alliance—a black-and-global alliance against pain—occur?

By the time of his internationalist phase, Baraka has claimed the Du Boisian mantle of blackness’ paradoxical joy and pain. We know, too, from the ubiquitous charge of racial essentialism, which dogged his career since the Black Arts era, that Baraka indeed considers the aesthetic rubric of “race” seriously, not simply as “a dumb idea.” I want to argue that Baraka limns a conception of love broader than is typically associated with black activist discourse through—and not despite—a concept of an essentialist racial identity. By a broader love, I mean Baraka’s conception of social love that not only embraces black presence and testifies to black survival in “the night of pain”—which, I argue, is the model splendidly exemplified by James Baldwin, who functions here as a generative and provisional interlocutor—but one that also indexes, if not celebrates, the surplus pleasure felt in and as blackness (again, in contradistinction to “race”). Thus, the later Baraka illuminates then prioritizes that which lies open beyond the discourse of the pain of black social death, and he does this through the language of race and embodiment that in our critical discourse are often reduced to be the very markers of social death. Baraka opens up a modality of love that prioritizes the positive content of blackness as an irreducible—essential—identity, and it is the lens of internationalism that brings this view of the social embodiment of racial-sexual abjection into focus.

## ii. The essence of surplus feeling

This refusal of closure is not a rejection but an ongoing and reconstructive improvisation of ensemble; this reconstruction’s motive is the sexual differentiation of sexual difference.<sup>13</sup>

- Fred Moten

In one of Baraka’s most trenchant essays from his black nationalist period, titled, “The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation,” he writes: “Race is feeling. Where the body, and the organs come in. Culture is the preservation of these feelings in superrational to rational form. Art is one method of expressing these feelings and identifying the form as an emotional phenomenon.”<sup>14</sup> We typically identify the role of cultural production in Baraka as the articulation of politics—as the reflection of racial

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<sup>12</sup> Baraka, *Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems*, 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> Moten, *In The Break*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Baraka, “The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation,” in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 166.

and class struggle—but in this passage he provides almost the opposite formulation: art functions as a diagnostic of the affect necessary to produce liberatory consciousness. Baraka thus proposes that an “emotional phenomenon” precedes both liberatory consciousness and political transformation. Rather than reading Baraka’s nominative phrase, “Race is feeling,” as yet another instance of a crude racial essentialism from this period, “race” here could be said to be the affective apotheosis of the diagnostic work of art and culture, thereby sublimating “race” into a recursive conceptualization of an anterior blackness as the ontological site of social bonding. Reminiscent of Butler’s formulation from the previous chapter, in which “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form” and thus “the ontology of the body” is always “a *social* ontology,” such a view of “social crafting” is at work here in Baraka’s essay, allowing him to emphasize the potential for remaking and re-bonding within and *as* the very constitution of blackness.<sup>15</sup> Thus, an idiom of essence can also be said to be Baraka’s mobilization of affect toward the struggle for black liberation; thus such essentialism, so often thought of as separatist or enclosed, gets Baraka to a mega-social concept of love bonds.

Love for Baraka is thus a constituted and essentially embodied starting-point rather than the space of political choosing. If Butler is right to suggest that there is no body-ontology that is not also a social ontology, then Baraka adds that the black body is the site of surplus “feeling” that always comes from without but is also always locatable in the love-constituted black body. That is, the entire ontogenesis of the black body hinges on this “feeling.” In this way, the charge of racial essentialism—which alleges Baraka with the heresy that he unwittingly propagates Enlightenment mythos surrounding racial categories and subhuman status by inverting its terms—neglects wholesale the possibility for a new, open imagining of the black body that in its very definition cuts so radically against the mythos that produced it that calling it false consciousness has no critical force. Essentialism in this register is the site of the irreducible yet truly open space made possible by the affective life of racial-sexual abjection. Since the site of bonding is the black body, such a notion of essence, even as it begins from the nation-bound particular, suggests a borderless black collectivity based upon the affected recognition of positive feeling. Thus, Baraka’s internationalist political focus is not only in sync with but directly yields a borderless notion of black collectivity.

Such a view of essentialist embodiment stands categorically apart from the proximate and long theoretical shadow of “strategic essentialism.” Essentialism here has a political comportment that indeed suggests strategy (for what in Baraka’s thought does not?), but it is an idiom separate from the postcolonial deployment coined by Gayatri Spivak. Spivak famously defines “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest,” and that for the subjugated, would-be subaltern party, such strategy “would allow them to use the critical force of anti-humanism... even as they share its constitutive paradox: that the essentializing moment, the object of their criticism is irreducible.”<sup>16</sup> While Baraka’s formulation shares the recognition of this paradox, his essentialism diverges from Spivak’s irreducibility in that it is not in “the critical force” of the logic of subjugation where political value can be found. Spivak goes on to say that “strategy becomes most useful when ‘consciousness’ is being used in the

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, “Remarks on ‘Queer Bonds,’” *GLQ* 17:2–3 (2011): 382.

<sup>16</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 281–282.

narrow sense, as self-consciousness” and that “[t]he task of the ‘consciousness’ of class or collectivity within a social field of exploitation and domination is thus necessarily self-alienating.”<sup>17</sup> Though Baraka’s stakes are indeed about imagining black “collectivity” and the “task” of black consciousness, the language of “feeling” and positive affect point to a conception of collectivity that pays no heed to the suffering-bound idiom of critical force, self-alienation, and self-consciousness; precisely through the equation of “race” to positive “feeling,” Baraka suggests that the ontological given of the subjugation that has generated “race” does not need to be avowed—only the “emotional phenomenon.” That is to say, for Baraka there is no ontological given of a racialization that requires a hermeneutics of self-alienating suspicion to cede to it. Instead, the ontological given of “race” is to be located in the feeling of blackness itself. In this way, Baraka is interested in the diagnostic force of the “feeling” itself in a non-strategic, non-dialectical, positive direction; the ontology of the body and the organs is plenty for black collectivity to commence. This emphasis on love requires no negation as a starting-point, which is to say that the love-constitution broached here is not engaged in an ontology of a black body that could be constituted otherwise: it simply, assertively, and nominatively *is*. Baraka’s love is not interested in a counter-epistemology of addressing irredeemable black degradation, or at least not first and foremost; his assertion is already lingering at the borders of the ontology of Enlightenment that produced the need for strategic deployment of the epistemology of “anti-humanism” in the first place.

Because the idiom for racial-sexual abjection borrows in indelible ways from Julia Kristeva (as sketched in the introduction), it seems prudent here, however briefly, to consider the voice for “strategic essentialism” in French poststructuralism. Luce Irigaray’s work on mimesis, like Spivak’s strategy-talk, presumes that one can only proceed from the ontology of the negative: “One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.”<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, the rhetorical force of “deliberately” here rings the bells of a Spivakian strategist, as both camps reach desperately for the texture of agency provided by (and despite) the discursive “form of subordination.” Yet Irigaray goes on: “To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.”<sup>19</sup> The crucial difference between their idioms is that Irigaray’s readily accounts for the fact that essentialism is never reducible to the claims that define it as such; womanhood, that is, is never just a matter of essence in a ‘classical’ definition of the term that denotes infallible claims of Nature. If women’s subjugation is constitutive, but this constitution is in/as phallogocentrism (no more but no less), the strategy for Irigaray—“mimesis”—takes a very different tone than Spivak’s: “if women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation.”<sup>20</sup> Precisely because of her emphasis on phallogocentrism, she proffers not only the deep constitutive paradox as strenuously as Spivak does; Irigaray also brings to bear in this description of its negation a language very much apart from strategy and deliberateness: of play, nourishment, as

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>18</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 76.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

well as “the hypothesis of a reversal” that “is always possible.”<sup>21</sup> This idiom of possibility seems, at least in terms of heuristic attitude, diametrically opposed to Spivak’s strenuous and apologist idiom of self-alienation and self-consciousness. Needless to say, it sounds more closely allied with the *jouissance* of feminine abjection described by Kristeva. Lastly, on her way to the famous subsequent language of *ek-stasy* and the transcendental operation of feminine pleasure, Irigaray leaves us with this astounding aphorism: “Re-semblance cannot do without red blood.”<sup>22</sup> Irigaray shares with Baraka, then, the framework of a *pre-mimetic* structure of embodiment: of organs, capillaries, and blood, which is to say of an anterior material in racial-sexual abjection.

### iii. Black essence affected as love

James Baldwin provides what is perhaps the clearest and best-known literary articulation of love’s function in the civil rights era. In his famous essay, “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin speaks of “the torment and necessity of love” in addressing the race problem. Unsurprisingly, he begins from the challenge to love within the black community:

Perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love.<sup>23</sup>

Baldwin intimates the possibility of a “freedom” (approximated by and routed through love bonds), while suggesting that a stable love proves difficult to achieve within, even, an “us” that precedes it. Such is the power of “the nature of our oppression.” Baldwin goes on to say that this strenuous gambit of love must extend across racial lines in order to preserve the “us” from “murder.” Thus, stable egos and racial identities can and must be courageously shattered:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder.<sup>24</sup>

What is striking about Baldwin’s love-concept here is that it appears as both compulsory and agential: a mode of survival (avoiding murder) in the chaos of oppression, as well as an act of courage associated with grace. Baldwin conceptualizes this double love through the language of “depths” and moral interiority, of eschewing the masks and committing to a stable “state of being” from which to begin to try to transform the self and others. The political capacity of the subject lies in its moral intention, and that intention is

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>23</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 310.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 341.

affected as love: this is the logic of Baldwin's romantic subject-agent, one spellbound by what Elizabeth Povinelli calls, in her description of love under liberalism, "the fantasy of self-authorizing freedom."<sup>25</sup> In turn, Baldwin's nether-space between determination and agency brings to light the liberal agent's consequent notion of "obligation," which Povinelli defines as "a no man's land between choice and determination" but also, in contrast to either, a "much richer form of relationality, a continual nurturing, or caring for, bindings that are often initially very delicate spaces of connectivity."<sup>26</sup> It is precisely in the language of moral obligation by which Baldwin concludes this powerful essay, building from "the very delicate spaces of connectivity" to "a sense of an immanent connectivity" that Povinelli outlines as the ineluctable effect of obligation.<sup>27</sup> In full jeremiadic power, Baldwin writes,

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.<sup>28</sup>

This appeal to morality, so definitive of the mainstream civil rights movement, gets its power in part from the simile located in the exact middle of the aside: "like lovers." For Baldwin, the move away from the fallacy he traces by essay's end between full agency and overdetermined powerlessness means an appeal to the language of love and its obligations. Following Povinelli, it becomes clear that the structural management of domination comports an affective dimension, and that even counter-dominant conceptions of love such as Baldwin's might suggest the propagation of the gripping delusion of autological freedom, leaving us with nothing more, and nothing less, than obligation.

By contrast, consider Baraka's definition of love from *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*:

The brownness of me, in me, I certainly had been touted off of and me always yearning for an even darker explanation. At least that was what had been my measure, the blue/black streets of Newark. The gray steel of its relentless hardness. Love, for me, was music and warmth, high-pitched sounds and jagged or regular heavy grinding rhythms. It was collective and so dark you had to tighten yourself up to look it in the eyes. Stop your shakin. Is that the way you want your hat to look? Is this the way you want to walk? How you sound? On the real sound, who did you sound like, the yellow picnic church-boy alien or the smooth blue rolling down the streets laughing at your collective hipness?<sup>29</sup>

Rather than moral depth, Baraka presents a self that knows love only through embodiment. Indeed, Baraka proposes that there is no subject apart from a stylized,

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<sup>25</sup> Kim T. DiFruscia, "Shapes of Freedom: An Interview with Elizabeth A. Povinelli," *Altérités* 7:1 (2010): 91.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 346-347.

<sup>29</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich, 1984), 92.

extemporaneous self, one that dons hats and walks and sounds in particular ways. This self begins from the language of essence: of his “brownness” which requires a “darker explanation,” which is its constitutive “hardness” and “blue/black” Newark upbringing. It is as if Baraka rejoins Baldwin to say a rubric of social love requires more than the package-deal of agency and necessity. Indeed, Baraka offers a surplus-value principle of “high-pitched sounds” and “jagged or regular heavy grinding rhythms.” To boot, Baraka also exceeds Baldwin in the language of collectivity—of a “collective hipness,” of selves presented and stylized always already within the collective “music and warmth.” This reading might work as an antidote to Baraka’s heretical essentialism; for here it could be argued that it is Baldwin, in his language of depths, masks, and moral capacities, who suggests essence. But perhaps it is more convincing to *defend* essentialism by inverting that reading’s terms: that it is exactly in the essentialist hermeneutics of “brownness” and “collective hipness” that we might prefer Baraka’s mode of social love over against Baldwin’s free-but-still-not obliged love.

Either way, this passage links Baraka to Baldwin in the discourse of loving from the standpoint of “brownness.” Because the *Autobiography* was penned after Baraka’s transition from black cultural nationalism to internationalist Marxism, we know that his views on the political mobilization of black identity have moderated by the time this book appears. What this means in terms of this text is that the language of collective love—his “yearning” for better modes of community-binding—shot through Baraka’s account in one scenario in the book can be interpreted as seriously as another. As *The Autobiography* represents an era of Baraka’s thinking in which separatism is not the social modality that over-determines all others, we can take seriously a tension between Baldwinian black love and other modes of binding that *The Autobiography* engages, such as the bonds Baraka locates in his extensive engagement with the white gay community. That is, Baraka’s internationalist open provides a plane of immanence in which to consider not only his black diasporic internationalism in conjunction with Baldwin’s obliged black love; it also brings into relief the affective politics of a decidedly non-black, non-political scenario, such as the following (hyper-provincial white queer) scene from *The Autobiography*.

Describing an evening spent with Black Mountain poets in Charles Olson’s hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts, Baraka writes: “I think the only non-gay persons in the crib were Olson and I. The castle was full of statues and hanging tapestries.”<sup>30</sup> Even in his declaration of non-gayness, Baraka’s putative straightness comes with a partner; his is a disavowal that still insists on identification. Additionally, the double image of adornment signals sexual binary, as Baraka goes on:

Later that night, I was assigned a bedroom right off a patio in the middle of the castle. After midnight sometime, I hear this noise like splashing and men’s voices high and tittering. I go to the door and prop it open and this guy’s friends are diving from a second-story balcony down into this pool in the middle of the patio. They’re butt naked. It was like being woven into a tapestry of exotic fagdom, but the next day when we get back to Olson’s place he is roaring with laughter at the whole business.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 191-192.

In his definitive queer account of Baraka, Marlon Ross brilliantly reads this scene as an iconic instance of where LeRoi “finds himself investigating the psychology and verbal resources of the queer white mind” and where LeRoi functions as “a spy on this other otherness invisibly shielded by the lap of white American luxury, an otherness so ‘acknowledged’ in a way different from his own race’s marginalization at the socioeconomic bottoms.”<sup>32</sup> Yet by LeRoi’s own positioning within the luxurious space of “exotic fagdom,” he asserts the tapestry rather than the statues as the way he inculcates himself in the scene. LeRoi’s identification with this other kind of bottoms, while not necessarily suggesting a non-differentiation between these two social “bottom” categories, suggests a utopian gesture divested from the sociogenic differential between the abjection of white gayness and his own subjecthood. “Fagdom,” that is to say, represents a utopic space that Baraka goes to lengths here to identify with. Rather than espionage, Baraka suggests immersion, envy, and wish-fulfillment, for LeRoi feels woven into the metonymic tapestry despite his physical distance from the scene; there is a bedroom, a patio, a door, and a balcony between LeRoi’s witness and the splashing men. LeRoi’s conference with Olson thereafter might have brought him back to humdrum straightness, but it also confirms what Baraka has said earlier regarding the always already essential and thus collective self. There is no distance between LeRoi and the white aristocratic Olson; rather, they share the space of a queer relation (and identification) to the orgiastic pleasure at hand.

By way of this definite racial-sexual attraction (and possible sexual disavowal) in this scene of homoeroticism, I would like to suggest an “Amiri Baraka” very different from the homophobic Baraka described so brilliantly in Ross’s reading, in which Baraka’s idiom of camp appropriated from these gay white friends becomes nefariously axiomatic to his black nationalist rhetoric. Instead of Baraka putting down Baldwin as “a white-sympathizing sissy,” it seems to me much more significant that Baraka here presents himself as one.<sup>33</sup> Backlist by Baldwin’s limited love-concept, it becomes clear that the queer content of LeRoi’s self-presentation in the *Autobiography* is neither Baraka’s homophobic takedown of white-sympathizing sissies nor a kind of espionage into a marginalized sociality self-consciously incommensurate with Baraka’s essential brownness. Rather, Baraka suggests a queering of love that might yield a feeling of collectivity apart from both strategy and survivalism. While both Baraka and Baldwin suggest that attention to positive emotion augments the empowerment in black collectivity (agency, that is, might be delivered by “yearning” for love), it is, however surprisingly, Baraka who insists that this affective agency requires comporting a queer surplus-value of love, affectively locatable *against*—and not within—the felt despair of black bottoms.

Such affect-oriented thought also makes clear the links between the phases of Baraka career. The scene above, after all, is a retrospective of Baraka’s beat period through the lens of his internationalist open. To buttress the reading above, I conclude with a brief turn to the Baraka of an explicitly revolutionary poetics, in which he also locates this notion of surplus love. Published in 1995 but in the making since the 1980s, the epic poem *Wise, Why’s, Y’s* continues the line of thought not only of “race is feeling”

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<sup>32</sup> Marlon Ross, “Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective,” *Callaloo* 23:1 (Winter 2000): 296, 298.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.



but of the nominative constitution of black being that might be called love itself. “Wise 9” reads:

there was war  
before  
be war  
again  
died before  
will die again  
but not gone die  
not gone leave  
not gone cry too long  
not gone grieve

free is who we are and be  
love who what will lift us we  
struggle love struggle—against primitive death  
while you walking around  
spirit death tie you down  
slave death and servant death and let me work for us to be.<sup>34</sup>

Backlit by the problems of the black community (especially leadership) that yokes Baraka to Baldwin, one significant suspicion-bound question regarding this passage would be whether the speaker’s characterization of himself fits Smith’s generalization that “despite his celebrations of Afro-American music and vernacular culture, Baraka’s political poems have rarely even acknowledged our long tradition of struggle.”<sup>35</sup> Particularly in the final line that invokes a “me” that leads or inaugurates an “us,” there is a stable reading that equates Baraka’s speaker to Baraka himself, who, again in Smith’s words, “reveals a certain condescension, an inadequate understanding of Afro-American history, and a detachment—mental if not physical—from the actual day-to-day lives of Afro-American people.”<sup>36</sup> Such a reading would bring to bear on Baraka all the critiques of ‘race men’ and black charismatic leadership.<sup>37</sup>

But Baraka’s invocation of love here can redeem the passage. Predictably, “love” is put in dialectical tension with “struggle;” but instead of love as equated to struggle, we have, yet again, love as the affected surplus against the felt despair of black abjection. Yet again, for Baraka love is a political modality that speaks against the survivalism evoked here by “struggle,” and that rather than surviving the “primitive death,” he suggests (by way of the friction of enjambment and orality) that “we” might “be / love” already. Rather than pointing to a Baldwinian urgency of survival, “not gone grieve” here

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<sup>34</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Why’s, Y’s* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, “Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art,” 250.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Though Baraka is not discussed explicitly, the definitive account of charismatic leadership in black political culture is Erica Edwards’s recent study. Here I think of the aptness of Edwards’s definition of charisma to Baraka’s speaker’s “formation of authority” in this poem: “Charisma, literally meaning ‘gift of grace,’ might be conceptualized in three ways: as phenomenon, as formation of authority, and as the discursive material for the elaboration of black social and political identities, relationships and movements.” See Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 12.

indexes instead a *positive* diagnosis of the melancholic situation of blackness: that the wound cannot be mourned and grieved ‘properly’ as it has already generated a Butlerian “social existence” that gives lie to the completeness of grief and death, not to mention the pathology of melancholia itself. In rhyme with Butler, this declaration of embodied social love thus offers a love-bound rejoinder to the critical trend of equating race with melancholia, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

### 3. Non-differentiation and the lie of yellow melancholia

I tricked myself out of desolation; I could not tell if I was moving or moved. And such feelings seemed to contradict me, the way love seemed to contradict itself and its lover with a sweeping gesture that traveled as much as it trapped. Love was stalking us.<sup>1</sup>

- Pamela Lu, *Pamela: A Novel*

#### i. Love, authority, and identity

Perhaps we have limited ourselves, in the age of multiculturalism and affirmation-bound identity politics, to a hagiographic version of “Audre Lorde” that might occlude a deeper investigation of the relationship between ego and identity as one to be read as radically disrupted (not affirmed) and provisional (not stable). There is a paradox here that Lorde’s final non-distinction limns and possibly points us beyond: if identity’s radical disruption is the aim of identity as such, why hold onto any rubric of identity at all? It is a question that haunts the politics of the post-Lordean present, one which Slavoj Žižek formulates via Lacan as well as in larger “reference to the ‘deconstructionist’ commonplaces about identity”:

[I]ndeed, identity is impossible, inherently hindered, its constitutive gap is always already sutured by some supplementary feature—yet one should add that identity “itself” is ultimately nothing but a name for such a supplementary feature which “sticks out” and suspends the essential quality of the domain whose identity it constitutes. It is therefore not sufficient to present “identity of the opposites” as a paradoxical kind or species of identity: identity as such is ultimately always already “identity of the opposites.”<sup>2</sup>

A non-differentiation his own, it is at first puzzling why Žižek, too, seems to want to retain the rubric of “identity” itself, if “identity” itself is non-identity, not a singularity but always already a package-deal duality. Identity as a positive ontology is impossible because, following Lacan, it is constituted by a gap or remainder whose presence becomes legible by its supplementary “suture;” it is this suturing, nothing more or less, that is the mechanism we tab as “identity.” Further still, if we promote minoritarian identity discourse primarily for its political capacity (the politics of representation), then, in our enthusiasm and vehemence for doing right by the hagiographic Lorde, we risk losing sight of what Žižek calls “the inherent link of identity with authority: the monarch performs his role as a figure of pure authority, as the one who, by means of his ‘Such is my will!’ i.e., of his abysmal decision, cuts through the endless series of *pro et contra*.”<sup>3</sup> This is the paradox of identitarian discourse, which the narcissism of the Other can further illuminate. For if we say that the authoritarian character of identity (which, according to Žižek, inheres in the doubleness of identity itself) is the subject’s social mapping of its narcissistic cathexis, then there would be no reason to be wary of

<sup>1</sup> Pamela Lu, *Pamela: A Novel*, (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 1998), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2008), 103.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

identity's authoritarian character as such, for we would know that this authoritarianism, too, is an authoritarianism of the Other. Authoritarianism would then take on an entirely different set of connotations than it commonly does, most radically in that a mega-concentration of power might actually be something desirable (as long as it was legible as an authoritarianism of the Other), especially given my previous attention to the attitudinal split between Edelman's and Lorde's versions of the narcissism of the Other. If Lorde's black queer womanhood has precluded her from politically obliging anti-sociality, then the mega-social relationality that her version of the narcissism of the Other yields ought to be read as a full and exciting dehiscence from the anti-social cocoon of Edelman's no-future polemic. In this light, the central problem with the hagiographic Lorde is not that we have granted her authoritarian power in good faith in an attempt to redeem and honor the achievement that she both represents and narrativizes through *Zami*; rather, it is that in doing this, we unwittingly excise the "of the Other" inherent to authoritarian/narcissistic identity, insisting instead that we redeem Lorde for our own designs, which means we have put *bad* faith in the same authoritarian deceit—power's regulatory function and the minority identity-qua-pathology—from which Audre herself begins in *Zami*. This is the postmodern paradox of the politics of representation: in the attempt to honor Lorde we have in effect ceded to the bad version of authoritarianism, enshrining her work and alienating her anti-power message of honest narcissism/authoritarianism of the Other. We have, in short, reified Lorde toward our own (bad) authoritarian ends. To honor Audre's subject-position, in fact, would be to let it speak, and the irony that the hagiographic Lorde illustrates is that in the wake of an age of canon-expanding multiculturalism, we think we have done so. Yet we would know we have done so only if we had honored Audre's own categorical imperatives. Regarding the Audre (of *Zami*) and through "Audre Lorde" (the placeholder for our reclamation desires), we have mistaken subject for object.

For all the non-distinctions that arise out of Lorde's vision of love, the conceptual problem remains regarding the remaining differentiation; how do we keep track of both felt "despair" and its opposite, the surplus that comes beyond it, "the existence of love" that for Lorde is always already there? We remember that one reason to read Lorde as a theorist of non-differentiation—echoing Lacan and presaging Edelman—was to discount the hagiographic Lorde that insists on a schema of cheap romance as the rejoinder to the social death designated by intersectional abjection. To think non-differentially of (and with) Lorde is to let her subjectivity remain subjective with us, to deny her a status as an object of secular martyrdom. In turn, the absolute logic of non-differentiation must be extended to the final dyad as well, which means in talking about love one finally and courageously collapses the distinction between despair and pleasure, between wound and surplus. In this way, the non-distinctions that arise out of Lorde's vision of love ultimately suggest an abrogation of the political distinction between endurance and victory. In turn, what the queer analytic of love reveals is a positive content that cuts against contemporary thought regarding race and love. The voice that offers love as a restorative corrective to vicious racialization turns out not be Lorde's but rather the voice of an ethereal desire that demands the hagiographic Audre Lorde. And this is the voice that leads us to the hermeneutic problem in academic discourse regarding the so-called completeness of racialization as a constitutive process.

Put more broadly, there are the critical designations limned by this dyadic (not transparently dialectical) structure, which appear in the aforementioned academic discourse surrounding a complete ‘social death’ and ‘bare life’ and their relation to the *positive* constitutive psychic life of power, which the place-holders of “despair” and the “existence of love” designate. Though they are not precisely the same problem, the two share the same internal logic insofar as that to the diagnosis of racial abjection, they offer the prognosis of a romance of the restored self (a false and cruel love), of a properly loved self that embraces its constitutive abjection. The desire for that romance, after all, stems from an adherence to the authority associated with but not reducible to that abjection: the keenly *felt* and lived despair limned by affect studies, that which might be described as the authoritative historical experience of racial abjection. To which the Lorde of *Zami* replies: the romance can be retained without the delusion of its completion. One must insist on distinguishing the ontological given of racial abjection from its own authority. Precisely because survival and surplus come into view as non-differentiated, we can proceed without the need to ‘honor’ or avow the authority of bare-life, material survival. It is always already there; it constitutes us, which is to say it constitutes the surplus of love that is abjection’s abreaction. This false love (and here, the difference between “autobiography” and Lorde’s “biomythography” is revealing) turns out to be our own desire for the authority of abjection, to which the non-differentiated love of Lorde brings a twofold answer: through it we can both fulfill the desire for that which exceeds bare life while also accomplishes the task of claiming and honoring Lorde.

## ii. Love, power, and ontology

In their final volume of their political poetics trilogy, *Commonwealth* (2009), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe love as both an “an economic power” and “a biopolitical event”:

Love—in the production of affective networks, schemes of cooperation, and social subjectivities—is an economic power. Conceived in this way love is not, as it is often characterized, spontaneous or passive. It does not simply happen to us, as if it were an event that mystically arrives from elsewhere. Instead it is an action, a biopolitical event, planned and realized in common.<sup>4</sup>

Staking the commons as the territory yielded, if not constituted, by love bonds, Hardt and Negri are interested in an idiom of love that accounts for that which is always already social. “Love is an ontological event,” they claim, “in that it marks a rupture with what exists and the creation of the new. Being is constituted by love.”<sup>5</sup> The concatenation of their theory of the commons to this equation of “being” becomes clear when being itself is equated to the commons as its “ineluctable” constitution: “Being, after all, is just another way of saying what is ineluctably common, what refuses to be privatized or enclosed and remains constantly open to all. (There is no such thing as a private ontology.) To say love is ontologically constitutive, then, simply means that it produces the common.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Hardt and Negri parallel the recent formulation of Judith Butler’s

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009), 180.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

cited in chapter one, in which she postulates that “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form; it is to be this very exposure. That is what makes the ontology of the body a *social* ontology.” Hardt and Negri add to this idiom of ontological structure that there is no ontology at all that isn’t always already social; to be ontologized or to posit an ontology is itself a recognition of an *a priori* non-differentiation between ontogenesis and sociogenesis. Thus, their formula “being is constituted by love” offers a positive-affect-oriented parallel to the melancholic-being that immediately precedes it (to which I will turn momentarily).

Hardt and Negri argue that the question regarding love’s ontological structure is a temporal one. In the chapter preceding their principal meditation on love that sits at the center of the book (“De Singularitate”), Hardt and Negri speak of the *kairos* that “has to be grasped by a political subject.”<sup>7</sup> (165). Emphasizing the agential puncture available against Empire’s *chronos*, they define *kairos* here as “the opportune moment that ruptures the monotony and repetitiveness of chronological time.”<sup>8</sup> And in so doing, they conflate the generation of political “events” with kairotic rupture. The multitude, they claim, can remake itself precisely through its position vis-à-vis hegemony, as that relation means the multitude is already “the result of a process of political constitution... formed through articulations on the plane of immanence without hegemony.”<sup>9</sup> “Immanence” here indexes multitude’s relation both to the state of nature and the political state; within immanence, there is, *through* its contestation of the political state, an invaluable “metamorphosis of nature at work in the constitution of the multitude.”<sup>10</sup> Conceived this way, the multitude has a capacity to constantly reconstitute itself: “Multitude should be understood, then, as not a being but a making—or rather a being that is not fixed or static but constantly transformed, enriched, constituted by a process of making.”<sup>11</sup> In teasing out the dialectical tension between materiality and spirit—between immanence and transcendence—Hardt and Negri suggest that it is the multitude, precisely in this dialectical tension which continually reconstitutes it, which provides the location for the “event” of *kairotic* rupture.

There are two possible objections to the concatenation of multitude to *kairos* as Hardt and Negri have it, and I wish to draw attention to the ways in which they are connected. The first is a materialist claim, perhaps too easy a charge against the ambitious straddling of transcendence and immanence carried out by the duo. Still, it is worth noting that there is a political liability of an event-ness in and of the multitude that is carefully and deliberately prioritized without teleology. Rather than an immanent revolutionary capacity against hegemony, Hardt and Negri wish to discuss instead multitude’s reflexively positive recomposition. To emphasize positive movement while keeping both categorical imperatives in register (“the ontological” and “the political” of *De Singularitate*), Hardt and Negri could be said to understate the multitude’s revolutionary capacity against the political state, simply suggesting within the Marxist counter-history they wish to limn that there remains the work of “opening the possibility

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 173.

for biopolitical labor to claim its autonomy.”<sup>12</sup> It seems to me that the political deployment of *kairos* can, within their own terms, be read as limited to a counter-discourse that suffers from precisely its false-positive directive of *kairos*, which is to say a kind of multitude-solipsism that only re-creates the revolutionary *capacity* deferred against the oppressive political state rather than creating a negation its own. Secondly: as the event-ness of the multitude—its *kairos*—attends to its remaking first and foremost rather than in its political revolutionary capacity against hegemony, the political state, it might lose sight of the fact that the political state is also composed of a *kairotic* dimension its own, which can also remake and reconstitute. Thus, *Commonwealth*’s primacy of love as “an ontological event” may lose sight of the “rupture” that follows it. Put another way, the positivity-content of love-as-multitude is hardly positive enough, insofar as the political state (and its subjection of the multitude) is held in heuristic place as the multitude’s dialectical opposite. In turn, the ontological totality of the political state is, however unintentionally, avowed. Whether this comes at the expense of the multitude or despite the declaration of it might matter (especially in a strategic discussion surrounding the material conditions of the multitude), but the conceptual problem remains: the psychic power of the oppression that composes both state and multitude is redoubled rather than contested.

There remains as well the objection that love’s positive puncture is simply an illusion, underwriting a politically reactionary take on what amounts to a very conventional (not to mention heteronormative) conception of love in the Western tradition. To emphasize love’s *kairotic* puncture might be to concede love as a function of the conditions of neoliberalism. Indeed, this has been the insight of critics less optimistic than Hardt and Negri, which, unsurprisingly, commences as a theory of love that retains the distinction between erotic and social love bonds. For example, Elizabeth Povinelli’s diagnostic of love’s relationship to Empire does not imply a non-distinction between erotic and social love. Rather, she is invested in how the precise feeling of the “intimate event” of erotic coupling functions as a symptom of Empire. She is invested in the particular as the reveal-point of the universal; these couplings constitute the *socius* and compose “the new secular religions,” an oppressive singularity. In contrast to this implication of a hoodwinking *kairos*, Hardt and Negri view this puncture *as* that new singularity and thus, emboldened by their non-distinction between *eros* and *agape*, suggest that it is precisely a ‘new secular religion’ that the multitude desires.

What brings these two opposing conceptions of love’s rupture together is the shadowy invocation of the logic of surplus-value that underwrites them. Povinelli writes: “Love, as an intimate event, secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death, and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions.”<sup>13</sup> For Povinelli, it is precisely the *kairotic* dimension of love’s “intimate event” in which “one might locate the hegemonic home of liberal logics and aspirations.”<sup>14</sup> Here appears the danger of conceptualizing love’s *kairos* as a political rupture, as love might be precisely the salve administered by capital, a kind of affective surplus-value, whereby the political state can *also* remake and reconstitute, and that its

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

administration of that *kairotic* rupture called love is part of its operation in keeping the multitude under, operating as “the vital frisson that lets us feel it as a resistance.”<sup>15</sup>

On this view, love would function in relation to the logic of surplus labor that underwrites capital itself (or the political state of Empire). Capital depends, after all, not only upon worker insurgency, the going beyond the mere minimum of what is contracted, but the avowal of that insurgency—the feeling that that over-production is as much for oneself as for the system that steals it. In this way, Povinelli’s suspicion regarding the “intimate event” is rooted in the Marxian legacy of a stubborn paranoia regarding an unwitting avowal of the mechanism that underwrites one’s own oppression. But rather than saying flatly that love is the affective binding in and as that avowal, the shrewdness of Povinelli’s argument lies in the implicit allegory drawn between the economy of love and that of neoliberalism. For her the “new liberal mystery” of love shares Marx’s logic of surplus-value; love *might* appear as an affective cast of the surplus-value accumulated by capital, but the larger point is that it is *definitely* a kind of unwitting avowal, the false consciousness typically associated with the autonomy-myth associated with surplus-value.<sup>16</sup> In a cruel twist to the Mingus tune, love is a dangerous necessity indeed, appearing as the affective arm of surplus (at worst) or as a structure of oppression simply allegorized by capital (at best?). In either implication, love comes into view as the affective binding and psychic location of one’s complicity in their own oppression.

And yet for Marx, a defining feature of capital is that the worker does not have an option to produce surplus. Marx’s definition of surplus-value arrives as a non-differentiation from use-value: the “capitalist process of production, the capitalist production of commodities,” always already includes the “unity of the labour-process and the process of producing surplus value.”<sup>17</sup> By the very “nature of the exchange of commodities,” there is “no limit to surplus-labour” in Marx’s conception of the “peculiar nature of commodities.”<sup>18</sup> This non-differentiation reveals not only that use-value and surplus-value are structurally the same; Marx adds adamantly that the peculiarity of surplus-value does, in fact, exceed the logic of capital, as the worker must attend to “his own maintenance,” an avowal of one’s use-value that *appears* as an affective attachment to the minimum necessary labour: “Capital has not invented surplus-labour. Wherever a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>16</sup> The other possible emphasis: love is a surplus-value itself in addition to being the affective mechanism of surplus accumulation, extracted by greedy Empire and always in excess, aligning this kind of affective attachment with Marx’s logic of commodity fetishism, by which logic love itself then becomes legible as a commodity. This reading of the mystery of love as inhering in the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” of the commodity is, needless to say, an alluring one. On the other hand, there remains in Povinelli’s work an adherence to the sheer presence—an unquestioned ontology—of the affective bonds themselves. And this ontologism of love already suggests, I think, a technical error that would be made in making this allegory, for the work these bonds “do,” as Sara Ahmed might say (see chapter one) and as Povinelli takes for granted in her magnificent work, already belies the tethering of love to commodity, which shows the Marxist ground-up route of the argument I am making regarding love’s erroneous concatenation to an unwitting avowal, a false consciousness associated with surplus. For if love is actively ‘doing things’ in the world, then it is already its own use-value and not purely a commodity; and if it is its own use-value, then the allegory to surplus-value doesn’t hold, for the point of the allegory is to bring to stark relief the false consciousness regarding the particular affective avowal of surplus, rather than both surplus- and use-value.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1978), 360. [Original work published in 1867.]

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 364.



part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the labourer, free or not free, must add to the working-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra working-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owners of the means of production.”<sup>19</sup> What is shocking about Marx’s paradoxical formulation here—that surplus is firmly in the grasp of capital but also precedes that grasp—is that it reveals an always-already-there good news. Surplus becomes a point of analysis in *Capital* because of “the tendency to the extension of the working-day, the were-wolf’s hunger for surplus-labour,” yet by his own definition, it already exceeds that vicious hunger, promising its own satiation on its own terms.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is through surplus-value’s proper non-distinction from use-value that we can dispel the notion of false consciousness regarding one’s surplus—and, by extension, one’s affective attachments. For Povinelli, the intensity of that misreading of surplus takes on freshly dangerous, irredeemable heights by staking that logic on the grounds of the body and love bonds.

To return circuitously to Hardt and Negri, another way to formulate the problem is to ask what a model of love that views it as false consciousness does for us. How does such a view enable further thought on the commons, further thought on empowerment against the political state, further thought on love itself? It is as if the demand for and anxiety about a negative capacity in and as thought have replaced wholesale the positivity-content of negation; it is as if it has been forgotten that the positivity-content of love already includes its own negation. When Hardt and Negri call love “an ontological event,” they also already always suggest that love comprises a deontologizing movement, which they call “being”; the conception of “event” would not make sense without this inverse already in tow. Hardt and Negri are concerned with the potential mobilization of love toward a new ontology of the commons, and thus they take as given the counter-ontologism required of the commons, not to mention the material reality that Empire’s dominant ontology administers against it. The biopower they locate in the “event”-ness of love, posed against a master discourse of love as “spontaneous or passive”—love as happenstance, serendipity, vertiginous dumb luck—means too that for them love is most of all concerned with the deontologizing, gerundive “being”: “Every act of love, one might say, is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with existing being and creates new being, from poverty through love to being.”<sup>21</sup> This is an ontological structure that does prioritize evanescence—the ‘marking’ of “rupture,” its event-ness—yet it also insists on that evanescence’s reliability, its repetition over time: its *becoming* “being”: “Through love we form a relation to that cause and seek to repeat and expand our joy, forming new, more powerful bodies and minds.”<sup>22</sup> This “being” is a reliable, already-there repetition—a deontologizing movement here *and* yet-to-come—by way of the teleology that brings it into view: “from poverty through love to being.” In calling that movement one that commences from “poverty,” the constituted beginning that inaugurates love, not unlike love itself and not unlike being itself, is already a positive Spinozan substrate. That is, if being “is just another way of saying what is ineluctably common, what refuses to be privatized or enclosed and remains constantly open to all,” a very significant implication of this formulation is that “poverty,” because of its proper

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>21</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 181.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Spinozan formulation here, is the condition of possibility for such.<sup>23</sup> Poverty, for Hardt and Negri, is not about lack or loss and is, ultimately, non-differentiated from love and being.

The inauguration of love commences from what we might mistake for lack but, in fact, is already always about the common: here is the joyous yet strenuous counterpoint to the hermeneutics of melancholia. Melancholia is an idiom in which the event-ness of love is so long gone that it functions as Hardt and Negri's formulation in negative, in which the progression toward being's inverse, non-being, becomes legible insofar as the negotiation of the lost love-object makes for less and less "powerful bodies and minds." Put another way, love's event-ness functions as a cut against the drab ontological fabric of melancholia. Love is the *kairotic* puncture to melancholia's *chronos*. Yet even if love is conceived of as the exact inverse or reversal of melancholia's immanent structure, it is crucial to keep in mind the precise Spinozan formulation of love that refuses to conceive it as solely an antidote to the toxic conditions that produced it. On this view, it is astounding that in Audre Lorde's time and in ours the hermeneutic focus regarding race's relationship to affect has prioritized melancholia rather than love. This is particularly true in Asian American literary studies.

### iii. The love-bound Asian American subject

Perhaps it is in this gap—in this emptiness—that Freud's theory of melancholia emerges and inhabits. It is in this gap—in this loss of whiteness—that the negotiation between mourning and melancholia is staged.<sup>24</sup>

- David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia"

One of the reasons the concatenation of Freudian melancholia to raced subjectivity is so compelling is the long shadow of sociological discourse over any and all thought regarding race and subjecthood, in which the avowal of the power differential between racial formations—indeed, the very power that gives "race" any meaning to begin with—is made commensurate with social relations 'as they are.' The relative absence of love as a heuristic mode in ethnic literary studies—or, put another way, the reason both Anne Cheng and David Eng are invested in the concatenation of melancholia to yellow subjecthood—can be traced to this sociological impetus.<sup>25</sup> For instance, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10:4 (2000): 679.

<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, it is crucial not to conflate these separate thinkers' work on yellow melancholia. Especially pertinent within the parameters of my discussion is Anne Cheng's relentless emphasis on the subjective and affective enablements of melancholia, even when the station and feeling of grief are those enablements' conditions of possibility. Her insistence on the ontology of fantasy, which is enabled by her focus on grief and to which I owe inestimable debt in my own reading of *M. Butterfly*, allows us to see ontological possibility in fantasy beyond given "[s]ocial forms of compulsion and oppression," which "may have their hold precisely because they mime or invoke ontic modes of identification." See Anne A. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (NY: Oxford UP, 2001), 27.

Put simply, Cheng imagines melancholia apart from the clinical mode emphasized by Eng (and by Han), which, in my view, possibly redoubles the very pathologization of yellowness he seeks to limn. My intention here in grouping Cheng and Eng together is to give a broad conceptual sketch of the two most

‘model minority myth’ that haunts Asian American studies has been explained in contemporary literary theory through this exploration of melancholia, which is posited as the psychic structure to (and wound of) yellow subjectivity: the “splitting of the Asian American psyche.”<sup>26</sup> This discourse describes the social structure of contemporary Asian America through a diagnostic of perennial lack, an originary loss of the horizon and promise of whiteness and its attendant social privileges and recognitions:

In the United States today, assimilation into mainstream culture for people of color still means adopting a set of dominant norms and ideals—whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class family values—often foreclosed to them. The loss of these norms—the reiterated loss of whiteness as an ideal, for example—establishes one melancholic framework for delineating assimilation and racialization processes in the United States precisely as a series of failed and unresolved integrations.<sup>27</sup>

In materially-bent antiracist thought, it is by now a commonplace that the “model minority myth” persists against the interests of not only Asian Americans but other minority groups on (at least) these three registers: 1) the myth operates on the social-descriptive terms always already set by power; that is, yellowness is set against the metric of whiteness for the kind of “modeling” it does; 2) this modeling is then deployed against blackness, brownness, and redness, as a metric of minority success (overcoming pathology), thus pitting Asian America against other minority formations (as discussed in my introduction regarding “comparative racialization”); 3) the majority of Asian Americans are not and have not been bourgeois, and the myth functions in contemporary discourse to elide the cruel history (and its afterlife) of systemic oppression of Asian people in America, i.e., railroads, Angel Island, internment camps, Vincent Chin, Wen Ho Lee.

Eng describes the contemporary scene as one in which Asian American masculinity is haunted by these afterlives, yet all the while its material reality is putatively different. In fact, the material reality of the model-minority era is so different that it is lived with the *feeling* of freedom from systemic oppression always in mind,

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influential accounts of yellowness’s relationship to Freudian melancholia and to make the genealogical point that this concatenation comes as a direct but heretofore under-acknowledged parallel to so-called “antisocial” psychoanalytic and queer thought. Thus, there is a heuristic turn I wish to mark in my engagement with yellow melancholia that resembles the resuscitation (or “socialization,” as it were) of Edelman via Lorde in chapter one, and this is what Hwang and “Linsanity” each illustrates in this chapter’s following segments.

<sup>26</sup> Eng and Han, “A Dialogue,” 675.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 670. Cheng arrives at quite a similar claim regarding yellowness’s relationship to loss, highlighting the founding of the melancholic “minority subject”: “More than a haunting concept in America, the minority subject presents a haunted subject. Denigration has conditioned its formation and resuscitation. Not merely the object of white melancholia, the minority is also a melancholic subject, precisely because he or she has been enjoined to renounce him/herself. In the landscape of racial melancholia, the boundary between subject and object, the loser and the thing lost, poses a constant problem.” One way Cheng is substantively different from Eng (and Eng and Han) is shown through the juxtaposition of these passages. Even as they arrive at the same idea regarding the constitutive component (full saturation) of melancholia in and as yellowness, Cheng regards this condition as a psychic problem situated between the majority and minority positions, thus suggesting, in good Butlerian fashion, that *both* are in some way founded by melancholia. By contrast, Eng and Han are interested in the way that the differential between those two positions, even if both are constituted by melancholia, maps as historical-material difference, the social sublimation of psychic power. See Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 104.

which in turn results in the aforementioned anxiety about a false consciousness associated with positive affect. Eng makes much of the new generation's putative freedoms afforded post-Civil Rights Asian Americans: "Existing in a world in which legislative injunctions against their immigration, naturalization, reproduction, miscegenation, and economic livelihood have been putatively eliminated, they can exist and reproduce, politically, economically, and culturally, without fear."<sup>28</sup> In this materialist discussion, melancholia then points to the remainder of feeling, to the subject constructed by yellowness that still feels its perennial outsider-ness as loss or grief. The historical irony: the myth has constructed a narrative of material progress, but the originary loss remains. Yellowness is still constructed by pathology; we come from nothing.

Why would we continue to believe that we come from nothing? Further still, how is this positing not an avowal of the pathology that gives race its psychic power in the first place? To call melancholia the affective signature of yellowness actually reveals the entire problematic, echoing Hardt and Negri, as one of love, simply inverted. If melancholia already suggest lost love object, yellowness as ontogenic structure can just as easily be conceptualized in a positive direction. To bring the inversion into relief, one simply thinks in terms of the "narcissism of the Other" (from chapter one), which here is to think of yellowness's constitutive corollary structure: whiteness. If yellowness is constituted by the perennial foreclosure of love from whiteness, then it follows that whiteness is constituted by its inability to love yellowness back. Regardless of the fact that this constitution-talk reveals the psychic workings of social power—that whiteness can *afford* not to love and yellow cannot *not* love—it is equally true that yellowness finds enablement and privilege here. In its constitutive incapacity to love back, it is whiteness that is in the weaker position. For what subject, to echo Kristeva, would prefer to be in the position of one who has not felt love to the one who has? All love is melancholic, but to call forth love rather than melancholia negates the grim possibility of our avowing the nihilism that purportedly produced us. The outsider-ness marked by yellowness and delineated by the analytic of love gets us to a different—almost exactly the opposite— affective position regarding yellowness than what prevailing theoretical regimes suggest.

Yet as problematic the materialist dominance in ethnic studies might be, this inversion from melancholia to love is, in fact, in political alliance with such thinkers (Eng included). Love brings into relief a debate regarding critique itself—the jockeying for better deployments of self-reflexiveness and critical attitude (nihilism vs. celebration) attendant to critique—yet it also, quite adamantly, makes a contention in the political ontology engaged by ethnic studies. The deference to love here functions as a pivot between historical-materialist thought and Žižek's post-authority discourse. If yellowness is constituted positively by love, then we can mobilize this positive hermeneutic not only to negate the heuristic attitude ineluctably embedded in Eng's melancholia but also to talk back to and within any 'real' power of material model-minority discourse. Love can augment the antiracist argument against the social workings of this myth, adding a fourth prong to the admirable task of demystification, a psychic cognate to each of the three respective sociological rejoinders.

First, in viewing the model minority as a problem of love, it is revealed that nothing ought to be ceded to the imperial injunction to "model" from the minority

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<sup>28</sup> David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2001), 194.

standpoint. There is no social metric to which to defer since it is yellowness, in fact, that is the model for love which whiteness cannot fathom. Secondly, it follows that the ‘non-model-minority’ formations, which are so easily pitted against yellowness, might instead share the same love-constituted structures. Rather than ceding to the special case of blackness as iterated most fervently by antiblackness theory (which will be described at length in the epilogue), this reading of racial-sexual abjection brings into relief possibilities for antiracist coalition.<sup>29</sup> Precisely because the pathologies designated to these other racial formations are arguably ‘deeper’ or even more odiously pathologized (which is to say, unlike yellowness here, there is not even a putative redemption from whiteness), to counter that blackness (or brownness or redness) is constituted by love is to cut radically against any pathology discourse *and* to forge alliance with yellowness (against the charge of social fissures emphasized by the regime of “comparative racialization,” as discussed in the introduction). “There is nothing wrong with us,” we conclude, and ‘us’ here designates both the racially particular and the racially allied. For if love constitutes both yellowness and blackness, then it follows then all race-pathologies are, in this constitutive way, legible as the same and must be conceptually countered in alliance. Thirdly, within a particular racial formation, love limns a political possibility of intra-class alliance better than does melancholy. One obvious rejoinder to Eng’s mapping of melancholia to yellow subjects is that it speaks primarily to the way yellowness is lived by and through those who have been afforded the privileges marked by the historical juncture that gives birth to model-minority discourse, at the expense of the rest of Asian America. But rather than a spoils of melancholy (as if the yellow underclass might say, “Yes, we, too, are suffering, and materially more than you!”), love gives way to alliance in an intra-racial formation whose main fissure is the lived experience of class difference. Rather than, “We, too, suffer, and we don’t even get paid well,” one might say, “We, too, are composed by the love that comes despite and through the abjection that composes us as the same.”

By now it is clear how abjection provides a stronger prognostic framework than melancholia, for through the former it is already given that the constitutive psychic injury of “race” is never about complete loss. In fact, as shown in chapter one in Lorde and chapter two with Baraka, it might be the case that the raced subject’s affective comportment is one that desires *more* loss, an ego-shattering actuated by racial abjection’s dialectical tension with queer love bonds. Then there is the important fact that the idiom of ego-shattering itself, yielded by racial-sexual abjection, leads to the schema of non-differentiation (originally between id and ego as seen in chapter one through Lacan and Edelman), which here can be deployed productively to redeem melancholia.

It is startling that despite their separate (but cognate) insistences on melancholia, both Cheng and Eng resort, in the end, to a collapse of Freud’s originary distinction between mourning and melancholia. Cheng finds the non-differentiation in Freud’s original piece itself: “Freud writes that it is only because we know less about melancholia

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<sup>29</sup> As will be discussed in the epilogue, one central tenet of antiblackness theory and its attendant mood of “afro-pessimism” is that racial formation’s constitutive axis is non-blackness as opposed to non-whiteness. According to Frank Wilderson, the singularity of blackness and its constitutive formation of “the structure of political ontology” renders “the unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human life.” See Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), 57.

that it seems pathological to us. The good mourner turns out to be none other than an ultra-sophisticated, and more lethal, melancholic. Thus the double bind of mourning turns out to be melancholia itself.”<sup>30</sup> This sequential logic positions melancholia as a positive-inflected origin-point for mourning’s “double bind,” and, not unlike Hardt and Negri’s poverty, that originary positivity is brought to reflection only by way of the legibility of its consequence: the possibility of the “good mourner.” Yet if the “good mourner” is simply the “more lethal” melancholic, then it follows that there is no “good” melancholic either—which is to say, no subject whose constitution is only and resolutely scribed by the debilitating, negativity-content of melancholia. Cheng herself, then, suggests that melancholia works diagnostically less as a container of propositional content and more as a strenuous mood that houses its own positive-inflected negation.

Eng and Han give a stunningly similar reading of melancholia’s non-differentiation:

If the ego is composed of its lost attachments, then there would be no ego—indeed, no distinction between inside and outside—without the internalization of loss along melancholic lines. Melancholia thus instantiates the very logic by which the ego and its psychic landscape are constituted. It is only after this partition of internal and external worlds that the work of mourning—that subjectivity itself—becomes possible.<sup>31</sup>

In echo of Cheng’s double bind, Eng and Han suggest that rather than the foreclosure of positive attachments, melancholia could be thought of as the condition of possibility for ego-shattering—for mourning, then subjectivity—to take place. This would be the same good mourner limned by Cheng, and it would take on the same counterintuitive teleology as Hardt and Negri’s, that which always suggests a non-differentiation from origin to telos. Melancholia, in this way, is also always already *not* about loss.

Where one might expect from this chapter’s critique of yellow melancholia a rejection of its hermeneutical danger of a redoubled racial pathology, I wish to defend it because of its proximity—if not non-difference—from what I have described as racial abjection. The toggle between these terms generates (I hope) counterintuitive and productive readings of yellowness’s positive affective and symbolic content.<sup>32</sup> Both terms

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<sup>30</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Eng and Han, “A Dialogue,” 691. In a far less compelling reading of non-differentiation in Freud, these authors continue: “The process of assimilation is a negotiation between mourning *and* melancholia. The ethnic subject does not inhabit one or the other—mourning *and* melancholia—but mourning and melancholia coexist at once in the process of assimilation. This continuum between mourning and melancholia allows us to understand the negotiation of racial melancholia as *conflict* rather than *damage*” (693). What I mean to suggest by bringing their language of the composition of the ego into combinatory assessment with Cheng and Hardt and Negri is that melancholia does not have to take on the either/or logic of “conflict” over “damage.” Rather, it could be conceived of as a space of negotiation—but not necessarily a negotiation of trauma and conflict. This is one sense of what I mean that melancholia functions most generatively as a mood.

<sup>32</sup> This queer revision of yellow melancholia—as mood rather than content—can also be viewed under methodological questions arriving in the wake of Cheng’s and Eng’s magnificent analyses. Specifically, the inversion of melancholia in this discussion can also be framed under the terms of a recent regime of “comparative racialization,” which, as explored in my introduction, is a matrix of interdisciplinary thinking that has signaled the provisional triumph of materialism in ethnic literary studies. My assertion that whiteness occupies the weaker position vis-à-vis yellowness could serve as an answer, for instance, to a comparativist query posed by Colleen Lye: “the question of whether Asian American mobility really confirms the persistent symbolic power of white privilege or whether it represents the detachment of

keep sight of the completeness of race's psychic power and its mapping in the social world as pathology and its designation-making of yellowness as a chronic condition. But more importantly still, both ambit-terms, in the way they always already implicate love, suggest the affected possibility of interpellating bigger, non-negating desires. In the same way abjection is already always extravagant, we might designate melancholia as 'happy,' which, in turn, gets us to think past pathology toward a heuristic "attitude." Echoing the language of wholeness from Lorde in chapter one, Žižek describes this paradox thusly:

Paradise is always pervaded by an infinite melancholy. Perhaps this paradox also accounts for the ultimate paradox of melancholy: melancholy is not primarily directed at the paradisiacal past of organic balanced Wholeness which was lost due to some catastrophe, it is not a sadness caused by this loss; melancholy proper, rather, designates the attitude of those who are still in Paradise but are already longing to break out of it: of those who, although still in a closed universe, already possess a vague premonition of another dimension which is just out of their reach, since they came a little bit too early.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than chronicness or permanence, Žižek gives us a language to conceive of melancholy as a different kind of temporality altogether, an antinomian patience for

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whiteness's symbolic power from material power" (Lye 1734). From yellow love's reversal of melancholia, particularly in the context of "Asian American mobility" denoted by the model minority myth, the answer is twofold: Asian American mobility indeed indexes yellowness's capability within a material structure defined by (and in and as) whiteness; yet that capability, in addition to confirming the existence of that "persistent symbolic power," always already exceeds the grasp of that power. Hence, Lye's terms illuminate the problem of whiteness's constitutive relation to yellowness, yet the formulation that assembles these relations hinges on an either/or notion of yellowness that keeps it in the weaker position either way, thereby redoubling yellow melancholia even as it attempts to continue to think against the putative symbolic powerlessness of yellowness.

Lye announces detachment from prior materialist thinking about Asian American racial formation, alongside the age-old suspicion regarding yellowness as "a coherent racial formation" at all: "Although there is no agreement that Asian Americans are a race, or even a coherent racial formation—given the contested sense, historical limitations, and potentially constitutive exclusions of Asian American panethnicity—it is by now common to describe the Asian American as the product of an official, state-managed racialization or the racial expression of varied social contradiction" (Lye 1732-1733). For Lye, the description of yellowness-qua-racial-identity as "an official, state-managed racialization" is good news, for it enables an anti-romantic query regarding the station of that political identity. Against this anti-romantic backdrop arrives "a welcome third stage of ethnic studies, one long postponed by a standoff between a multiracial model limited by a national horizon and a diasporic model that lacked a historical ground for conducting cross-racial analysis" (Lye 1732). Lye thus gets us to see that Asian America's historical-material station affords a certain privileged relationship to its own symbolic power. Perhaps this is revealed symptomatically (that is, despite her article's intentions), which is to say that the problem with Lye's formulation is something like a misrecognition of the relationship between material and spirit, that the material truth of the material privilege/ascendancy newly designated as yellowness's station reveals not only a truth of its constitutive relation to whiteness in the symbolic register, but that it also reveals a deeper truth of the "persistence of symbolic power" itself, which is that rather than categorically apart, symbolic power and material power are always already tethered; from this tethering, yellowness's giving lie to a material "myth" might also alter its own symbolic content. Another way to put this is that rather than an either-or formulation of yellowness that redoubles the distinction between symbolic power and material power, yellowness could be said to limn a non-differentiation between the symbolic and material. See Colleen Lye, "The Afro-Asian Analogy," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1732-1736.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York and London: Verso, 2000), 80-81.

“another dimension.” But that waiting is good news, as it lets us know that we, like the good mourner, have had the good fortune of melancholy, of arriving “a little bit too early.” Which is to say, racial melancholia could be said to designate a subjunctive mood that is oppositional to its propositional content.<sup>34</sup> Thus, part of the challenge in thinking about racial melancholia is to be into the mood it affords—a mood that is, with apologies to William James, simultaneously strenuous and easy-going.

#### v. Gallimard’s love-being and the Butterfly’s open secret

I think you must have some kind of identity problem.<sup>35</sup>

- Gallimard to Song, *M. Butterfly*

What comes into view in the routing of Freudian melancholia to critical thought on raciality is, thus, a possible occlusion of an always-already-enabled and positively-constituted notion of minority identity and the love bonds that underwrite it. My cleaving the propositional content from mood within the discourse of racial melancholia is in the service of this project’s global aim of delimiting notions of love bonds as coercive and coerced. Since melancholia is a precise Freudian term that is directly tethered to (at times synonymous with) psychoanalytic frameworks of love, it is distressing that melancholia has become a hallmark of thinking about the psychic constitution of yellowness in terms that nullify the definitional positive-bound content of love. This content, though not reducible to the (always already social) identity scribed by race, is nonetheless tethered indelibly to it, binding the racial-sexual abjection to the legible subject-formation—identity—enabled by it (as described in the ontogeny/sociogeny distinction in chapter two).

One splendid example of the separation of melancholia’s mood and content is David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1989). This play has been a lightning rod for queer and psychoanalytic readings in Asian American thought, including rigorous examinations from the separate yellow-melancholia treatises of Anne Cheng and David Eng. Cheng emphasizes the fantasmatic discursive space of the psyche that constitutes subjectivity, bonds, and identity for both Gallimard and Song (the two central characters of the play). What I wish to do here is to closely read Gallimard’s penultimate monologue, which brazenly acknowledges his love bonds in convergence with his Orientalist fantasy. Before revisiting Cheng’s path-breaking reading of the play, I wish to argue that Gallimard’s declaration of love, precisely as it arrives in sync with the extent of his fantasy, defines it as 1) a love unfettered by notions of false political consciousness; 2) a love legible as *stable* and *present* (again, precisely by way of the constitutive character of fantasy), which is to say a love that has a proper object; and 3) a love that identifies with but comes up short against the love-being in and as yellowness. Thus, the love bonds presented in the play are granted reprieve from the ontology of absence as forwarded by

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<sup>34</sup> It could be said, after all, that affect always denotes mood. In his taxonomy of affects, Charles Altieri grants mood one of the “four basic categories” of affect, defining mood as the merging of individuated “sensation” into what I think could apply to a *critical-theoretical* (and not only an aesthetic) “situation”: “Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that pervades an entire scene or situation.” See Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003), 2.

<sup>35</sup> David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988), 66.



yellow-melancholia discourse, yet such reprieve is made possible by melancholia's mood of voluptuous loss. In turn, the rubric of identity, as chaotic and confused as it appears throughout Hwang's play, can be said to be validated, too, insofar as it is *identification* (with Song's racial-sexual abjection and with the Butterfly mythos) that has forged the very bonds that speak back to what Gallimard describes as "unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment."<sup>36</sup> With echoes of the mega-social narcissism explored in chapter one, the name of these bonds must be granted the value of what they are labeled by Gallimard: love.

Having lost the entirety of his social and political capital as a French military bureaucrat and bound inside a Paris prison cell, Gallimard still finds himself longing for Song at plays end. The close of Hwang's play (an entire scene unto itself) is infused with Gallimard's melancholic language of affirmative love. Under the pressure of social death and with his actual death imminent, it might be expected that Gallimard, having lost all the markers of 'life' itself due to his dalliance with Song, would take recourse to an idiom of love as a source of regretful delusion and remorseful false consciousness. Though such language does commence his monologue, it extends only to his knowledge of having been betrayed by Song's physiological incommensurateness (the fact of his penis) with Gallimard's "vision of the Orient"—that is, by the utter fullness of Gallimard's Orientalist fantasy.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, it is clear from the content of the monologue that it is Gallimard's fantasy that has betrayed him, not his love. Upon ruing the "mistakes made over the course of a lifetime," Gallimard's language of regret reaches its high point when he claims that Song "deserved nothing but a kick in the behind, and instead I gave him... all my love."<sup>38</sup> Gallimard thus makes clear that no part of "all my love" that he felt, expressed, and "gave" was regrettable for the validity or truth-content of his love.

Gallimard's "vision of the Orient" in this scene is, on the one hand, a crystalline example of imperialist fantasy:

Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps no clearer articulation of Gallimard's Orientalism (where gender and sexuation meet as an essentialist concept of "race") is made in the entire play, an Orientalism configured by "clichéd images of gender, race, and geography" to constitute "an essentialist notion of identity."<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the fullness of this Orientalist fantasy ("a vision that has *become my life*") suggests a corollary intensity and completeness of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Dorinne K. Kondo, "'M. Butterfly': Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique* 16 (Autumn 1990): 15. Kondo's full formulation here is precisely the kind of insistence on love-qua-false consciousness I have in mind as erroneous in reading the convergence of fantasy and love: "Gallimard will be 'seduced,' 'deluded,' and 'imprisoned' by clinging to an ideology of meaning as reference and to an essentialist notion of identity. For him, clichéd images of gender, race, and geography unproblematically occupy the inner space of identity, enabling opera star Song Liling to seduce through the play of inner truth and outer appearance" (15).

love bonds that must be reckoned with on terms their own—that is, provisionally at least, apart from the politics of Orientalism. That is, precisely as a convergence of love and fantasy comes into view for their parallel power, the intensity of Gallimard’s love could be thought of as separate from the structure of fantasy that gives it form, especially from the vantage of this final juncture (when, again, all has been lost in terms of “my life”), only to converge again to redeem the form of fantasy (if not its content). Fantasy has structured his reality, yet as his imprisonment and impending suicide make so very clear, his reality is not reducible to fantasy. This precise logic, in my view, could extend to the very content of the fantasy as well: Orientalist ideology structures Gallimard’s fantasy (and does so completely), yet his fantasy is not reducible to Orientalist ideology, precisely because it is entangled in the force of his love.

Cheng reads this moment in similar terms, noting the tethering of fantasy and love in Gallimard’s monologue: “The difficult lesson of *M. Butterfly* is therefore not that fantasy exists... but the more politically distressing idea that fantasy may be the very way in which we come to know and love someone—to come to know and love ourselves.”<sup>41</sup> But such a convergence is only “politically distressing” if one half of the equation is as politically distressing as the other—that is, if love, on its own, is retroactively viewed as distorted, deluded, or otherwise false. The strident Gallimard, in echo of my earlier rebuttal to conceptualizing love as a form of coercion or false consciousness, makes it clear, even from his prison cell and on the verge of *seppuku*, that he does not view it, in retrospect, as such. Rather, the intensity in and as this convergence leads him to view his own love as that borne from the *geisha* fantasy, a non-differentiated love his own that can “bounce back, strengthened” by itself, “unconditionally.” His very being, that is, is constituted by and bound to this love, a being that has, in sync with Hardt and Negri, “mark[ed] a rupture with what exists,” in this case a being Gallimard can only assess as tragically non-viable in his given social ontology. Another way to put the matter is to say that love is configured by Gallimard as the surplus-value in relation to the use-value of fantasy, and as long as the notion of surplus-value is read properly as structural and not agential (that is, not as a notion of unwitting reinscription of one’s own structural victimization), his love abides as the redeemable element of an otherwise “politically distressing” situation, extending to redeem the form of fantasy as well.

Needless to say, the point here is not to overlook the historical legacy of Orientalism, its contemporary manifestations in Western fantasy, nor Gallimard’s boundness to it. And remorse over love proper does, admittedly, enter the monologue thereafter, with Gallimard identifying “a man whose love is completely without worth” in a second articulation of Orientalist fantasy:

Love warped my judgment, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face... until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but... a woman. (*Dancers help him put on the Butterfly wig.*) I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth.<sup>42</sup>

However remorseful and melancholic as love is situated here, it is not positioned as having been a space of choice—of voluntary commitment. Instead, Gallimard recognizes

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<sup>41</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, 68.

the consequence of his love as a sheer force that he has been bound to and constituted by; this is a retroactive recognition of the ontological event of his love-being rather than a mistake in his choosing. Further still, the love that “blinded my eyes” is the love that here pushes him outside the realm of social life—that is, an acceptable social identity—into identificatory embrace of the fantasy itself. That is, if this were the space of choosing against the anti-fantasy forces of administered life, he might reject the convergence of love and fantasy and attempt a to rehearse a love ‘with worth.’ The intensity of Gallimard’s love bonds doubles down on the intensity of fantasy here, but it is the incommensurateness of this convergence with acceptable social ‘life’ that makes his love valueless in his sociality. Gallimard’s recognition of love deemed “without worth” in the given social order is, then, categorically different from his recognition of his love-being, that which, via fantasy or “vision,” has “become my life.” Love, again, appears as the one redeemable component within a tragic situation, in which everything around that love—beginning from the Orientalism that structures his fantasy but extending to the charge of racial-sexual treason and, ultimately, social death—appears as “politically distressing.” To this tragic situation, Gallimard’s full embrace of his fantastic love, which would mean to “return forever to my Butterfly’s arms,” is perhaps the only rejoinder.<sup>43</sup>

What is this embrace if not an identification with a racial-sexual abjection not his own? Again, it is the social reality that has failed to live up to the fact of Gallimard’s fantasy, not that his love was under some false consciousness entailed by the fantasy’s content. The deeply problematic content of the fantasy does not alter the fact of Gallimard’s love-being nor his cognizance of it; in fact, the form of fantasy itself has given form to the ontological event of Gallimard’s love-being. But another way to put the matter of Gallimard’s love-being is to turn to his actual death, which is, simultaneously, to attend to the content of his Orientalism. Such attendance might begin with the following query: what if the love-power Gallimard imbues to yellowness were, by some metric beyond his own fantasy, *true*?

As soon as Gallimard enters “a *seppuku* position” during his monologue, he describes the content of his Orientalism again in terms of a resilient love: “The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things—unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment.”<sup>44</sup> Under the frame of Freudian melancholia, such an equation of the withstanding of loss cuts radically against the grain of what we have come to associate with the symbolic substance of the “Butterfly”—namely, the concatenation of yellowness to melancholia itself. As the stage directions suggest, such a concatenation of love’s resilient positivity to the Butterfly is, for Gallimard, wrapped up not only in his own identificatory embrace of the Butterfly but his recognition of the social consequence thereafter. Such narcissistic identification becomes clear in his very final words: “My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly.”<sup>45</sup> This nominative declaration is where we see a full non-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. As explored briefly in my introduction, Abdul JanMohamed leads the way in discussing a “utopian possibility” borne from the subject’s “inherent potentiality for death,” which for him constitutes a dialectic between the will to live on and the radical potential of self-abnegation in suicide. There is, in my view, a way in which a structural space of willed hope must be read in Gallimard’s *seppuku*, even if the legibility of his political ambition in such suicide (if any) is obfuscated by fantasy. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005), 292.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 69.

differentiation of Gallimard's love bonds and his Orientalist fantasy, by way of a narcissistic embrace that ends his life. Holding abeyant the political-historical question of whether the Butterfly functions as an 'accurate' or 'true' symbol of yellowness (more on this momentarily), here Gallimard is fully invested in—as well as done in by—what *he* perceives as the overpowering symbolic substance of racial-sexual abjection. That is, Gallimard's ultimate identification with the Butterfly mythos reveals both the power of yellowness (of yellow love-being) as well as the station of a love un-returnable to it from his position of lived whiteness (of fetishistic but de-pathologized white love-being). The devastation of the convergence of love and fantasy finally reveals that Gallimard's own love-being cannot live up to the possibility of another (markedly yellow) love-being that exists an ontology apart from his existing sociality. His final resort, then, is an activation of the death drive in the hope of an ontological order in which identification with yellowness (the Butterfly fetish) would be neither pathologizable nor imperialist.

The point here is not so much to ask whether Gallimard's own death is a "success" or a "failure" in terms of alternative ontologies, as tempting as such speculation is given the structural intimacy (if not direct causation) of his death to his love-being and its social failure. Rather, the point is to ask what the narcissistic activation of the death-drive in this instance reveals about the symbolic content of racial-sexual abjection—that is, what the political content of Gallimard's Orientalist fantasy has to do with his remittance of "life." What does Gallimard's fetishistic attachment to the Butterfly reveal if not his recognition of the power of yellowness in relation to whiteness? What does the final resort to *seppuku* mean, in addition to a gesture toward that recognition, if not the self-abnegation of his whiteness?

While Hwang's conclusion reveals, in this way, the beautiful open secret of yellowness's privileged relationship to love, criticism regarding this monologue has focused on the content of Orientalism and has been befuddled by the ironic twist that it is Gallimard whose voice brings this open secret into sharp relief. Kondo contends that the intense convergence of love and fantasy and Gallimard's suicide reveals "that Gallimard has too little imagination to accept the complexity and ambiguity of everyday life, too little imagination to open himself to different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power."<sup>46</sup> Cheng views his final act as the denouement of a sadistic fetish, in which "Gallimard's sadistic position derives its pleasure and potency precisely through identification."<sup>47</sup> Eng writes, "In his continual defense against the potential threats of numerous social differences, Gallimard's reworking of classic fetishism both manages and erases race."<sup>48</sup> What these responses all share is the notion that Gallimard's love is synonymous with the workings of Orientalist fantasy, which map in social life as stilted imagination, sadism, and fetish, rather than a convergence that reveals the parallel power of each. While my reading does not intend to defend Gallimard's Orientalism *per se* or hold his whiteness as some heroic vantage of some almost-yellow-being, neither does it wish to vilify Gallimard, at least not for the intensity of his love bonds and their attendant notions of attachment, even if such notions appear as racial fetish. And it is this reading of Gallimard, it seems to me, that can actually make

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<sup>46</sup> Kondo, "'M. Butterfly': Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," 21.

<sup>47</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 152.

sense of the convergences of 1) love and fantasy and 2) identification and death *without pathologizing yellowness or whiteness*.

In Cheng's reading of the monologue, she diagnoses an "identificatory disorder" on Gallimard's part:

This moment when Gallimard dons his geisha makeup is melancholic, not because he is mourning a lost love, but because the scene dramatizes a condition of identificatory confusion fundamental to the melancholic experience. Melancholia, after all, designates a condition of identificatory disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another. This disturbance or confusion between the griever and the thing lost-but-taken-in-as-the-self render unstable even Freud's attempt to distinguish mourning from melancholia.<sup>49</sup>

The aggrieved Gallimard is the one who has lost, whose psychic reality has been halted by a failed and betrayed love, and, ultimately, who is committing *seppuku*. Yet is there a way, even in exploring the confusion between melancholia and mourning, to celebrate such confusion, to identificatory confusion without deeming it as pathological disorder? My reading adds, then, this corollary to this melancholia diagnosis: if whiteness is weaker than yellowness, then Gallimard's love is an attempt at strength—which here is also to say an articulation of that recognition, of his having wanted and having lost yellowness more intensely than yellowness ever wanted Gallimard. Such an attempt reveals, I wish to suggest, an accuracy, rather than a disorder, regarding this matrix of racial-sexual abjection, its symbolic content, and identification.

This brings me, at last, to the predictable refutation of my reading: that the Butterfly mythos cannot be equated to yellowness, and thus Gallimard's attachment to a cultural stereotype cannot be read as a love for yellowness, given my precise definition of the term as an anti-melancholic symbolic substrate borne from racial-sexual abjection and synonymous with Hardt and Negri's "love-being." While it is no doubt true that Gallimard's definition of "yellowness" is textually deducible as very different from mine, there are two significant similarities, stemming from the parallel structures of fantasy and love found in his monologue. First, Gallimard does not prioritize some empirical or scientific *a priori* within raciality; far from "too little imagination," he grants yellowness a content that is both symbolic and fantastic—imagined—rather than imputed as 'fact' to human bodies. Though the content of that fantasy is over-determined historically, such over-determination, from the vantage of the end of the play, does not have bearing on Gallimard's expectation of reality, i.e., his own historical experience. As the monologue makes clear, Gallimard's full commitment to imagination instead reveals his recognition of the preclusion of such fullness in his lived experience. (Indeed, such a commitment to fantasy is what got Gallimard jailed in the first place as the object of Song's easy seduction.<sup>50</sup>) Again, Cheng is the guide here, as she puts the matter of fantasy in the generative terms of structure versus content: "I would suggest that it is not the content but the structure of the Butterfly fantasy that seduces Gallimard. Race and sex are not the

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<sup>49</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 123-124.

<sup>50</sup> The play's crucial plot twist of his having disavowed the "fact" of Song's actual sex throughout the play, mistaking male for female (as well as "man" for "woman"), confirms this pivotal preference toward fantasy, that the so-called "facts" of "race" or "gender/sex" might be a matter of avowal and disavowal rather than compelled ontic acceptance.

content but the conditions for mobilizing the work of fantasy in this play.”<sup>51</sup> The form of Gallimard’s fantasy trumps, in the end, its content. In the same way that love is the redeemable part of a tragic and “politically distressing” equation, it can be said that fantasy too can be redeemed here.

Secondly, Gallimard’s attachment to yellowness by the play’s end reveals a deep recognition of an identificatory privilege that is itself the gap between his fantasy and reality. That is, Gallimard’s ultimate identification with the *geisha* image, as melancholy and confused as it is, can be read as his recognition of yellowness’s privileged relationship to love itself. His demise, then, comes at the deep disappointment of having been unable to agentially overcome what is a structural gap between whiteness and yellowness (as well as between man and woman and between non-queerness and queerness). Thus, Gallimard’s yellow fetish reveals a previously unrecognized and unheeded relationship between love and being—his *own* and that of the other. Gallimard’s attachment to yellowness, then, can be read—no matter what he thinks is the precise content—as a conduit to the strength inherent in and privileged by racial-sexual abjection.

One significant caveat remains to my prioritization of fantasy’s form. Cheng’s thought remains a crucial reference point here. In addition to “the politically distressing idea that fantasy may be the very way in which we come to know and love someone,” Cheng’s emphasis on fantasy makes for an interrogation of what she calls the “guise of the binary opposition” and limns a possibility of what I have been calling non-differentiation. By way of the abovementioned reading in which race and sex are the conditions of possibility for fantasy rather than its content, Cheng arrives at “the limitations of insisting on the pure distinction between subject and object, oppressor and the oppressed, agency and the agentless. The guise of the binary opposition prevents us from examining the structure of desire and need nurturing that power distinction.”<sup>52</sup> Without a doubt, my idiom of “love-being” and the deflation of “false consciousness”—not to mention the reversals of power and privilege that frame this reading of Gallimard—are also in the service of undoing such oppositions. But for Cheng, one important consequence from the interrogation of “pure distinction” is that the ambit of sexuality has no necessary aim and that sexual desire does not necessarily entail an object. In assessing the full extent of Gallimard’s fantasy, Cheng arrives at the astonishing conclusion that such fullness reveals that “sexuality has no object at all.”<sup>53</sup> While the lesson of this formulation refers to the generative disorientation of Gallimard’s sexual life (that what can be called his “sexuality” is not definable by its object, given his insistence on a heterosexuality that is belied by his dalliance with Song), it is, technically speaking, untrue. Gallimard, after all, has had sex with Song, and though the intensity of the *geisha* mythos has made his sexual bond outside the realm of a sexuality articulable by him, his sexuality has indeed found objects in both Song’s body and in the mythos itself. To deny the reality of sexual object-ness in this case would be to deny the affective attachments Gallimard’s love has provided him as both the provisional proof of and the further fuel for his fantasy. That is to say, to the ears of love-being discourse, saying “sexuality has no object” sounds dangerously close to saying love has none either. But

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<sup>51</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

love does, even if, to echo Audre's attachments in chapter one, the object revealed is one's own narcissism (of the Other).

Here, then, is one crucial difference between a hermeneutics of love versus a hermeneutics of melancholia. Even if we agree that Gallimard's love does not prioritize Song as its object, it remains crucial to claim that the realm of fantasy constitutes its own object. Why? The parallel structure of fantasy to love is only parallel if the affective intensity of both are legible as convergent, i.e., comparably forceful. That is, to my reading, the love of Gallimard can be read as redeemable only if its intensity is, more or less, matched by the intensity of fantasy (especially when backlit by the irredeemable political content of the fantasy itself). Put simply, Gallimard's recognition of yellow love-being can only work if his own love-being is legible to him as such; since his declarations of love are so clear throughout the monologue, we know he has felt, experienced, and lost a love-object. Gallimard's love-object is, as to be expected, his own ego, which has unraveled by way of the fetish-object of the Butterfly myth. Emphasizing the superego's regulatory function of the social abjections (homosexual bonding and sex) that has bound Gallimard to the Butterfly, Gallimard recognizes that his love has been foreclosed not because of his obeying the superego's injunction to occupy, enjoy, and invite obliteration by the racial-sexual abjection given form in both Song (less so) and Orientalist fantasy (more so). Rather, he has enjoyed his submission too much, at least within his inhabited sociality (of whiteness, patriarchy, and homophobia). Gallimard extends this submission to its conclusion, affirming his narcissism of the Other by way of a literal ego-shattering: his *seppuku*. In a cruel twist, a love that cuts against "loss," ultimately, might also have to activate the death drive. Such are the parameters of his own love-being. Yet perhaps Gallimard's self-abnegation gestures toward the possibility of another ontology of love, one which would not separate the superego's regulatory function from the desire for the ego unbound.

## vi. From melancholia to Linsanity: the new ontology of yellow commons

But what strange pride suddenly illuminates me?<sup>54</sup>

- Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

This configuration of yellowness to love-being made its way into a different form of textuality in the 2012 international sports spectacle surrounding NBA player Jeremy Lin. Lin's sudden rise to prominence in professional basketball, marked by a month-long stretch of astounding play in February 2012, is backlit by his exceptional status as the only Asian American in the NBA and the first of Taiwanese descent. The narrative of Lin became an important footnote to a global text of sudden ascendance: Lin was under-recruited in the college ranks, became a star player at Harvard, went undrafted in the 2010 NBA Draft and then immediately outplayed John Wall, that year's first pick, in the NBA Summer League, thereby gaining just enough traction in the elite tier of his profession. Lin then earned a partially guaranteed contract with the Golden State Warriors for one season before being waived near the end of the 2010-2011 season; he

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<sup>54</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 33. [Original work published in 1947.]

was subsequently waived in the preseason of 2011 by the Houston Rockets before being signed as a third-string point guard by the New York Knicks at the beginning of the 2011-2012 season. Due to a combination of injury and poor play by the other Knicks point guards, the 23-year-old Lin was granted significant playing time for the first time in his career and averaged 27 points, eight assists and two steals a game through his first four career starts, in the fourth of which he outplayed Kobe Bryant, the superstar of the Los Angeles Lakers and a former NBA Most Valuable Player.<sup>55</sup> In his twelve starts before the NBA All-Star break of 2012, the Knicks's record was 9-3, and Lin averaged 22.5 points and 8.7 assists.<sup>56</sup> Lin's deft and meteoric rise from marginalized bench player to superstar talent captured the collective imagination of the nation's biggest basketball market and far beyond, resulting in a popular cultural phenomenon tabbed "Linsanity."<sup>57</sup> From this event, it is the positive emotive or affective content connoted by its name, suggesting collective mania, ecstasy, and celebration, especially against the predictable melancholia-bound reading of both Lin's subjecthood and to the public consumption of his yellowed body and performance.<sup>58</sup> I wish to argue for the love-being inherent in yellowness—in addition to the public cognizance of that being—as suggested by this fortuitous Derridean pun. This "ontological event"-as-sports-spectacle, in which the yellow body's anti-melancholic "being" became the symbolic source of a mass affect of celebration, suggests a double departure from the way raciality is configured in relation to the commons.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Jeremy Lin," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed August 10, 2014. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy\\_Lin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Lin)>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Here the otherwise dubious source Wikipedia is very helpful in narrating this very recent phenomenon; the event of Linsanity is described in lush and comprehensive detail, replete with hyperlinked references. In addition to reaching the heights of sports media coverage (such as the cover of *Sports Illustrated*), Linsanity, according to this narrative, extended to various advertising outlets and met many surprising benchmarks of cultural significance, including the Global Language Monitor's inclusion of the word in its lexicon: "Within three weeks of his first game as a starter, at least seven e-books were being published on Lin, and the Global Language Monitor declared that *Linsanity* had met its criteria to be considered an English-language word. He appeared on a second consecutive *Sports Illustrated* cover, the first New York-based team athlete and the third NBA player in the magazine's history, after [Michael] Jordan and Dirk Nowitzki. New York City restaurants introduced new food and bar items in honor of Lin. The city has about 450,000 residents of Chinese or Taiwanese descent—larger than the entire populations of NBA cities like Miami, Atlanta or Cleveland—and viewing parties to watch Lin play flourished in Manhattan's Chinatown. An airline advertised 'Linsanely low prices,' bids for his rookie card exceeded \$21,000 on eBay, and the press circulated rumors—denied by Lin—that he was dating Kim Kardashian. *Foreign Policy* speculated on his potential impact on Sino-American relations, and Jack and Suzy Welch wrote that Lin's rise was a lesson to business leaders to not let bureaucracy stifle unproven talent." See Wikipedia contributors, "Jeremy Lin."

<sup>58</sup> The classical sense of "ecstasy" in Greek connotes "insanity" and "bewilderment." There is, then, a fortuitous connection between what Linsanity entails as a mass affect of celebration and José Muñoz's use of ecstasy as a master metaphor for collectivity as detailed in my introduction. Linsanity, in this way, could be conceived as one brief moment of collectivity when consumers of spectacle did indeed "take ecstasy together," per Muñoz's instruction. I owe this connection to a series of exchanges with Adam Ahmed. See "Ecstasy," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, the exceptionality of yellowness within the spectacle of the NBA must be read within the context of that spectacle's present relation to raciality. The ranks of professional basketball, of course, are predominantly peopled by black players, rendering Lin's yellowness exceptional primarily against the backdrop of blackness (or, worse, at its expense). I do not mean to deemphasize this specific context *per se*, though I do think overemphasizing the yellow-black binary here would fall into the critical-political trap of



A brief sketch of the over-determined readings of Lin's position in the American cultural imagination is worthwhile. Such a sketch reads like a full sampling of the concerns comported by the predictable historical baggage pertaining to Asian Americans in the contemporary period: the feminized male body (Lin, who stands 6'3," is not read as exceptionally "athletic" or tall by NBA standards), the Ivy League-aspirant model minority, the socially-oriented distributor (Lin plays the point guard position), the globalization-age immigrant threat, and the putatively race-unconscious or "post-race" American citizen. Media outlets made quick recourse to Lin's second-generation biography: his father had immigrated from Taiwan to earn his Ph.D. and make a living in the U.S., had taught his sons the game, settling in suburban Palo Alto, California, in the densely Asian-American Bay Area. Such a narrative can be read, especially in a post-1965 context, as enfolding Lin's very presence in America into an accommodated and unexceptional American story—that is, as the melancholic model-minority mythos. Our current cultural studies might, in turn, suggest that the ease of these articulations doubles back to a permanent position of defeat for the melancholic yellow subject. Yet these over-determined readings, as much as they might productively limn the discourse surrounding Lin toward antiracist ends, are belied by both the "being" and "event" within Linsanity itself.

Like love, Linsanity's celebrative mode could function only in and as the ontology of affect, of positing yellowness as a positive substrate *felt* the same way melancholia might be felt. Within that celebratory mode, Linsanity suggests a double logic of production and consumption, of use- and surplus-value, and of being and event, marked by 1) individuated performance and 2) the reception of that performance. Hardt and Negri's conception of the "ontological event" marked by every act of love is, again, extremely useful here, especially for their tethering of event to being (dialectically toward new being). In considering Lin's anti-melancholic being as the symbolic source of a mass affect of celebration, we see the new social ontology suggested by Linsanity by way this precise logic: Lin's love-bound yellow being (his athletic performance, always embodied in and as yellowness's positivity) becomes the symbolic material of a collective event of recognizing and partaking in that yellowness (the receptive celebration of that performance); in dialectical turn, this celebration indexes the establishment of a new ontology of *collective* being. Hardt and Negri's precise political point in calling every act of love a rupture toward new "being" is that such new being is tied up with a notion of a revived and reconstituted collectivity, which they call the "multitude," toward a collective mutuality and the recognition of mutual wealth: the commons, or

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comparative racialization sketched in my introduction, in which blackness and yellowness would be read against one another in order to position both melancholically against whiteness. On the other hand, there is to the basketball-trained eye another precise relation that comes into view within the specificity of NBA spectacle: that Lin's flashy style of play, as a "score-first" point guard not especially touted for his shooting nor his passing, resembles most closely an identifiably black style of basketball. As none other than Cornel West observed in a certain heyday of black cultural studies, blackness is inflected in the "aesthetic execution" of basketball, "where the black player tries to *style* reality so that he becomes spectacle and performance, always projecting a sense of self; whereas his white counterpart tends toward the productivistic and mechanistic." That is, Linsanity can only have occurred the way it did because of the recognizability of the richness of blackness (in and as basketball spectacle, performance, and style) already constitutive of the NBA. See Cornel West, *Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race and Power in America* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993), 98.

“commonwealth.” Linsanity thus reveals that yellowness is a source-material for the multitude. On the one hand, this doubleness might be difficult to embrace in antiracist thought, as out of sync as it is with the notion of racial identification founded on the logic of liberal subjectivity and individuated possession (the precise logic of dispossession and racial-sexual abjection will be explored further in the following two chapters). Yet the celebration in and as Linsanity showed that yellowness is not *just* the being that Lin possesses and has access to; additionally, yellowness is for everyone, toward collective being; yellowness *is* the commons. And this notion of yellow-being-qua-commonwealth gives Linsanity its own force in liberatory thought.

One obvious and significant criticism of Hardt and Negri’s work has been the absence of articulations of either the commons or the multitude by thinkers of color, as well as in the socialities they index, study, and, more often than not, come from.<sup>60</sup> That is, Hardt and Negri have been inexcusably silent concerning racial-sexual abjection and its attendant modalities of the multitude and the commons. (This is an intellectual failing they share—or, one could say, inherited from—their heroes, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.) In the same way Lee Edelman’s reach for anti-sociality is blind to the already-present socialities of Lorde’s queerness in chapter one, it can be said that Hardt and Negri’s reach for the commons is blind to its iteration in and as Linsanity’s yellowness.

To equate yellowness to the commons is to give lie to the easy possessive hermeneutic maneuver of reducing yellowness to the people marked by it, while, at the same time, accurately staking (as Gallimard, however surprisingly, does in *M. Butterfly*) the privileged access to yellowness from the vantage of subjects marked as yellow. Yet in addition to giving lie to yellow melancholia and correcting a whitewashed notion of collectivity, Linsanity provides an idiom for a kind of positive-directed ontologism that exceeds “De Singularitate.” For if yellowness already is the commons, the strenuously dialectical move of arriving at collective being (by way of “acts” and event of love) can be deemphasized; we can strive for collectivity only insofar as we already have it, insofar as we have Lin’s graceful, love-bound performance. The affective dimension of Linsanity is the proof we already have it: that the privilege indexed by Gallimard and Lin can be said not only to be lived through cultural formation, but *felt*. If yellowness is as rich as we feel it to be—and as the feeling of Linsanity might have proved it to be—then it does not need to consider itself through its negative other, a lost love-object, an ontology of absence. For whatever ontology is claimed by yellowness is an ontology that is marked by positive feeling: the feeling of the privilege of racial-sexual abjection. Following Cesaire’s epigraph to this section, this is the privilege of the “strange pride” borne and felt from yellowness. Against such pride, even the generative mood of melancholia might not be worth feeling for long.

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<sup>60</sup> For pointing out the full extent of Hardt and Negri’s deafening silence on theorists of color, I am indebted to a series of exchanges with Fred Moten. Here one remembers too that the coincidental mass racial spectacle of February 2012 was the George Zimmerman murder of Trayvon Martin. This event incited public outcry over the continual loss of black life at the hands of the white-supremacist police state, then again as Zimmerman was acquitted of killing the unarmed black teenager in July 2013. But these events, too, could be read as a marking of the ontological reach of a (black) commons already present, as political outrage, movement, and spectacle together indexed the love-bound sorrow of blackness, *mourning* the unjust and violent loss of Martin’s love-being. That is, even the fact of Martin’s death must, perhaps, be read as an event bound by black love rather than black melancholia.

#### 4. Subjecthood's *Shortcomings*: the love of the yellow object

Our history, the collective subject and object constituted by love and openness to the encounter with others, solves the riddle of existence.<sup>1</sup>

- Michael Hardt, "Pasolini Discovers Love Outside"

##### i. Ben Tanaka as "just-is" melancholic

There is a tempting reading of Adrian Tomine's graphic novel, *Shortcomings* (2007), which argues in now-familiar fashion that it maps the concatenation of yellowness to melancholia. In fact, the novel might be the tidiest in twenty-first century Asian American cultural landscape of the negative affect associated with Asian American subjectivity in general and Asian male sexual frustration in particular. Centering the text around a gloomy and pessimistic Japanese American, Ben Tanaka, and set in contemporary Berkeley, California, Tomine emphasizes the affective remainder legible as yellow melancholia, that which remains at the core of yellow subjecthood despite the *a priori* indices of Tomine's generation of relative material privilege and bourgeois ascendancy, which in the graphic novel includes the setting of a relatively high population of Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay area (particularly in the affluent university town of Berkeley) and the fact that all Tomine's characters, Ben included, are English-fluent, highly educated, and socially mobile. In this setting, Ben might not only thrive but recognize his thriving, giving lie to the curse of yellow melancholia by way of the overabundance of material power afforded him given his historical position. And yet, Tomine's novel traces Ben's failed love relationship with a fellow Japanese American, Miko, and that failure's connection to (if not explanation by) a predictable and melancholic racial psychopathology. At the root of Ben's psychic struggle and his incapacity to love his partner Miko is "Ben's refusal of Asian-American categorization and its political use," which, for Hye Su Park, "is also a refusal of his ethnic identity and what communal experience Asians in American society share."<sup>2</sup> Sandra Oh foregrounds the problem of social identity as well, observing that "Tomine rejects the strategy of rewriting identity narratives, and like his incessantly gloomy character Ben Tanaka, Tomine seems to be pessimistic about the possibility of escaping the limitations of socially inscribed identities."<sup>3</sup> Hence, while in historical content *Shortcomings* marks a departure from the previously discussed frameworks of yellow love, in the thematization of melancholia alongside Asian American identity—that is, a failed love that suggests a pathological relation of that failure to minority racial identity—Tomine's text seemingly appears rooted in the tradition of negative Asian American thought.

The small body of criticism on Tomine in general and *Shortcomings* in particular tends to read Ben's social detachment from Asian American community as the social

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt, "Pasolini Discovers Love Outside," *diacritics* 39:4 (Winter 2009): 123.

<sup>2</sup> Hye Su Park, "Lost in the Gutters: Ethnic Imagining in Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*," *Image & Narrative* 11:2 (2010): 104.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Oh, "Sight Unseen: Adrian Tomine's *Optic Nerve* and the Politics of Recognition," *MELUS* 32:3 (Fall 2007): 146.

sublimation of a psychic wound that cannot be overcome.<sup>4</sup> Predictably, this wound is read as a problematic of raced gender, the lived-historical-experience of castrated Asian manhood, aligning him from a “negative” melancholia view in Hwang and Lee’s lineage. For instance, Ben’s fantasizing only about white women becomes such a ubiquitous index of his wound, mentioned repeatedly by the three central Asian American characters: Ben, Miko, and Alice. There is much validity to the reading of *Shortcomings*’ psychosexual preoccupation in and as the yellow abject, as if Tomine seeks to remind those who might forget amidst Asian American material ascendancy the permanent station of yellowness. Indeed, this is one forceful reading of Tomine’s title: as a post-modern reminder, beyond the time of Hwang and Lee, of the utter insufficiency of the yellow subject-in-process under the constituting metric of whiteness and the affective remainder between material ascendancy and symbolic abjection. So again the question becomes: Is there a redemptive, positive-love reading of *Shortcomings*? Specifically, is there a way to defend Ben—amidst, in the words of Miko, his “depression and anger management,” “weird self-hatred issues,” and “the relentless negativity”<sup>5</sup>—in the same way that there is for Gallimard and Song? The corollary question appears as one of method, familiar from these Asian American authors but from Lorde as well: What is the precise relationship between the psychosexual wound of racial abjection and social (racial-sexual) identity?

One way to get at this question is, yet again, by way of the apparatus scrutinized throughout chapter three: the misreading of contemporary yellow melancholia discourse. Specifically, there remains the question that has not been answered by melancholia-centered critics, nor in my own exploration of this problematic through Hwang and Lee: *Why* does the relationship between a strenuous purview of the constitutive psychosexual wounding and a consequent positive social identity give birth to, in the affective register,

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<sup>4</sup> The few published articles on Tomine’s work tend to focus on the series of his comic series, *Optic Nerve*, from which the plot and characters of *Shortcomings* originated. For instance, in Park’s investigation of Ben’s alienation (both social and psychic), she emphasizes the work of the graphic novel form in illustrating the intensity of that alienation, so smitten by the paradox of a realist graphic novel that the reading falls into the trap of affective fallacy, suggesting that the reader’s *experience* of Ben’s alienation should not be divorced from the propositional content that comes out of the *representation* of that alienation, in passages such as this one: “Though readers hear nothing from Ben in this page, readers quickly learn how out of place and isolated Ben might be feeling among other Asians as the author-artist strategically locates him either at the far back or very margin of the panel space, making him look like the Other. In other words, the visual representation of Ben, his direct facial expression, and the sense of isolation spatialized through the specific location of the character functions as the means of communication with the readers and engages them with Ben’s emotional state (alienated and frustrated) in the absence of written words. Because reader-viewers cognitively process the visual as a gestalt rapidly and arguably more readily than the written narrative, the engagement between readers and Ben becomes more direct and intimate” (104). The gap between “written narrative” and “the visual” is outside the bounds of this discussion, but most literary critics (since Wimsatt and Beardsley) can delineate a “sense of isolation spatialized” in the ‘traditional’ novel, too. Not to mention that the confusion of the affective power of the text lying in the object (within the world of the text) and not in the author’s purported intended effect on the reader’s affective-receptive experience would make most affect theorists cringe. Which is to say, a formal argument regarding Ben’s yellow melancholia/love will not be explored here not because the form of the graphic novel isn’t interesting in itself, but because there is no clear reason to differentiate between the forms (and more specifically, our practices of reading these forms) in a discussion of the text’s propositional content.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Tomine, *Shortcomings* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2007), 103.

what appears as grief, sadness, depression, or otherwise “ugly” feelings? Such a question opens up a litany of anxious interrogation: If social identity is posited in a positive direction, against the threat of nihilism that threatens to shatter the racially abject ego, then why does the formation of that identity (again, if one deliberate aim of such identity is to buttress and shore up that ego) produce feelings that can be described as melancholic? It is one thing for Tomine to explore “the limitations of socially inscribed identities,” yet is the suggestion, then, that the negative affective remainder that appears as melancholia proves that the posited social identity is, in fact, *negative*? Is it ultimately the case that the posited social identity that comes out of racial abjection one which is negative, one whose social inscription ineluctably aligns with then delimits abjection beyond the psychic or subjective sphere into the socius? Is this what we mean when we say that race is “pathological,” that the social inscription of yellowness and blackness is, in the end, tantamount to the shattered-ness of the ego?

This is the line of pessimistic questioning inaugurated by yellow melancholia discourse. In the psychic wounding that this discourse gets us to see in *Shortcomings*, Tomine seems to suggest through Ben and his negative affects, suggesting a full permeation of melancholia both caused by and resulting in Ben’s failed relationship with Miko, the insecurity of a racial-sexual identity, and the failure of Asian American community bonds, particularly in the age of both material fissure and identitarian discourse. In one reading of this novel, all these negatives are implicated together in a diagnostic framework regarding contemporary yellowness that unavoidably reads as melancholia proper.

Yet where one might expect the most intensely melancholic scenes of Tomine’s novel, one surprisingly finds a jumble of mourning and melancholia, suggesting the non-differentiation between them noted earlier by way of Cheng and Eng and Han. As Park notes, *Shortcomings* gathers much of its emotional power through frames without text nor other characters, through which “the engagement between readers and Ben becomes more direct and intimate.”<sup>6</sup> It is in this intimacy in which Tomine sounds an affective register that cannot be reduced only to melancholia. In one scene of Ben’s isolation, Ben drops Miko off at the Oakland airport (Miko is to begin a summer internship in New York), and the intensity of the loss, grief, and ambivalence (as their relationship has already been on the skids) marked by the impending physical separation is illustrated by repeated frames—an overhead shot of the parking lot—devoid of either character (see *fig. 1*).

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<sup>6</sup> Park, “Lost in the Gutters,” 104.



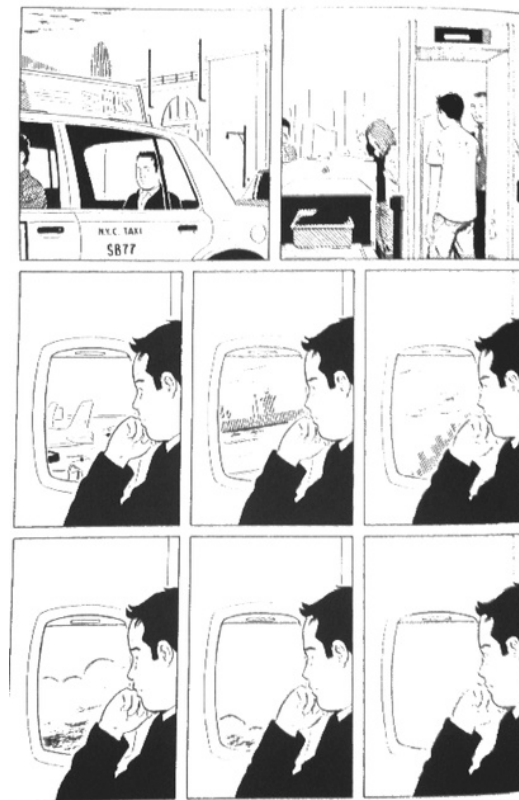
(fig 1. Tomine 36-37)

The parking lot frames are repeated in order to spatialize the emptiness Ben feels later in this scene, negative space occupied by the negative affect indexed in the frames that follow: his sullen face as he reenters the car; the reminder of his lost love in Miko's forgotten coffee cup; his forlorn face as he sips the coffee, as if he might retroactively possess its owner via consumption; his side profile, face visibly aggrieved, as he considers the coffee in his hands; and the exterior shot of his expunging the coffee with a "SPLASH." There is no doubt about the melancholic mood here, commencing from the loss denoted by the emptiness in the repeated parking lot frames and then the return of an aggrieved Ben, who is cruelly reminded of the loss of Miko by the coffee cup and whose act of throwing it out can be read as an attempt to begin mourning. It is in the significance of the coffee cup where one locates the anti-melancholia of this scene; yet rather than mourning instead of melancholia, the cup instead suggests the difficulty of distinguishing the felt experience of the two. For in the larger frame of Tomine's novel, this scene does not illustrate Ben's 'getting over' Miko; actually, it only inaugurates the sense of living death that he lives through the sadness, resentment, disappointment, and confusion that follow and which the novel does not resolve. Ben is not a successful mourner, but the cup suggests that he recognizes the mechanism of mourning, as he expunges the material trace of Miko. To confirm this reading formally is Tomine's final frame in this set, at last zooming the reader out of Ben's "direct and intimate" depressed visage with an exteriority-bound "splash."

If Cheng is on to something in suggesting that for the raced melancholic (not to mention Freud himself), "[t]he good mourner turns out to be none other than an ultra-sophisticated, and more lethal, melancholic," then Ben here is, by this logic, a 'bad'

mourner—that is, a thoroughly ‘benign’ melancholic.<sup>7</sup> Yet what might it mean to be benignly melancholic? Though melancholic mood and its attendant affects (sadness, resentment, and confusion over the event of Miko’s departure) are no doubt present, there lingers in these frames—*through* and not despite that mood—a positive content signified by the cup and limned by the non-differentiation of melancholia and mourning, which, as argue in chapter three, after all, came *through* the melancholic critics. As argued there, the positivity content of melancholia that comes out of Cheng’s sense of the “double bind” of mourning—that mourning is, in fact, an iteration of melancholia—suggests that there is no such thing as a “good” mourner in the first place. By corollary logic, there is no such thing as a “bad” melancholic either, but rather a “just-is” melancholic, embodied by Ben in this scene. Admittedly, this just-is-ness of Ben’s presence—what we see as the non-differentiation between mourner and melancholic—might ineluctably generate a negative mood, yet its sheer presence also gives lie to the full abjection—a legibly complete raced social death—that racial melancholia wishes to assert.

Such again is the case with Tomine’s ending, which is (only) the second scene of Ben’s isolated melancholy. Having sought out Miko in New York, discovering her dating someone else, and failing to win her back, Ben is seated on an airplane headed back to California (see *fig. 2*).



(Fig. 2, Tomine 108)

Again featuring Ben in side profile and again deploying a repeated image, in the novel’s final six frames, the only variable is what is visible from Ben’s window, depicting the ascent of the stages of commercial flight. There is no more powerful evidence of the just-

<sup>7</sup> Anne A. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 105.

is melancholic than Ben's final, expressionless visage, repeated for emphasis over six frames. Any affect of melancholia here is more about mood, established by these frames, than it is about propositional content, which is to say Ben is, once again, neither "good" mourner nor "bad" melancholic, sitting contemplatively between the two positions. This set of frames works to open up the mood of melancholia toward a literally elevated antinomian open, framing Ben's affective capacity toward that which appears as lack—for the sixth and final window is blank—but which is, at the same time, a positivity-laden aesthetic of the capacious and unresolved. There is formal support for this anti-melancholia reading as well: as the final frame of the entire novel, it can be seen as structurally impossible for Ben to be a pure, "bad" melancholic, looking out into the void of a tragically shattered subjectivity, because to do so would mean his story would, structurally speaking have to continue onward, adding frames beyond the unspeakable, unrepresentable open that abruptly punctuates the end of Ben's narrative.

There is a way, too, in which the open that finalizes *Shortcomings* is instrumental politically, as it deploys yellow melancholia as a mechanism to interrogate racial identity. Ben's "just-is" melancholic can be in this register aligned with the raced subject who counterintuitively desires the negation of social identity, not unlike Audre's and LeRoi's queerings of blackness. One way to connect Ben's special cast of melancholia to *Shortcomings*' exploration of Asian American identity is to consider the extant criticism on the matter: as noted earlier, Oh's reading of *Shortcomings* emphasizes the overlap of Ben and Tomine himself on the matter of yellowness as an internalized social category. On the register of lack-bound identity-talk, she presumes a doubling of Ben and Adrian Tomine himself, that "like his incessantly gloomy character Ben Tanaka, Tomine seems to be pessimistic about the possibility of escaping the limitations of socially inscribed identities."<sup>8</sup> Yet immediately thereafter, in grappling with the book's finale, Oh suggests a reading of the final scene along the lines of an antinomian open:

The storyline ends with Ben on a plane for Berkeley, with no clear indication of what is to become of him. In the same manner, Tomine offers us no closure about the seemingly endless identity issues that he brings up throughout. Through obscured plot developments and "unfinished" endings, Tomine "breaks" open the repeating chain of hegemonic narratives. But rather than substituting one link for another, Tomine takes the story of racial identity and unfastens it from the innumerable narratives that preceded it.<sup>9</sup>

This reading of positive-bound unfastening—a paradoxically generative lack of closure—would suggest, against her own assertion of Tomine as "pessimistic," that Tomine's optimism in breaking open "the story of racial identity" comes by way of (and not despite) the 'depression and anger management' and 'relentless negativity' on Ben's part. Ben's "story of racial identity" encompasses, then, both melancholic and optimistic content. Yet in Tomine's breaking "the repeating chain of hegemonic narratives," Oh's implication is clear: a slight but final preference for optimism over pessimism and melancholic mood over content. In turn, Oh's precise but terse reading of the final scene might be considered under this optimistic aegis: "On the plane departing from one

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<sup>8</sup> Oh, "Sight Unseen," 146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 147. By contrast, Park is more cautious about the affirmative tone of this ending, suggesting Tomine ultimately asks "reader-viewers to experience an unresolved Asian American identity" (103).



location but not yet at his point of arrival, Ben is also frozen at the space in-between.”<sup>10</sup> This condition of being “frozen,” then, is a positive one for yellowness, a raced “space in-between” that suggests a liminal or border-based subject position.

In other words, the impossibility of Cheng’s “good” mourner is great news not only on the psychic-wounding front (for it becomes clear that Ben, even in this scene of putative melancholic isolation, is never reducible to the wound); it is also great news for the Asian American identity borne out of that wound, as it reverses the logic of affective remainder. In the calculus of yellowness and melancholia in contemporary thought, the tendency has been to conceive of melancholia, the putative signature symptom of the raced subject, as the remainder of racialization as it appears in the affective register. Paradoxically, this *remainder* has been the proof of the *completeness* of racial abjection: race’s full and utter internalization, race’s ineluctable pathology. As noted in chapter three, this remainder appears as the affects and emotions of grief, sadness, depression, and other debilitating negative feelings associated with the ambit-term of melancholia. To this, Tomine’s just-is melancholic gives us another idiom. By conceiving of melancholia as an *a priori* mood that provides a backdrop for yellow subjectivity and thus gives lie to the suffering-sweepstakes-thinking of a “good”/“bad” mourner, the negativity content of racialization—its internalization—is countered always already positively, and the affective remainder is, in essence, an ontology of the Spinozan substrate from Hardt and Negri: the always already “just is.” Thought of this way, melancholia comes into view as a parallel hermeneutic to abjection.

Once the question of negative affect—the question of the legibility of racial abjection—is reversed, the corollary query might be, “What is the proof of this positivity substrate? Is there a legible affect of melancholia’s reversal?” After all, *Shortcomings* documents the failed love relationship between Ben and Miko. The answer is under our noses, commencing from the formal exceptionality of the scenes analyzed above: there is the simple fact that throughout the novel, with the exception of these two scenes, Ben is never quite alone. The scenes of Ben’s isolation only have their “direct and intimate” power in part because they are so rare, because their engagement functions only in relation to other scenes, which all depict Ben’s already-there sociality. The scenes of isolation that Park emphasizes in *Shortcomings* are so engaging because of the near-ubiquity of Ben’s interlocutors everywhere else; Ben’s solo presence is felt in Tomine’s work only in stark and rare contrast to the presence of a crowded, Ben-centered, narcissistic sociality. And it is this presence that illuminates Ben’s own narcissism of the Other.

## ii. Ben’s generous narcissism

Ben’s strenuous anti-sociality, in good queer-theory fashion, reveals the sociality structured by a Lordean narcissism of the Other. Ben is accused by Miko for having, pathetically, “what? One friend?” and he himself characterizes his younger self as “a nerd with a bad personality and social skills.”<sup>11</sup> Such indices of Ben’s putatively anti-social life and misanthropic personhood are not simply belied by the fact that he is always surrounded and that he is always talking; rather, these indices point to the entrenched

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>11</sup> Tomine, *Shortcomings*, 103, 16.

narcissism structuring Ben’s love bonds. For example, in the scene immediately following the airport parking lot, Ben speaks on the phone with Alice in terms far from the selflessness expected from the beloved (see *fig. 3*).



(*Fig. 3, Tomine 38*)

Ben’s very first social recourse in the wake of Miko’s departure (and having jettisoned the coffee cup on the previous page) is to foreground both his sense of loss *and* his desire to be recognized as loss: “Of *course* I’m gonna miss her. That’s not even a... yeah... the question is whether or not she’ll miss *me*.” In echo of Audre and Muriel in chapter one, this is a love that in its distance reveals its selfish structure. Yet unlike Audre’s relationship described in *Zami*, in which a love professed in distance as declaratively selfless reveals it as not an enduring love at all, here Tomine presents the inverse: Ben’s

selfishness reveals the intensity of love bonds felt that *cannot*, even in distance, be professed. Which is to say, Ben's ego is already shattered, and there is no recourse to shoring it up via declaration. Ben's selfishness here is a particularly revealing instance of his "relentless negativity," for it reveals an ego not in a position simply to be narcissistically shored up.<sup>12</sup> Since it has been established that Ben's is a subjecthood that "just is," which is to say it is not an ego somehow pathologically and melancholically devoid of itself, there is something else at work in the ontology of his shatteredness.

To describe this other ontology is to invoke the non-differentiation of ontogenesis and sociogenesis from chapter two. Here this non-distinction can be used to reconsider the ego, beginning again from Judith Butler, yet this time from her formulation of a social ontology of the ego, which non-differentiates between psychoanalysis's emphasis on "primary" love bonds and the bonds of social (racial-sexual) abjection. Butler argues that "the ego is not an entity or a substance, but an array of relations and processes, implicated in the world of primary caregivers in ways that constitute its very definition."<sup>13</sup> This claim of a process-constituted ego does not dispense with particularly negative (say, racially abject) socially inscribed conditions; rather, these are the very processes that embed "the world of primary caregivers." Butler, that is, highlights these "relations and processes" to argue toward a notion of the ego as already mega-socialized, which is to say the particular social "environment" already *are* the "primary impressions" constituting the ego: "Although there is always a specificity to that environment, one can make the general claim that primary impressions are not just *received* by an ego, but are formative of it. The ego does not come into being without a prior encounter, a primary relation, a set of inaugural impressions from elsewhere."<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, racial abjection is one such "inaugural impression," and an ego too shattered to desire either more shattering or shoring up, then, can be countered only from the positive substrate of the primary impression that formed it, which under the precise definition of abjection means, non-differentially, *both* shattering and shoring. Extending the narcissism logic of Lorde, in which Audre infinitesimally prefers ego-shattering to shoring but necessarily demands both, Tomine's negativity affords both as well. Thought of this way, Ben's ego, rather than an internally stable "entity," comes into view as an always already social matrix of raced surplus pleasure. Like Audre's and (perhaps less definitively so) LeRoi's, Ben's subjectivity simultaneously requires more shoring up *and* more shatteredness. His affected negativity—his anti-sociality—is the signature of his "just-is" ego-position that holds open the need for both.

In the social ontology of Ben's selfhood, it is thus great news that his negativity appears as it does, for it is this always already shattered ego which enables mega-social desiring and grasping for the other, which we see in the end of this scene. Ben reaches out to Alice: "Well, listen... are you doing anything right now?"<sup>15</sup> As Alice declines, his next social recourse is to call Autumn, his new employee which encounter becomes Ben's first white lover (40). Thus, housed in Ben's melancholy, in which the abeyance of

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<sup>12</sup> Another way to put the matter is to say that there is no mystical, originary trauma for Ben, and his "relentless negativity," which is already social, is proof. Just as Ben is not a bad melancholic, his ego is not *traumatically* shattered, though the idiom of shatteredness still applies to it.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 59.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Tomine, *Shortcomings*, 39.

abject loneliness is tantamount to the promise of the receipt of surplus, is the brimming possibility of newly improvised social encounter. Elsewhere in *Giving an Account*, Butler argues that there is always the possibility of dehiscence in the “normative horizon” of encounter:

The normative horizon within which I see the other, or, indeed, within which the other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical opening.

It will not do, then, to collapse the notion of the other into the sociality of norms and claim that the other is implicitly present in the norms by which recognition is conferred.<sup>16</sup>

One way to think of Ben’s negativity is through yellow abjection, which takes for granted the preclusion of yellow subjectivity from “the norms by which recognition is conferred.” Following Butler, abjection takes for granted as well that yellowness is itself “a critical opening,” and there is, then, always already something in Ben’s relationality approximating “recognition.” This specific space of “critical opening” can be framed through the familiar problematic of Asian American identity. As this is a thematic rubric Tomine and his critics have embraced, a brief return to the register of social identity from the depths of subjectivity-talk provides common occasion to arrive at this opening: the register of object-relations with which, sounded and in tune, I want to end this chapter.

### iii. Asian American identity: the yellow subject approaching objecthood

In *Shortcomings*, it becomes clear that rather than opposition, there is ultimately a characterological doubling of Ben in Miko in that they both intensely feel the need for a social identity from their common racial abjection. While Miko’s politicized Asian American consciousness and Ben’s disgust with such identity politics function as the structuring opposition of their friction and, ultimately, of their failed relationship, in their grasping for their respective positions, it is revealed that one is simply the constitutive negative of the other. Consider, then, Park’s observation that “Ben’s refusal of Asian-American categorization and its political use is also a refusal of his ethnic identity and what communal experience Asians in American society share.”<sup>17</sup> While the movement of “refusal” on Ben’s part indeed has deep consequence in his relationship with Miko and thus also for a relation to Asian American “communal experience,” it is crucial to note the category error of this reading. Park’s interpretation of subjective refusal mistakes a refusal of raced social inscription (as if that were structurally possible) with the refusal of the predominant modes of grappling with that social inscription. After all, Ben is not claiming that he isn’t Asian American, but rather that he isn’t in accordance with the prevailing declarations of that social identity: “I mean, why does everything have to be some big ‘statement’ about race?”<sup>18</sup> As yellowness is the unrefusable condition of possibility for his racial identity, Ben’s frustration with race-prattle cannot be read as a refusal of yellowness as such but as the refusal of the declaration of given identities (those based on “big statements”), whose requirement of declaration perhaps testifies to

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Park, “Lost in the Gutter,” 104.

<sup>18</sup> Tomine, *Shortcomings*, 13.

their smallness and to which Ben demands larger possibilities for the identities enabled by yellowness.

This critical conflation reveals the extent to which the psychoanalytic view of the raced subject's relation to their social inscription is so commonly thought of in terms that primarily (re)pathologize the subject (i.e., making the issue about Ben's self-hatred) in favor of an insistence on the opening of the fluid possibilities of identity that might emerge from such refusal. Yet perhaps the simpler point here is that such refusal also reveals Ben's adamant desire for an identity on the same register as Miko's. If Miko seeks political consciousness as a durable and certain identity based on her raced social inscription, then Ben has fashioned just as certain an identity based on the negation of the epitome of that political consciousness. If Miko's empowered Asian American identity is not a form of false consciousness, nor is Ben's rebuttal of that identity. These positions can thus be read non-differentially, bound by the fact of the togetherness of their mutual constitution, which is to say the love bonds that tether these subjects on the basis of these seemingly opposite identities. As they do for Baraka in chapter two, both Ben's and Miko's identities are always already structured by surplus. It has been established that Ben's negativity is an affective remainder of a sociality that is, despite melancholia's propositional content, a positive one. This sociality, rather than the affective remainder, is what Ben and Miko share, bound by their relation to one another. Their there-ness—the posited love bonds that have brought them together—again gives lie to the anti-sociality and melancholic content associated with yellowness, whose logic appears as the following: “If you are yellow, you are negatively constituted,” and, reflexively, “if you are negatively constituted, you are yellow”; whose corollary is, “if you are yellow, you are not together; you are structurally precluded because you are constituted by a negative.” And yet these lovers, failed as they are, are over and over again around each other and talking to each other about their togetherness. Thus, in the ultimate recourse to identity, Ben and Miko are each bound by a raced love that surges up past ego-talk to make itself legible even on the register of agential identity. In turn, this is where the discourse of agential identity is challenged altogether, as both Ben and Miko, whose love-bound beings soon enter together into object-relations. For if their subject-positions are love-constituted, in echo of the positivity substrate of Hardt and Negri, then it does not suffice to call these subject-positions at all; rather, in their togetherness, they are instead imbued with objecthood.

This counterontology of objects serves as the denouement of the novel, the final confirmation of the failed love of Ben and Miko (and Ben's belated realization of it), as well as the last time they see each other. But prior to that scene is an instance of Miko's own objectification, which may be useful to read in relation to the togetherness of the scene that follows. With no immediate contextualization and as the opening to chapter three, six text-less frames appear of Miko's visage in various poses, only to discover on the next page that these are posed photographs advertising a clothing boutique owned by Miko's new lover (see *fig. 4*).



(Fig. 4, Tomine 77)

This matrix of images suggests an intimacy starkly opposed to Ben’s just-is melancholia of his own six frames that end the novel. Each frame here corresponds to an advertisement photograph, after all, thus only imbricated with the frame-by-frame structure of the narrative and excused from the frame’s conventional function of building the novel’s mimetic structure. Adding to this page’s outsider status is its confusion as a narrative strategy to begin the chapter; presumably, the reader does not yet understand these are photographs until the page turn.

And yet for these obvious differences, the there-ness of Miko’s alone and unsmiling visages suggests the same strain of brimming possibility as Ben’s alone and unsmiling final frames. Though the six frames present Miko in various poses, camera angles, and clothing, the affect legible on her face—her eyes demure and mouth slightly agape—stays consistent. This consistency presages Ben’s unchanging affect in his own ‘antisocial’ set of frames, suggesting, again, a doubling or non-differentiation of Ben and Miko on the register of affect, namely a “just-is” melancholia. To confirm this doubling is the very first frame of this page, in which Miko is featured in side profile facing the left border of the frame, eyes invisible and face visibly expressionless, in rhyme with the final visage of Ben (see *fig. 5*).



(Fig. 5)

What this doubling reveals is that even in the blatant objectness of Miko's raced-sexed body (advertisements featuring said body, exemplifying the market-driven reification most commonly associated with human objectness), what comes through that reification is the good-news melancholic structure in and of Miko's putative subjecthood. Rather than the predictable assertion that human affect is shaped by but survives this reification, it is in the reversal of this assertion that a positive politics of affect can be located: that in such objectness, the thingifying that race already is, a positive affect makes itself legible to declare the 'good news' of racial abjection.

#### iv. The recognition and ecstasy of yellow objects

In the end, the magic of objects, the magic of the surplus, is a rough thing that cannot simply be adjured.<sup>19</sup>

- Fred Moten

It is with this positive valence of objecthood that we finally come to the scene of Ben and Miko together as objects, which might be described as Tomine's contemporary yellowing of what Frantz Fanon famously describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* as finding oneself "an object among other objects."<sup>20</sup> Having arrived in New York, where Miko has settled into her new life apart from Ben, to witness the advertisement photographs (a tip from the separately relocated Alice brings him there, setting up chapter three entirely in New York), Ben tracks down Miko to find her on the arm of Leon, the white owner of the boutique that produced the photographs. When Ben sees them together for the first time, his shock extends beyond heartbreak to include a claim about social identity; Ben claims to Alice, "I can't believe she'd fall for a fucking rice king."<sup>21</sup> Ben describes Leon as assuming a social identity not only objectionable to him but, presumably, even more so to the politicized Asian American consciousness of Miko. Ben

<sup>19</sup> Fred Moten, "Magic of Objects," *Callaloo* 26:1 (Winter 2003): 110.

<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 89.

<sup>21</sup> Tomine, *Shortcomings*, 91.

is betrayed here by an identity politics of racial authenticity explored throughout the novel and embodied in Miko, by which he and Miko would be united against the yellow fetishist, the “rice king,” the Orientalist’s gaze that has turned Miko into an object. The cruel irony is that this is the same rubric that Ben has taken pains to disapprove of from the beginning of the novel and which disagreement over has had no small part in driving Miko away. Upon confronting the pair thereafter, Leon responds to Ben’s hostility by speaking to Miko in Japanese and rejoining Ben with martial arts poses, prompting Ben to tease him as a “Steven Seagal dipshit.”<sup>22</sup> Leon’s physicality in this scene can be read as a desperate assertion of agential subjectivity and the (white) anxiety over subjecthood, against which Miko effortlessly asserts her own: “Just go to work, okay? Let me handle this” (see *fig. 6*).<sup>23</sup>



(*Fig. 6, Tomine 97*)

This orientalist “dipshit” subject, who over and over asserts himself in this scene, provides the subsequent backdrop to Ben and Miko’s mutual objectification. As the two enter Leon’s apartment to talk, Ben’s response to the setting is, “I can see he really likes his Oriental accessories.” One turns the page to see the next spread richly textured by the interior of an apartment decorated by “Oriental” objects, including a ceramic teapot, a paper-shade lamp, bonsai trees, an anime figurine, a celadon vase, and a Chinese calligraphy scroll (see *fig. 7*).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.





(Fig. 7, Tomine 98-99)

In this explicitly Orientalist context, Ben and Miko can be read as having become part of the Oriental collection. Their conversation in this scene reveals a now-familiar pattern of intersubjective failure, arguably even reaching new heights, as their exchange is diffuse with accusations, lies, anger, defensive irony, regret, and shame. As subjects (of love), Ben and Miko have no doubt failed, their relationship in full ruin. And yet here they are, again, profoundly together, tethered in a counterontology of (yellow love's) objecthood made explicit by a world of "Oriental accessories" and then populating it as such. As objects, Ben and Miko are legible as not only being together, but as being-together together. This ontic *being-together* has not only, at last, dispensed with subjectivity and agential identity, submitting to a world of yellow objects; it is rendered possible by having negated subjecthood.

It is important that this reading also enables an account of who here remains as the subject. Leon, who owns these "oriental accessories" and the space itself, can be read beyond the identity politics that would trash his subjecthood in favor of Ben's (and Miko's)—the familiar power-paranoid hermeneutics that redoubles power and threat. If the objects fetishized by the Orientalizing subject are, in fact, objects constituted by love and being-together, then the subject too can be said to challenge traditional conceptions of its mapping in the social world, which is here to say that it is *through* Leon's appearance as a repulsive "rice king" or "Steven Seagal dipshit" that Leon exceeds these diagnoses as well. The fetish character of the Oriental objects challenges traditional conceptions of whiteness (in addition to yellowness), for it is Leon who enables that object-world through his fetishizing-yet-never-owning conception of yellowness. Despite the ugly imperial impulse therein, Leon's fetishism is no threat to yellowness, for he never gets to occupy it objectively. Ben's already-there identification with yellowness,

sublimated into an object-ontology relationship, renders Leon's fetishist white subjecthood non-threatening to yellowness, as it is revealed, recalling chapter three, that it occupies the weaker position. At the same time, as Ben's own yellowness is brought into sharper relief in his objecthood, among other "Oriental accessories," especially in contrast to his intersubjective relation to Leon, his insults of "rice king" and "Steven Seagal dipshit" appear less vitriolic in its upholding of (raced) opposition, for only a subject clinging on to subjecthood would require such vitriol. Rather than opposition, there might be yet another social non-differentiation between Ben and Leon. Leon, in his relation to yellowness, might be said to be a cognate strain of the "just-is" melancholic.

Finally, the connection between this discourse of yellow objects and Ben's subjective resistance to identify positively with yellowness is more immediate than it might appear. It is precisely in Ben's refusal of a given sublimation of yellow social inscription in which we can also trace Ben as positively identifying all along, not only because his yellowness is constitutive, but because his yellowness is actively *being constituted* every time he disavows it (not unlike Cheng's reading of divestiture in Gallimard). This constituting movement works because it refuses individuated subjectivity, preferring objecthood, which is to prefer the company of commonality—to be objects with each other. This is, then, another idiom for the gerundive *being* Hardt and Negri describe in their conception of the commons. Ben's refusal of a prescribed social identity, then, can be read as the condition of possibility for a preference toward yellow objecthood that not only gestures toward and already always *is* the commons.

One remembers from chapter three's reversal of yellow melancholia as, even by way of its propositional content, revealing a position of strength for yellowness vis-à-vis whiteness in its capacity to love. That capacity, which gives lie to the purportedly aggrieved and unloved yellow subject, can also be said to demonstrate itself through the love-constituted *object*. If racial abjection yields a suspicion of subjecthood as a desirable category, then the narcissistic love that comes into view from the subject-in-process completes its logic in the ontology of the raced object, which is to say, the yellow subject having become object. On this view, the being of love appears as the para-ontological site (Fred Moten's splendid term) in and of yellowness, where it is precisely in the dislocation of queerness/yellowness/objecthood from the hegemonic ontology of ego/identity/subjecthood in which one finds an idiom of love. One remembers, too, Pamela Lu's epigraph to the previous chapter: "Love was stalking us." This formulation's reversal of love's subjective agency is another way to get at Ben's (yellow) strength. Love is the subject doing the stalking, affixing value to an object that can take it on. Yellowness here signifies the strength of taking on the position of the stalked: the objected object position of the beloved.

It is also the case that such an idiom can be characterized via poststructuralist and psychoanalytic approaches to the subject. From the non-distinction between "primary" and social-matrix love bonds sketched above, Butler continues in *Giving an Account of Oneself* by describing a subjective "opacity" that paradoxically makes love come into view:

That we are compelled in love means that we are, in part, unknowing about why we love as we do and why we invariably exercise bad judgment. Very often what we call 'love' involves being compelled by our own opacity, our own places of unknowingness, and, indeed, our own

injury (which is why, for instance, Melanie Klein will insist that fantasies of reparation structure love).<sup>24</sup>

There is in this formulation the same logic of an object-relations account, as the subject becomes the receiver, “compelled” by the truly subjective power of “opacity,” “unknowingness,” and “injury.” We become the object of an agential force that evinces itself in “bad judgment,” our loss of subjective control. Rather than the affective power of the subject, “love” is the name for the relationship between that fully-other opacity and what we know of ourselves so far, the shortcomings of a self-knowledge that enables love in the first place. Thought of this way, Ben’s ‘invariably bad judgment’ shot through Tomine’s novel is the evidence of love rather than its loss.

## v. The queerness of objecthood

What, if anything, is queer about being an object? The question seems almost insipid, for the discussion of objects in contemporary critical discourse—in the queering of psychoanalysis that affect theory always is and in the externalization of affect known as “object-oriented ontology,” not to mention in the anoriginal standby of performance studies—has always suggested the object as queer. In the context of racial abjection, which always comports itself queerly, the ‘good news’ of objects can be seen as both a completion of racial abjection’s queer logic and a potential sanitization of its queer content. For on the one hand, having redeemed Fanon’s formulation of being “an object among other objects” as a positive-sociality/love-being construction is to have kept the object outside, to keep the queer position of yellowness ‘fully’ queer, not unlike the impulse of so-called antisocial queer theory (with the Lordean caveat from chapter one that mega-social bonds are enabled henceforth). On the other hand, this positive-sociality redemption threatens to wash out the queer content of abjection, the frothy lived-experience desires that both animate abjection’s hermeneutic power but keep it from being only that power, which is to say of *wanting* power’s negation—the bottoming and shattering that begins from the precise location of queer *subjecthood*.

This dilemma can be addressed by what I wish to sketch as the queer non-differentiation of subject and object, specifically in *Shortcomings*. It is the wisdom of the object—that is, a slight heuristic preference to and overemphasis on objecthood over subjecthood—that recursively reveals this non-differentiation within and as queerness. But the point in calling such thinking “object-oriented” is that it already shows that the queer subject was in a structural sense oxymoronic, that clinging on to subjecthood as a container for queerness is purely out of strategic function for ego-shoring, a survivalist need both deeply against but in accordance to the normative horizon of straightness, thus necessitating holding abeyant the structure of desire for ego-shattering. And in ego-shattering, too, often the idiom we have for it, despite its founding ‘antisocial’ parameters, is still deeply about the subject that emerges on the other side, rather than a subjective desire to negate the parameters of subjecthood altogether. Was not queer thought’s emphasis on ego-shattering always suggesting a *telos* of objectivity rather than subjectivity?<sup>25</sup> Even with Audre Lorde, for whom the narcissism of the other attends to

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<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips suggest as much when they write that subjecthood’s desire for ego-shattering might lead to the utopian “dissolution” of subjectivity altogether: “How would our lives be better

the social in non-differentiated and mega-social ways, the project remains too survivalist to imagine what it would mean to remain in objecthood. To return to Tomine: as I have shown earlier in this chapter, Ben Tanaka's already-shattered racial ego shows that the matter of wanting subjecthood in more security is not simply a matter of desiring it, as the failure and frustration subsequent only confirms its structural preclusion (and which affect appears as melancholia). Yet as this ego is shattered to begin with, the turn to objecthood thereafter in Ben's narrative is not so much a recursion but a confirmation of the already existing; the always already shattered ego might, then, be thought of as the always already racial object.

Then there is the obvious point regarding *Shortcomings*' queer content: Ben's is a thoroughly heterosexual subject, whose structures of loss, fantasy, and fulfillment are transparently male-to-female. Which is to say, there is a gap between any mega-queerness in Ben's yellow objecthood and the queer content of his narrative, which is, again, to distinguish the metaphorical ambit of queerness from queer material lived experience. The aim of the remainder of this chapter is not only to explore that gap but, by way of this non-differentiation of subject-object, to make the case that that gap is itself a symptom of heteropatriarchal thought. Straight guys as they are, it is Tomine and Ben who help show us this.

The work of Sara Ahmed provides a useful illustration of how this dilemma gets thematized by way of object-talk. In her magnificent *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed discusses the regime of compulsory heterosexuality as functioning by way of orienting subjects in trajectories with objects. Vis-à-vis the heterosexual who finds "contact" with like objects (thus bringing sexual orientation into relief as an object-orientation), queer subjects orient themselves along a separate trajectory of contacts, i.e., lesbians "become lesbians because of the contact we have with others *as well as objects*."<sup>26</sup> A specific set of objects exists apart, which places the disoriented subject along a certain line of orientation that can be henceforth called "lesbian," yet which categorization of objecthood remains distinct from "the contact we have with others." Another example of Ahmed's differentiation between "others" and "objects" is, revealingly, in her discussion of "the body": "Neither the object nor the body have integrity in the sense of being 'the same thing' with and without others. Bodies *as well as objects* take shape through being orientated toward each other."<sup>27</sup> Ahmed's idiom renders objecthood in the same ambit of the differentiated other—lesbians and embodiment, respectively—yet insists on splitting the difference between objecthood from each, as if hedging against the perceived danger of taking on objectivity as a positive site. But is it not the case that the trajectory on which the lesbian encounters another body is itself evidence that the lesbian is herself an object? Why is the lesbian presumed to be a trajected subject to begin with? If our aim is to explain queer orientation, why would we want to deploy the metaphor of a subject's

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if human relations were something other than the collusion of ego-identities, if the shared project was not the consolidation of selfhood, but its dissolution?" (Bersani and Phillips 117). What I wish to keep track of here is perhaps what gets lost in their emphasis on the antisocial thesis in general and the death drive in particular: that queer life, in its extant forms, might already be "better" in terms of a desirable sociality precisely for its identifiable representation outside the normative "collusion of ego-identities." See Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006), 94. Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Emphasis added.

teleological trajectory, which, in this formulation, is the very same trajectory of heteropatriarchal imposition, of compulsory non-queer orientation?

As the discussion shifts to racialization, Ahmed again insists on subjecthood as the strategy of oppositional orientation (even in her pervasive language of objecthood), thereby redoubling the very orientation that structures oppression. In Ahmed's diagnostic, whiteness serves as a straightening mechanism for "oriental" and other racially abject bodies: "In putting certain things in reach, a world acquires its shape; the white world is a world 'oriented' around whiteness."<sup>28</sup> As compulsory heterosexuality threatens the lesbian in a hegemonic orientation schema, whiteness serves as such for the raced body. Worse yet, this is where the discussion takes on the language of pathology and internalization: "Racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body, which is not a loving return but rather follows the line of the hostile white gaze. The disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities for action."<sup>29</sup> But what kind of action are we talking about? Why would we want to "act" in and against a world prescribed by the regime that already 'disorients' and 'diminishes' us along the inescapable orientation line of whiteness? As the insistence on the subject-object distinction is redoubled, so is the notion of queerness' and blackness' self-definitions based on the by-definition preclusive orientations of straightness and whiteness.

Speaking of objects in this way, devoid of the good-news opposition of objecthood (while portending to bring objectness into view), no doubt illuminates regimes of oppression. But it fails to limn the ways in which these structures can be and has already been negated by the there-ness of queerness, which is to say the there-ness of the object-ness of queer people. This disagreement with Ahmed is in echo of the question that follows the interrogation of yellow melancholia in chapter three: "Why do we insist we come from nothing?" Which here might be rescribed as, Why do we insist to be defined by the regimes that structure our oppression? What do we do with the jubilant survival and flourishing of queer life and black life? Does such jubilation not give lie to these suppositions? To this call to disavow discourses defined by limitation, the voice of the materialist (hopefully an ally like Ahmed), who resists this object-oriented good news, will accuse such disavowal of irresponsibly neglecting the differentials in the suffering of queer people (in the same way such objection regarding Asian American life comes up in chapter three), as if we are not allowed to ask for more than a circumscribed view (queerness-qua-subjecthood) of queer experience.

Yet the metaphorical comes out of the lived and experienced, and not the other way around. Which is to say, the Ahmedian voice (with apologies to Ahmed for using her thought as a synecdoche here), however unwittingly, posits race as a transcendent signifier to all material. In echo of chapter three's notion of a positive substrate in the material, the way to avow queer life (and suffering) would be, in fact, to reverse this formulation, to correctly conceive of the spirit as always already mediated by material. Thus, the metaphorical ambit of queerness (which appears as a positive) and queer material being (which appears as a negative) can be thought of in reverse order from how materialist thought has it. Queerness (blackness, yellowness) as a metaphorical mode does not deny the sufferings of the people who built that metaphor. Rather, the metaphor is recognizable as queer precisely because it is an expression of an already successful

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 111.

identification and sociality unquestionably rooted in that suffering. Thus, it is precisely in the privileged relationship to that metaphor that queer (black, yellow) people have that the metaphor is always one of celebration; needlessly to say, this celebration includes the privileged folks, always already there, who anoriginally animate the metaphor. Thus, the point that queerness as a metaphorical ambit could be even more beautiful and utopian, *more* mega-social, is a logic that commences from the Leibnizian paradox: the recognition of the always already there, Ben's just-is, the object being there in spite of—and thanks to—the lack of an imposition of subjecthood.<sup>30</sup> We know queerness can be conceived of as far beyond the violent regimes that oppress it precisely because of the presence and doings of present identities.

It has already been shown how Tomine understands the shortcomings of subjecthood and, ultimately, responds with the magic of yellow objects. Such a response, however, does not mean the presence of queer life is neglected either. In fact, the link between queer subjects and objects is demonstrated in *Shortcomings* by way of lesbian bonds, which are pronounced in the novel even amidst the heterosexual love relationship that forms the main narrative. For instance, the final scene of social bonding and immediately preceding Ben's isolation by the airplane window, presents Meredith declaring long-term commitment to Ben's closest friend, Alice (see *fig. 8*).

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<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the foremost contemporary thinker on this Leibnizian paradox is José Muñoz, who tethers the “vast life world of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality” to the “utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment” (Muñoz 6, 22-23). Following Muñoz, chapter five further explores notions of black/queer utopia in relation to queer futurity and temporality. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2009).



(fig 8. Tomine 105)

Explicitly non-straight bodies populate—“celebrate”—Tomine’s final scene of social bonding, in which gay love is publicly declared to boot. Lesbian love’s success is staged in and as the social, as the joyous applause, Alice and Meredith’s being-together, and Ben’s inclusion function together to constitute a profoundly successful queer sociality whose starting-point is not “queerness” as metaphor or ambit-term but lesbian lived experience.

There are two additional observations of this scene to augment this reading of positive-lesbian sociality, which together will show Ahmed’s object-talk as closer to mine than first posed. First is that throughout this scene, it is significant that Meredith is the one declaring and talking, most transparently legible as a subject. By contrast, Alice is seated, silent, and interjects only with a small bit of humor rather than assertion (“She’s falling-down drunk!”). Deemphasizing Alice’s subjecthood brings into view her objecthood along the line of queer orientation—as the *telos* to Meredith’s lesbian

trajectory of objects; Alice can thus be read within the objecthood of *Queer Phenomenology*. Then there is the presence of Ben in this scene in the spread's final frame, surrounded by revelers and thus part of the constitution of this positive queer sociality. As the applause continues from the previous frame (of Alice and Meredith's public kiss), it becomes clear that the disparate objecthoods of Alice and Ben are, in fact, closely tethered. As Ben's objectness has come into sharper relief in the immediate context of Alice's queer identity, Alice's queerness can also be said to be Ben's. Present as an already-there lesbian object, Alice embodies the Ahmedian conception that always comes alongside the conception of the yellow object embodied by Ben. The relationship Alice shares with Ben might, then, be thought of as the relationship between these two uses (Ahmed's and mine) of objecthood, allied rather than oppositional in a liberatory calculus of queer-love-bound objects. Thus, Ben's material relationship to lived queerness reveals the immanent-to-transcendent/material-to-spirit logic of queerness as the logic of grace. Queerness (as metaphor, as spirit) must be conceived as a gift, an open secret, present in the world not as the property of queer-identified folk but available to everyone. The privileged access that queer (black, yellow) folk have to queerness (blackness, yellowness) can only be enjoyed gracefully, accessible to nonqueer (nonblack, nonyellow) folk and with absolutely no anxiety or doubt about the anoriginal, abjectionary, love-constituted privilege that enables such grace. The queer ones are the strong ones, and Ben and Alice are, together.



## 5. “Touch my life *and theirs*”: grace, utopia, and somatic wisdom in *Corregidora*

*In memory of Carmen Mitchell*

His body transfused in a light sent from elsewhere seems to show forth in a Participation, and the Lord, just and benevolent, smiles an exquisite smile. But the fisherman does not interrupt his joy in the Presence, spurts out a curved stream of water, reminiscence of love for the enemy shore and the benevolent hut, and says to us, *What has passed through here?*<sup>1</sup>

- José Lezama Lima

### i. Theodor Adorno’s grace

If the logic of the queer object is one of grace, then it can be said that racial abjection, more largely, is graceful too. The abjection that race is makes it open and available to all, not proprietarily to those whose lives map that abjection. The objective strength revealed thereby confirms the logic of the precise and proper relationship of material and spirit, whose confusion has been the source of a tragic and weakened sense of the identities borne out of racial-sexual abjection. If Fred Moten is right to say that blackness is not the property of black people, then the relationship between these two categories can be said to be one of surplus love, in which the para-ontology that is blackness has been constituted by the strivings of subjects whose unspeakable abjectness exceeds its originary horrors. The object-status borne out of these horrors render black folk the receptor of blackness’ own newborn subjective power, and the feedback loop between the two (and the non-differentiation between subject and object therein) reveals black power as black love. The souls of black folk is, in grand Du Boisian fashion, the metaphysical “proof” of blackness; or, as Edouard Glissant’s formulation of black abjection’s designation has it (and which Moten is fond of quoting), the capacity “to consent not to be a single being.” The surplus love of blackness, then, can also be said to be the surplus love of black people, by way of the evidence of things unseen—but always already there—in the glorious presence, lived material strivings, of black people. If love is the metric, a non-differentiation appears even between the anoriginal distinction between black folk and blackness.

As has been demonstrated throughout this project, a foundational limit of love-talk in ethnic studies is that it tends to insist upon an identity discourse defined by lack. Even as the global non-differentiation appears between subject and object, the discursive invocation of love tends to appear, belying that more precise relationship of spirit and material, as within the circumscribed space of immanence. To this, positive affect can offer a rubric beyond the bounds of subjective identity. As Don Pease casually uttered at the Dartmouth Futures of American Studies Institute in 2012 (in response to Rachel Adams’ plenary talk regarding affect and disability), “Affects are unanswerable to the logics of subjects and identities.” The bodies we live through and by our ‘subjects and identities’ are the very sites of going beyond subjecthood and identity-talk toward a

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<sup>1</sup> José Lezama Lima, *Selections*, trans. Ernesto Livon-Grosman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 38.

deontologizing schema of both. The specific positive affect of such deontologizing movement is love. This love, I wish to argue here, is inseparable from grace; love is comported, affected, and received in and as grace. The receipt of grace, that is, like that of the black (queer and yellow) object, suggests a calculus of the receiver and received that takes on a messianic theodicy allegorized by the transcendent gesture of affect—its “unanswerable” status amidst our immanent identitarianisms, which is to say our mistaken preference to the material.

Deploying such an idiom is, however surprisingly, Theodor Adorno, who in *Minima Moralia* speaks of the positive movement commencing from the “agonizing pain” which “lights up one’s own body” in the failure of love:

Someone who has been offended, slighted, has an illumination as vivid as when agonizing pain lights up one’s own body. He becomes aware that in the innermost blindness of love, that must remain oblivious, lives a demand not to be blinded. He was wronged; from this he deduces a claim to right and must at the same time reject it, for what he desires can only be given in freedom. In such distress he who is rebuffed becomes human. Just as love uncompromisingly betrays the general [Allgemeine] to the particular in which alone justice is done to the former, so now the general, as the autonomy of others, turns fatally against it. The very rebuttal through which the general has exerted its influence appears to the individual as exclusion from the general; he who has lost love knows himself deserted by all, and this is why he scorns consolation. In the senselessness of his deprivation he is made to feel the untruth of all merely individual fulfillment. But he thereby awakens to the paradoxical consciousness of generality: of the inalienable and unindictable human right to be loved by the beloved. With his plea, founded on no titles or claims, he appeals to an unknown court, which accords to him as grace what is his own and yet not his own. The secret of justice in love is the sublation of right, to which love mutely points. “So forever / cheated and foolish must love be.”<sup>2</sup>

Adorno begins from the particular feeling of loss and abandonment of the “slighted,” the feeling of which exceeds both in its affective power by way of the precise affect of “agonizing pain.” Though pain appears as the particular, it is general, and its intensity is the proof. The agony of the particular that “lights up one’s own body” proves that such pain dialectically belies the particular and then includes it into the general, which appears as the “demand not to be blinded” by love’s seemingly particular blinding power. This demand, which constitutes the structure of immanent love bonds (‘living’ in love’s “innermost blindness”), turns out to always have been a transcendental demand. Following Rei Terada’s brilliant analysis, this is “an instance in which the individual really does grasp the universal and the particular together—for reasons that are as interested as disinterested—and ‘reject[s]’ his own claim.”<sup>3</sup> The right to be loved is, then, essentially a transcendental demand: “A right based on no reason, it appeals to an

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 164-165.

<sup>3</sup> Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2009), 194.

‘unknown court’” and “does not operate on the scarcity principles of justice.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in an ultimate non-differentiation, this is a messianic form of love in which “judgment and plenitude are the same.”<sup>5</sup> Thinking through affect allows us to see the body lit up by the “agonizing pain” of lost or failed love, the cathexis of which is then understood as a package-deal toward an “awakening” to the general. The always already transcendental demand of love retroactively points us outside of immanence. Love, in this way, can be said to be the affective knowledge of the transcendental; love *is* the “consciousness of generality,” afforded larger forms to come by way of the graceful judgment handed down by a divine “unknown court.” On this transcendental register, non-differentiated love comes into view as the concomitance of transcendental “judgment” (diagnosis) and the receipt of “plenitude” (surplus).

Thus, even in Adorno’s more familiar idiom of consolation, there is a messianic and extra-social structure brought into relief by the affective power accorded to it.<sup>6</sup> Revealingly, it is “consolation” that Adorno accords in this passage the one and only non-dialectical and straightforwardly if-then causation. Adorno is very clear on this score: the pained lovelorn subject “scorns” consolation *because*—and not *despite*—the recognition that the loss is mega-social; rather than one, he “knows himself deserted by all.” Consolation, then, is already the sign of desertion. But the there-ness of this mega-social loss is what enables the desire for consolation from the outside, a messianic waiting for that which would match mega-social failure in plenitude. The internal logic of consolation thus appeals to the extra-social, the transcendental, declaring faith in the promise of bigger forms of consolation and holding love up transcendentially rather than intersubjectively. This view of Adornian consolation shares the logic of mega-social love bonds explored thus far but with a heuristic preference toward the objectness of love bonds. The subject that tethers and constitutes mega-sociality is also the object of mega-consolation, but Adorno, in his German idealist lineage, brings light to the formulation that confers grace proper, ‘according’ the aggrieved subject “what is his own and yet not his own.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the internal structure of grace—how it appears as plenitude in the first place—functions by conferring the one who appeals that which has been asked for *and* that which exceeds it.

The function of grace in this non-differentiated, transcendental love is clear: we are, in the end, objects lying in wait for the receipt of grace, having suspended the subject’s cranky yet ineluctable demand for “right.” Yet if love is the transcendental signifier that “mutely points” to this grace, what is the meaning of Adorno’s inclusion of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> One way to think about Adorno’s “consolation” is as the affective signature of our fallenness, i.e., as both the ultimate good feeling of immanence as well as the affected reminder of the subject’s immanent relationship to transcendence (more on this in n.7). This is in echo of the inimitable Anne-Lise François, particularly the graceful formulation of a “gift of revelation so transmuted it’s taken for granted,” which in turn leads to a release from the anxious and categorically erroneous duty to improve, i.e., to be agential in ways that would somehow negate fallenness itself. See Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2008), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Rather than a parallel logic, one could also conceive Adornian consolation as the transcendental negative of mega-sociality. That is, whatever is promised on the other side of mega-consolation is the same thing as that which is promised by mega-social love bonds. But precisely because of the immanence of mega-sociality and the transcendence of mega-consolation, it can be said that whatever appears by way of mega-sociality is by way of the determinate negation of the consolation structure.

the snippet from Hölderlin that punctuates the passage? “So forever / cheated and foolish must love be.” On the one hand, this can be read as a return to the affective logic that began this dialectical chain toward transcendence and objecthood: love, as a particular and immanent force, inaugurates the logic that, in the end, only “mutely points” to grace and mega-consolation, and in that originary sense, then, is defined as “forever / cheated and foolish.” On the other hand, Hölderlin’s formulation can also be read in dialectical sequence with the rest of the passage, such that the logic of waiting and grace (which, again, is also the logic of transcendental love) can itself be interrogated as “cheated and foolish.” The temporal force of Hölderlin’s “forever” hints toward this second reading, as if the cheated and foolish aggrieved must wait in pain in some measure of eternity, thereby redoubling the cycle of affected pain and immanent appeal. In this Adorno’s dialectical thinking, then, we locate a final wager regarding the graceful receipt of plenitude: are we, however pained we are, simply to wait? Returning to the binary of lived experience and the grace borne out of that experience, Adorno might also be suggesting, finally, the primacy of immanence, the style or comportment of waiting in material life, of occupying subjecthood too, of grasping mega-socially for the other.

Which is to say, in the meantime, this transcendental function of love—in which a judgment outside our subjective identities promises us grace in/as plenitude—can also be characterized in the language of the very subjecthood it seeks to transcend. In one sense, this logic is simply the (divine-added) reversal of Žižek’s Lacanian formulation from chapter three of the always already split subject, in which the gap is the very thing we call “identity”: Love’s transcendental function reminds us that if one is always already split, one is also always already sutured. There is a kind of divinity to this having-been-sutured, made provisionally whole, against the bounds of the abjection that threatens against such suturing. But since this divinity is only experienced and affected in lived experience, it confirms the love-bound identities that we already occupy in immanence. Here appears the relation between immanent identity and the transcendent grace of love, the former animated always already—and exclusively so—by the latter. Conceived this way, the grace of blackness (queerness, yellowness) is profoundly and only lived, despite and through the fallenness marked by abjection, a logic confirmed by this non-coincidence: it is no accident that Žižek begins from the apparent failure of identity and Adorno from the apparent failure of love. Lived material experience—specifically, the ego-shattering failures that confirm its difficulty while we await deliverance—is the only conduit for the consolation to come. It is, in this way, always already surplus.

Thus, we imagine Adorno living strenuously onward, paradoxically taking rest and consolation in that pained living, because such living is the only way to hold out for its negation, of holding open the general possibility of the very grace that belied the first version of consolation as well as the pain that requires it. On this reading of Adorno, Rei Terada is the primary guide: “As Adorno suggests, we are melancholy and restless during periods of freedom not because we don’t know what to do with freedom, but because there is not yet enough of it.”<sup>8</sup> Not unlike Tomine’s just-is melancholia, this Adornian position is graceful in its comportment of openness, finding provisional rest in its insatiable restlessness for deliverance, and which, needless to say, maps with and functions the outside-logic of abjection. This restlessness is not some apotheosis limned by Adorno’s deeper structure of consolation but rather the antinomian inhabitation in

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<sup>8</sup> Terada, *Looking Away*, 202.

immanence and particularity. This antinomian space is the location of the desire for utopian breaks in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), to which I will turn in a moment. But first, I want to return a final time to a contemporary discussion of love, "love as a properly political concept," to sketch how love bonds work without and within this view of grace.

## ii. Love as a political economy; or, love without grace

Political economy starts from labour as the real soul of production; yet to labour it gives nothing, and to private property everything.<sup>9</sup>

- Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844"

By way of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, love has already been discussed at length (in chapter three) as a theoretical context in which positive affect meets the socio-political. One crucial takeaway from that discussion is Hardt and Negri's imposition of love's constitution of being, in which being is always already there in Zen-like rejoinder to the threat of nihilism underwriting predominant theoretical apparatuses that emphasize constitution-talk: Nothing comes from nothing. Since then, Hardt's work (sans Negri) has attempted to broaden this conception of love on the socio-political register by explicitly returning to Marx (who haunts all of *Commonwealth* but is left largely unaddressed), specifically "in his critique of the power of money" in the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844."<sup>10</sup> Hardt reads love in Marx's text as an economy that would abrogate capital's function of money. Communism can thus be read as non-differentiated from love itself:

Communism can thus be conceived as the creation of a new love, which operates not by reproducing the same or unifying society in indifferent harmony—that would be crude communism—but, rather, by increasing our power to create and maintain relations with each other and the world. Under the rule of property, in which property structures and maintains social order and bonds, Marx claims that the power of the love and the other senses cannot be developed. And correspondingly to achieve a society beyond the rule of property those human powers would have to be transformed and expanded.<sup>11</sup>

Hardt's insistence on a love-bound definition of communism relies on the view that love is indelibly a kind of political economy, albeit with the Spinozan twist that such economy is always "increasing our power to create." Like my discussion of *Commonwealth* in chapter three, I want to emphasize this Spinozan expansiveness in a discussion of positive affect beginning from (of all folks) Adorno. I want to contextualize Hardt's theoretical formation, relatively fresh on the scene, and about the predictable yet compelling rejoinder offered by Lauren Berlant (both published in a 2011 issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, which will surely come to be seen as a watershed for the positive-affect-oriented

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: Norton, 1978), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt, "For Love or Money," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 678.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 681.

discussion of love's deployment at the intersection of the affective and sociopolitical). Contrary to an everyday realism that bespeaks the triumph of historical-materialist hermeneutics in critical theory, I want to argue that Hardt, when considered vis-à-vis the Adorno of "Golden Gate," does not go nearly far enough in his willingness to jettison extant regimes of truth. It is Adorno, that is, who helps bring Hardt's crass materialism into sharp relief. So far in this project, I have primarily discussed ways in which mega-social relationality is always already there, structuring relations that appear as failure, or is instead incipient and inchoate, suggesting a positive sociality yet-to-come. It is the combination of the two that has not been discussed yet at length and which is the final component to conceiving of mega-social love bonds. On this view, it is Hardt and Adorno together who ultimately illuminate the mega-social love bonds necessary for a utopian sense of the future, of love to come.

When Adorno claims in "Golden Gate" that the receipt of plenitude can be conceived non-differentially from transcendental judgment, the contours of the grace yielded by this non-differentiation appear outside any political economy proper. From Calvin to Adorno, the point of grace in the sociopolitical sphere is that it is free, perhaps defined most precisely as *anti-economic*. This in contrast to Hardt, who argues that love is an economic structure, not only analogous to money in the symbolic order but pliable in lived experience precisely because of this structure, which is to say that we could remake and reconstitute definitions of love by way of bettered "relations with each other and the world." With Adorno in the background, it is surprising that the primary critical voice back to Hardt's claim of an alternative economy of love, which is in its explicit Marxian inheritance already a deeply materialist analysis, has been on the grounds that it is too flighty, fanciful, and abstract.

Berlant reveals her suspicion on the register of affect, distrusting its deployment as, in Hardt's words, "a properly political concept." Seeking to raise the materialist stakes of the query, Berlant emphasizes the oppressive bindings attributed to love (not unlike Elizabeth Povinelli, as discussed in chapter three), implying that love might be the affective signature of a dangerous cathexis with death rather than life:

So, what does it mean for the ambition to make love a properly political concept that it is much easier to imagine dying for or from love than living for or with love? Also, is Michael's version of love a love we would feel as love? Or is it a structure or principle that would animate us while we might be having other strong and or diffused feeling events hooking us to the world and the world to us?<sup>12</sup>

Like the discussion of Povinelli in chapter three, the threat perceived by conceiving of a "properly political" love is that the subject in love would unwittingly underwrite its own oppression, entering a false consciousness in which avowing death would be "much easier" than "living for or with love." While this strain of thought might suggest a distrust of affective knowledge generally—and Povinelli comes close to such a position—Berlant's lockdown logic claims the primacy of affective knowledge even more so than Hardt. By investing in the avowal of the "other strong and or feeling events" potentially masked by a pejoratively labeled "structure or principle" of love, Berlant takes sole stake in affect, claiming such "feeling events" as both territory hers and as territory fully

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<sup>12</sup> Lauren Berlant, "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 687.

extricated from love. Berlant takes an additionally cruel turn when she asks whether “Michael’s version of love” is one the subject would even “feel as love,” implying that in addition to these other (proper, negative) affects in place of love, love itself, in Hardt’s deployment, would be unrecognizable as such. Thus, the function of the “other” affects Berlant has in mind is that they would doubly obfuscate love (as something that would feel like these other, presumably negative, affects) and be obfuscated *by* love (that is, by ‘false’ version of love struts about pretending to be good and true).

Such is Berlant’s thorough distrust of a love yet unrealized, which comes into clearest relief at the end of her essay: “Advancing a single vernacular term that converts the normative force of affect and emotion into one goad for a better sociality is not my project. I tend to multiply approaches, to loosen forms.”<sup>13</sup> The contrast could not be starker: vis-à-vis Hardt, who purportedly abstracts love away from its felt forms and conceives it “into one goad,” Berlant wishes to “multiply approaches,” which here suggests a hyper-attendance to the ways in which, again, love obfuscates and is obfuscated; rather than a “better sociality,” it is Berlant’s ‘tendency’ to attempt to diagnose (pathologize?) the current one, limning the forms of false consciousness that keep it from getting better. Elsewhere, Berlant has characterized such a project, in solidarity with Hardt, as the “now-central question of how to induce utopian futures from within a negating present.”<sup>14</sup> The gerundive “negating” as a descriptor of the present reveals the present to be one in process of further negation, which thus cannot be redressed simply by the love-saturated projection of “utopian futures.” Berlant’s use of the gerund here suggests that the present has not fully bottomed out in its negatedness, and the implication is that Hardt’s inducement of the future has not fully accounted for the depths of the negating/negated present.<sup>15</sup>

Yet what Berlant has in common with Hardt in this calculation of love is a structural diagnosis founded on an idiom of scarcity: “We know that love, suffusing our bodies and our interest, can lead us meanwhile to the impersonal, the structural vision, and that it can bear the weight of ambivalence and contradiction. But how far can the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 690.

<sup>14</sup> Berlant, “The Aesthetic Utopian,” *Social Text*, last modified June 21, 2010, <[http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/the\\_aesthetic\\_utopian](http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the_aesthetic_utopian)>

<sup>15</sup> Outside the bounds of this discussion, there is an Adornian critique of Berlant’s appeal to an authentic ontology of lived experience, purportedly not yet fully attended to in thought, along the lines of what Adorno calls “the jargon of authenticity.” Defined by Adorno as an “automatic assertion of its message by virtue of its pure content,” Berlant’s appeal to anti-abstraction tautologically appeals to the already-is of the very concretization to which she desires more attendance. This stripe of “pure content” in Berlant’s anti-love polemic can thus be characterized by what Adorno described as “jargon” in the existential idiom of Heidegger: “Now as then they sense the danger that what they call the concrete might easily be swallowed up by the abstraction they find so suspect and that cannot be eradicated from the medium of thought, of concept. They imagine that concreteness is vouchsafed by sacrifice, starting with that of their own intellect” (“The Jargon of Authenticity” 164). There is in all of Berlant’s writing a thorough implication that the concreteness of her own thought is “vouchsafed” by the sacrifice in and as her intellectual life, such as in the aforementioned passage of her more-rigorous-and-strenuous-than-thou tendency to “multiply approaches, to loosen forms,” whose “pure content” can only be defined against Hardt’s tendency to think by way of ambit-terms, to use “goads,” to non-differentiate. I am grateful to Spencer Coldren for showing me this connection. See Adorno, “The Jargon of Authenticity,” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) 163-181.

membrane stretch?”<sup>16</sup> Like Hardt’s deployment of an economy of love, Berlant suggests that the conduits of affect inaugurated by love (by “suffusing our bodies and our interest”) can function only by the logic of scarcity and finitude—before the membrane ruptures. There is, too, the same tension in her calculation of the exclusively personal and the politically impersonal, intersecting at “ambivalence and contradiction,” which love yields; for Hardt such non-differentiation is the starting-point for a political love that “would challenge conventional conceptions that separate the logic of political interests from our affective lives and opposes political reason to the passions. A political concept of love would have to deploy at once reason and passion.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, it could be said that Hardt and Berlant are always already allied and far from enemies. Still, in light of Hardt’s inaugural non-distinction between “reason and passion”—“political interests from our affective lives”—it is worth noting that one irony in this *tete-a-tete* is that the voice that demands better attention to lived experience and minor affective modes, against the threat of a unitary goad, does so by the principle of reason, the threat of an incipient political ambit-term that loses sight of the empirical constancy of a “negating present.” The double irony is that insofar as a “structural vision” is concerned, both thinkers are not only in full agreement (on the model of scarcity used to describe love), but that the putatively non-empirically-grounded and goad-driven thinker has broached such agreement by way of the father of materialism: Marx. In one sense, it is Hardt who is the materialist proper of this dyad and Berlant the abstract one, grasping at “approaches” yet immaterial. Thus, these thinkers represent the two sides of an infinitesimal differential in heuristic preference regarding how to approach the “impersonal” and “the structural.” Both agree on the ontology of the ineluctably “negating” present, the common ontological ground on which to prop up a “structural vision” of “utopian futures.” However they might disagree on the contours and depths of those futures and how to strategize toward them, it is agreed that a principle of political economy—namely scarcity—that provides the starting-point.

Yet in the same piece by Marx, he suggests that the concept of scarcity is itself the problem for the flourishing of human being (and in “properly political” terms, communism). In his manuscript, Marx alerts the danger of thinking within the regime of “political economists,” who by definition operate with “the lowest possible level of life (existence) as the standard.”<sup>18</sup> The closest Marx gets to what we might term ‘bare life’ today, the political economist is equated to the capitalist, as each avows an asceticism of thought subsequent from thinking of “life and existence” as a zero-sum game: “How the multiplication of needs and of the means of their satisfaction breeds the absence of needs and of means is demonstrated by the political economist (and the capitalist: it should be noted that it is always *empirical* business men we are talking about when we refer to political economists—their *scientific* confession and mode of being.”<sup>19</sup> If thought begins from an avowal of empiricism that models needs and satisfactions in austere terms of bareness and scarceness, then it will inevitably develop into a completion of the logic of austerity, namely the unshakeable appearance (as it appears as empirical) of bare life as the exclusive mode of existence. That it is the ‘political economist’ who demonstrates

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<sup>16</sup> Berlant, “A Properly Political Concept of Love,” 690.

<sup>17</sup> Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 676.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



this empiricism sounds a warning to thinking through what Marx calls elsewhere in the essay “the essential powers of man” (which Hardt gets rightfully excited by) by political-economic terms.<sup>20</sup> Marx elaborates further on the dangers of such thought:

By counting the *lowest* possible level of life (existence) as the standard, indeed as the general standard—general because it is applicable to the mass of men. He changes the worker into an insensible being lacking all needs, just as he changes his activity into a pure abstraction from all activity. To him, therefore, every *luxury* of the worker seems to be reprehensible, and everything that goes beyond the most abstract need—be it in the realm of passive enjoyment, or a manifestation of activity—seems to him a luxury. Political economy, this science of *wealth*, is therefore simultaneously the science of denial, of want, of *thrift*, of *saving*—and it actually reaches the point where it spares man the need of either fresh *air* or physical *exercise*.<sup>21</sup>

Capital’s distinction between “most abstract need” and “luxury” only functions to further abstract both, at the direct expense of the expansion of human powers. On this view, both Hardt and Berlant have underwritten the odious “science of wealth,” but it is the latter who has lost sight of and trust in its one redeeming component, that which such science sought to negate in the first place—the ‘essential powers of man’ and their expansiveness, i.e., wealth itself. So when Berlant says back to Hardt, “Is this a version of love we would feel as love?”: this question is tantamount to asking whether wealth—that wealth of the commons that is the very constitution of being, as discussed in chapter three—is felt, affected, *as* wealth.

Whether defined as wealth or love, the capacity for surplus that Berlant’s model of affect cannot account for, and the suspicion of which lurks inside and motivates her authentic love question, can be countered in accord with Berlant’s trust in affective knowledge: If something appears as love, why would it not feel like love? What else could or would it feel like? What motivates this question in the first place, i.e., why wouldn’t we want a bigger love that feels as such? By contrast, it is clear from Hardt’s Spinozan routing of love-qua-wealth in *Commonwealth* that he senses the proper Marx as the one who refuses the “science of wealth” while retaining the language of wealth and its relationship to ‘human powers.’ Yet the larger point in thinking of Hardt in alliance with Berlant is that no analogy to capital is needed to position love as wealth itself, as an anti-economic and graceful power, the condition of possibility to “expand human powers.” The best and proper Marx, in other words, is not the political economist who posits a preference for base over superstructure, but rather the one who imagines upending entirely the ontology of the distinction between base and superstructure (and thus of both). Such boldness begins from rejecting scarcity as a starting-point, beginning instead from the notion that “wealth and poverty are equal.”<sup>22</sup> Hence, there is a critique of Hardt’s post-*Commonwealth* conception of love, which claims the opposite from Berlant’s über-empiricist realism: that such conception is not nearly abstract and dreamy *enough*, and that to say this is not to stray from Marx but to be in precise agreement.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 96.

### iii. Political love meets apolitical grace

What is amiss in these political-economic formations of love is love's relationship to grace. Since this relationship is nothing if not an immanent one, understanding immanence as always already gesturing toward transcendence (with Adorno, packaging judgment and felt plenitude together), it is important to understand the function of felt experience in and as the receptive intersection of grace and love. The subsequent implication is that felt experience is the lateralized proof, as it were, of that top-down judgment, yet it still functions under the unitary 'goad' of love and is thus very unlike Berlant's insistence on negative ontologies (the already-there-ness of negative affects belying love). After all, such receipt appears as a "lighting up" in one's body, which can be trusted (rather than disavowed) precisely because of its simultaneity. What I want to suggest, in an attempt to bring this project around full conceptual circle, is that narcissism *is* that reception, and thus the Adornian grace that began this chapter must be thought of in tandem with the narcissism of the other from chapter one and which Gayl Jones shows by way of a somatic wisdom.

It is obvious how "Golden Gate" operates by the logic of narcissism: the "demand not to be blinded" by the pain of being "offended" and "slighted" is a demand that prioritizes, presumes, and commences from self-love. More specifically, the subject who "knows himself deserted by all" and thus "scorns consolation" can only begin from an understanding of its narcissistic "particular": a cathexis with the other that appears as the demand for singular recognition—and which, in echo of Audre in chapter one, is also always already a cathexis with oneself. Thus, the "demand not to be blinded," appearing as the particular, is structured by narcissism; particularity itself, in contrast to the general, can be said to be a function of having cathected to oneself. But further still, the turn Adorno describes from the particular to the general—the painful one that comes out of failed love and appears at first as the particular—is also structured by narcissism. The subject, having felt "the untruth of all merely individual fulfillment," enters "the paradoxical consciousness of generality: of the inalienable and unindictable human right to be loved by the beloved." This dialectical consciousness (of the general/particular together) is paradoxical if nothing but for its underlying narcissism, as the subject's entrance into the general by way of the particular—the "human right to be loved by the beloved"—is also the right to have the love of self recognized. In this way, narcissism can be said to be the animating force—the prosecutor, as it were, in the unknown court—behind the reception of the Adornian grace emergent from this consciousness.

Hardt, by contrast, understands narcissism not as a structuring principle for love bonds but socio-politically as "the love of the same and the love of becoming the same," thus positioning narcissism as a straw-man (and an implicitly anti-queer one) to the new Marxian love he imagines. Hardt is, in other words, suspicious of narcissism altogether, defining it as the opposite of the 'properly political' love he seeks:

Love conceived as a process of unification is an obstacle. Such narcissistic love—the love of the same and the love of becoming the same—can be conceived as a political form of love, but one that is author of the most reactionary political projects: the love of the race at the foundation of white supremacy, the love of nation that grounds nationalism, the love of both race and nation that supports fascism, and so forth. It is more

accurate and more useful in my view not to claim such projects lead to bad politics but, rather, to designate them as not political at all. Power and hierarchies, of course, can be created and maintained through logics of sameness and processes of unification but politics requires multiplicity and must function through the encounter and interaction of differences.<sup>23</sup>

From the view of racial-sexual abjection, it is perhaps too easy to criticize such a mischaracterization of narcissism, but a brief critique will hopefully allow for a redemptive twain. For one, there is the obvious inversion of “the love of the race at the foundation of white supremacy,” which has been described in chapter three as the love-constitution that scribes blackness and yellowness; the love of the same, insofar as it inaugurates subject-formation in and as “race,” is always a “good” narcissism in that it forges such subjects both non-negatively and together. Narcissism, it could be said, is synonymous to the positivity content—the always-already-there Spinozan substrate—of love-being. Secondly, the ‘logics of sameness and processes of unification’ are (but in a positive direction) at the heart of the bonds explored by queer theory. In *Intimacies*, Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips “take love to be a narcissistic extravagance,” invoking a Freudian tethering of narcissism to love as the precondition for reinventing both, such “that the myth of love can become its truth only if we reinvent the relational possibilities of narcissism itself.”<sup>24</sup> What these two objections have in common is not only their counterintuitive proposition that narcissism is a good thing, but that its goodness comes by way of retaining the category of a ‘true’ love, in which its trueness would be non-differentiated from narcissism itself.

It has already been established (in chapter one) how the narcissism of the Other not only has socio-political consequences but is itself a politicization of love, insofar as conceptualizing love bonds yields a mega-social relationality, which is, further still, staked on opposite grounds from the explicitly political ‘anti-social’ routing of said narcissism from Lee Edelman. As stated earlier, Hardt himself stakes contiguous territory to thinkers like Edelman and Bersani (and the exchange with Berlant is already to exemplify this). Nonetheless, excluded from Hardt’s account is this deep structure of narcissism, limned by psychoanalysis and queer theory, which redeems the term by fusing its logic to *all* love bonds (even the selfless, flourishing ones) and which can easily be imbricated with a politics ‘proper,’ perhaps most starkly in terms of mega-sociality and anti-sociality.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 677-678.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>25</sup> In his synthetic companion essay to Hardt’s and Berlant’s pieces in *Cultural Anthropology*, Lawrence Cohen also brings up Edelman and the *No Future* debate in the context of Hardt’s bad narcissism, bringing forth a critique very similar to mine in the notion of the ‘properly political’ that emerges from queer notions of narcissism. Like mine, Cohen’s critique of Hardt by way of Edelman’s narcissism functions, ultimately, to bring together Edelman and Hardt as political allies: “Edelman’s refusal of reproductive futurism can be read as precisely an effort to call into being a love that is not self-love, to the extent that the modern private sphere depends on the figure of the child as both the property and extension of its parent. Hardt’s distinguishing of self-love from the love we do not yet know and must bring into being may offer a radically different link of the properly political relation to the future than that which Edelman, and I think Sennett, reject. In Hardt’s terms, what is at stake in the debate over *No Future* is the possibility of love not organized around the deep and mutual imbrication of property and filiation” (Cohen 693). Throughout Cohen’s synthetic response to the Hardt-Berlant exchange, he responds generously to this omission in

So where might the twain meet? If one important fork in the path of conceptualizing love as a political concept is mega-social and anti-social relationality, then it is crucial to recognize Hardt's definition of narcissism, reductive as it is, as anything if not a grasp toward the former, toward a mega-social "field of multiplicity," and that such a grasping toward this relationality ought to be defended for its insistence on and privileging of the futural.<sup>26</sup> The narcissism at the heart of all love—a narcissism proper—opens up radically different conceptions of the subject's relationship to chronological time, from the presentism of Bersani and Edelman (and in very separate ways at that) to the grace-bound messianism of Adorno. A particular polemic borne out of the former takes on a politics of 'anti-politics,' as it were, in Edelman's *No Future*, which rejects the filial futurity always already implied in "politics." In chapter three, I discussed how the "*kairos* of the multitude" from Hardt and Negri suggests its own radical presentism; from the love of the multitude emerges a temporal unit of "the opportune moment that ruptures the monotony and repetitiveness of chronological time."<sup>27</sup> Subsequent primary readings in chapters three and four were primarily concerned with such presentism in and as the love bonds of the yellow subject, then the yellow object. For all this 'no-future'/'yes-present' talk, what has yet to be explored is the futurity that comes from the narcissism of the Other—the mega-social relationality yet to come, the utopian breaks therein. *Intimacies* makes explicit the link between their narcissism and futurity: "To have the courage of one's narcissism—to find a version of narcissism that is preservative at once of survival and pleasure—would be to have the courage of one's wish for more life rather than less."<sup>28</sup> Describing the political love yet realized, Hardt writes in no less utopian terms: "Love is thus always a risk in which we abandon some of our attachments to this world in the hope of creating another, better one."<sup>29</sup> It seems to me that however misguided a disavowal of narcissism this might be, Hardt here not only matches Bersani and Phillips' future-wishing but, *through* said disavowal, reveals such wishing to be non-differentiated from outright utopian longing. And it is this longing, enabled by and embodied as love-being, which *Corregidora* treats as the abreaction to racial-sexual abjection.

#### iv. Gayl Jones' utopic love

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Hardt's account. With an eye on the final segment of the above Hardt passage (i.e., 'Power and hierarchies, of course, can be created and maintained through logics of sameness and processes of unification but politics requires multiplicity'), Cohen implies that Hardt's omission of a good narcissism is necessary due to an implicit "slide" within Marx's own argument: "Hardt's effort seems to be to arrest an apparent slide in Marx's argument from (1) true love's antinarcissistic multiplicity and nonunification to (2) true love's refusal of free-floating value and, thus, its (narcissistic) demand for persons equal and thus unified in achievement" (Cohen 694). Outside the bounds of this discussion, there is, of course, a critique to be made here in Cohen's (and Hardt's) sense that Marx's "true love" by definition refuses "free-floating value." As stated earlier in terms of Marx's suspicion of political economists and their axiomatic principle of scarcity, it seems to me that for him "true love," if anything, would be valued as "free-floating." See Lawrence Cohen, "Love and the Little Line," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 692-696.

<sup>26</sup> Hardt, "For Love or Money," 678.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2009), 165.

<sup>28</sup> Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 98.

<sup>29</sup> Hardt, "For Love or Money," 678.

Utopian longing is shot through Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*. While the historical trauma constituting the presentist narrative of the protagonist, Ursa, insists on the inescapability of the brutally violent and death-bound past, such ineffaceable history also yields surprisingly positive notions of the future. Though the novel is in an obvious way always about futurity—as Ursa's primary preoccupation throughout much of the narrative is her incapacity to “make generations”—the notion of future time persists in the novel *despite* this reproductive obsession *and because* of the loss of that biological capacity that begins the book. The historical racial-sexual trauma constitutes Ursa's present voice, yet left out of the critical discourse surrounding the construction of that voice is the presentist notion that the voice exists in *positive* relation to such constitution (the evidence of which is the voice itself, i.e., “We are already talking”), as well as the fact that this voice might want not only recuperation or wholeness in the face of such constitutive violence (in echo of the critics discussed in relation to Audre Lorde in chapter one), but also a desire for surplus. In this case, as the shatteredness discussed throughout these chapters takes the shape of historical memory, the surplus that comes beyond it also takes temporal form—specifically, the parallel notions of grace and utopianism.

If there is one thing all critics of Jones agree on (and as anecdotal evidence of pedagogical impulses driving the novel's popularity suggests), it is that *Corregidora*'s deep narrative dive into the ineffaceable genealogical trauma that constitutes Ursa's subjecthood is representative of the historical trauma that constitutes black womanhood more generally. That is to say, Jones' novel has been treated as the *ur*-text of black female abjection, and, as such, it has been treated as a text worthy of examination for its concatenation of black women's circumscribed agency to an oppressed and violence-constituted black female sexuality, which includes notions of compulsory heterosexuality, sex as trauma (and possibly healing), sexual acts as conduits of somatic or affective knowledge (primarily of the originary trauma), and the sexual undertones of black vernacular forms (specifically blues lyric). In other words, the novel seems overburdened with the predictable negativity-content of racial abjection. As Darieck Scott has recently put it (by way of preface to his own reading of *Corregidora*), “To focus on the abject in its relation to black women too easily might appear to be a confirmation of the defeat with which abjection works rather than a complication of it.”<sup>30</sup>

Branching off from the marvelous complication-making reading Scott gives subsequent to this statement (more on this shortly), my own redemptive consideration of *Corregidora* includes a twofold complication concerning utopia and grace, which work in tandem to suggest, ultimately, that Jones prefers the positive, love-bound content of black abjection rather than the defeat therein. This is, to bring my readings to circle, a very similar contrarian sensibility exhibited in chapter one's reading of Audre Lorde, in which the “friendlier” critics, in declared alliance with their subject-author, turn out to insist on the very defeat Lorde strives against in *Zami*. Rather than ego-shattering versus ego-shoring, the thematic of this reading is historical time, which is the term that yokes utopia to grace. The expectancy of utopian futurity in the present—a deliverance of grace and the demand for it—appears in the novel by affect, as somatic wisdom, and, as such, this is where the twain meets between a positivity-content-reading of abjection(-qua-love) and a defeatist view of both racial-sexual abjection (such as the vast majority of black feminist

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<sup>30</sup> Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2010), 265.

critique of the novel) and love-as-false-consciousness (such as Berlant's proposition that love might not "feel like love"). The validity of the propositional content from the "lighting up" of one's body is where we can all agree; it just so happens that in *Corregidora*, such lighting up is always love-affirmative, and affected love appears against its seeming condition of impossibility, i.e., despite the defeat of historical (black female) trauma. Emergent from Ursa's pain and trauma is her own "inalienable right to be loved," the promise of which is also the promise to break out of the binds of historical time in order to insist on the utopian future embedded in black abjection.

#### v. *Corregidora's* grace of the present

Such a redemptive reading begins from Scott's, which appears as a "coda" to his groundbreaking study of black male humiliation as the phenomenological experience and symbolic signature of a counter-intuitively 'extravagant' black abjection. Scott's strenuous exploration of said abjection non-differentiates between pleasure and pain, defeat and triumph, and fracturedness and wholeness. At the close of his reading of one of the most violent scenes of *Corregidora* (the brutal rape of Ursa's ancestor, Great Gram, by the patronymic slave-owner-qua-ancestor, Corregidora), Scott brings Jones closer to his other texts by way of the black subject's reception of humiliation,

that the proximity of humiliation to violence, fury and despair could be mapped this way: the abject is the receiver of humiliation—it is the experience of violence at the core of the self, violence run so rampant that it is, in the moments of its being, what the self is; and violence and fury are that abjection turned outward, visited on others.<sup>31</sup>

If violence and fury are the "outward"-making of an abjection whose phenomenological signature is humiliation, then it follows that there must also be a cognate affect on the other extreme. Following the logic from chapter three's discussion of melancholia—that if things (history, lived experience) are so unspeakably bad, *constitutively* bad, they are also not *just* or *only* bad—the expression of "violence and fury" also finds in itself, *in* the very abjection it expresses outwardly, its own abreaction: in Scott's idiom, its own extravagance.

Though love is not the term for this abreaction in Scott's discussion, his deployment of *Corregidora* does describe a precisely positive (and nothing if not precisely political) content in that violence: "Great Gram's yearning for the basic freedom to build intimate connections with whomever she chooses, which, because this freedom is denied her due to her legal and racial status, is also a yearning for political change."<sup>32</sup> This yearning for intimacy, non-differentiated from the desire for political change, is for Scott a desire bound to the presentist logic of the always already there, temporalized as the "breach and rupture between the often untranslatable slave past and the 'free present.'"<sup>33</sup> It is in this gap, which Ursa's narrative imagination articulates and in turn which for Scott is an allegory for a political reading of black abjection (i.e., contemporary method in Jones' time), where Scott locates the temporal rupture that is nothing if not utopian:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 266-267.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 261.

This conjuring of time [Jones' narrative of Ursa's imagined voicing of Great Gram and the two other generations of Corregidora women] not as a line but as a loop might be a minor effect, except that this effect resonates with the elements of the novel's resolution: there Great Gram's great-granddaughter Ursa, the story's protagonist and heir of the histories of her foremothers' violations, asserts her break from being determined by that "body of history" from which Fanon wishes to shake free, by reenacting in the present a *sexual* act she imagines Great Gram performed on Corregidora (and this too is an act refusing either end of a continuum between pain and pleasure, erotics and violence, empowerment and domination: it is fellatio with teeth).<sup>34</sup>

I will turn shortly to the scene that famously concludes the novel, but first it seems crucial to overlap Scott's directive of a Fanonian "break," which operates on the register of the somatic and whose final instance in Jones' novel is "fellatio with teeth," with my project's insistence on love-constitution: the somatic knowledge and sexual imagination that together yield Ursa's assertion of that break is already a sign of the love-being that *is* her subjecthood. This being that always threatens break can be thought of as the substrate that exists between "pain and pleasure, erotics and violence, empowerment and domination," which is to say that love, again, non-differentiates these extremes. It is from this conception of love that the utopian break is articulated. Critics have tended to conceptualize Ursa's subject-trajectory along the lines of trauma and incapability; Elizabeth Goldberg insists, "Because there is no outside to her pain, Ursa does not experience the intrusion of trauma, but rather embodies it," and Stephanie Li, albeit much closer to a reading of love-being, argues, "Independence and self-awareness are not the sole ends of Ursa's journey; rather, the ability to love is critical to experiencing personal fulfillment."<sup>35</sup> But rather than pointing out the obvious (that there is something called trauma in Ursa's pained narrative, and this has to do with her propensity for abusive love relationships), there is the even more obvious—but enabling and generative—observation that Ursa is negotiating, feeling, and *imagining* (paramount for Scott) her abjection. These actions belie the pathologist rendering of Ursa's subjecthood as "no outside to her pain" (fine, for then it is indeed all inside, and that is precisely where the 'break' originates), as well as an inadequacy in "the ability to love" (because love is constitutive of ability in the first place).

For what appears in *Corregidora* as Ursa's incapability is often, in fact, an instantiation of love-being. For example, in one of Ursa's dreamlike sequences, she imagines a past exchange with Mutt, her abusive first husband who has violently caused the loss of their child as well as a hysterectomy, thereby foreclosing Ursa's biological capacity to "make generations." In flashback, Ursa explains to Mutt that the imperative to reproduce ("*I should make generations*") is tied up to the passing on of the collective history of the three antecedent generations of Corregidora women—a historical memory that has been burned out of the official record since abolition.<sup>36</sup> After an extended riff on

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 261-262.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 463. Stephanie Li, "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 145.

<sup>36</sup> Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 101.

“a life always spoken, and only spoken” down from the generations, the flashback concludes with Mutt’s interruption, to which Ursa responds with a startling claim about love bonds:

“Stop, Ursa, why do you go on making dreams?”

“Till I feel satisfied that I could have loved, that I could have loved you, till I feel satisfied, alone, and satisfied that I could have loved.”<sup>37</sup>

This is a complex formulation: Ursa asserts that she can only stop dreaming when she feels satisfied that her capacity to love might *have appeared* to herself differently rather than to appear to her differently in the future, suggesting that even the retroactive satisfaction of sufficient loving would be purely retrospective. The predictable reading here is that Ursa, in classic melancholic fashion, would henceforth never be able to cease to “go on making dreams,” for the possibility of loving adequately is already foreclosed. Yet beyond this melancholic assertion of her internalized doubt regarding her subjective capacity to love, this formulation can also be read as Ursa’s interrogation of the entire calculus of love-as-sufficiency-and-satisfaction. Ursa cannot be satisfied until she knows she might have loved beyond the immanently available, which already appears as not enough, as insufficiency. In this paradox of the subjunctive past, Ursa holds out for notions of love bigger than satisfaction with the given and ‘scorns consolation.’ Ursa is, in this way, declaring her inalienable right to be loved.

In other words, the condition of possibility for Ursa to stop making dreams is always already foreclosed, and yet this is a good thing, for this foreclosure belies the pathologies of trauma and incapability that have been ironically assigned to that dreaming (as that assignation, in vicious circle, is typically presented as evidence of Ursa’s pathology). Even as the content of Ursa’s dreamscape reveals “the way in which history is experienced by its survivors precisely as a pained, sustained present,” the sheer continuance of such dreaming gives lie to pain as the exclusive or definitive marker of that sustained present.<sup>38</sup> To dream is to insist on an ontology beyond the given of a “pained, sustained present.” Thus, it becomes clear in any interrogation of Ursa’s internal narrative that “making dreams,” pained as it no doubt is, is never the problem; in fact, dreaming might be the one unproblematic thing in Ursa’s life. This reading hinges on the fact that these dreams are *made*; however much Ursa is pained and haunted by the violence passed on as the historical memory that constitutes her dreamscapes, this historical memory is not *only* a haunting; Ursa is actively “making” them and has “gone on” doing so. Again, instead of reading this dream-making as Ursa’s internalization of trauma (the melancholic pathology that says she can’t stop repeating the story), Jones’ language suggests that the break is subjectively rendered: a call to the outside, a summoning of hauntology rather than an inescapable envelopment by it.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>38</sup> Goldberg, “Living the Legacy,” 450-451.

<sup>39</sup> I owe this point to a series of wonderful conversations with the late Carmen Mitchell. Working together on a presentation on *Corregidora* in the fall of 2008, we discussed Derridean hauntology and spectrality and their pertinence to Jones’ conception of historical memory. While my instinct then was to think of the haunting of the generational sexual violence that constitutes Ursa’s subjecthood as an invocation of its agential power (rendering Ursa its object), Carmen thought such a conception of hauntology might lose sight of the agential aspect within the novel’s presentation of this haunting, for, after all, the presentation is Ursa’s. I was hesitant to agree, as I thought her view would re-inscribe the very notions of subjective agency that the hermeneutic of black abjection interrogates and, for me, reverses. Years later, I understand



There might be, to boot, a serious hermeneutic danger in reading Ursa's dreaming capacity otherwise: for it is Mutt, suspicious and jealous of Ursa's attention to this capacity, who here questions the very reason for her rendering of dreams. To attach these dreams (and the potential breaks therein) to an irredeemable pathology of Ursa's psychic life is to forge alliance with Mutt, who wants Ursa to "stop" altogether. With Mutt as a provisional bogeyman, thus emerges the possibility of forging critical alliance with trauma-centered critics of the novel, who rightly put much of the pressure in explaining (what appears as) Ursa's damaged psyche on Mutt and his abuse-qua-love, wherein "[b]y conflating love with possession, he succumbs to a passion that re-inscribes hierarchies of power."<sup>40</sup> By affirming Ursa in this way and declaring that no pathology is attributable to her subjecthood, we retain what Casey Clabough calls Ursa's "promise of a harmonious future," arrived at through positive-directed "psychological means": "While the physical ability to make generations has been taken from Ursa, she still possesses the psychological means by which to judge the past, speaking both its evils and her repudiations of them—a process which holds the promise of a harmonious future."<sup>41</sup> The final confirmation of Ursa's utopian capability is that even Mutt's imagined voice is, ultimately, Ursa's own. Structurally, this dream sequence (marked in the narrative by italics) is wholly Ursa's: Mutt's challenge to Ursa's tendency to "go on making dreams" is *already* within her own dream.

What this suggests is that Ursa's condition for break—the dreamscape—already contains its own abnegation within; Ursa has tread both positions: the abject as traumatized incapability wrought from without (i.e., Mutt) and the abject as utopian potential from within (i.e., a new standard-making for love bonds). The mere existence of the latter gives lie to the triumph of the former, but it should be noted that this emphasis on the dreamscape/break is not to deny the experiential reality of the immediate pain and loss surrounding Ursa's narrative, beginning from the physical, somatic fact of her loss of the biological capacity to "make generations." Rather, the heuristic preference for the dream capacity is, in fact, a way to honor that somatic tragedy, and that Ursa can account for both positions reveals as much: the biological capability violently taken away from Ursa (Mutt has pushed her down a flight of stairs) reveals, insofar as it *is* the catalytic content of Ursa's utopian break, that such biological capacity cannot be conceived of as *totalizing* loss, deprivation, and zero-sum scarcity (of being able or not able to produce offspring). Even given Ursa's singular, material, and immanent *body*, to consider the biological capabilities of that embodiment as an ineluctable economy is to reduce Ursa's hard-won subjecthood to her embodiment, thereby reinscribing the 'hierarchies of power' that reduce black womanhood to sheer morphology, wombs and holes; as Ursa imagines Mutt's response to her trauma, "At least a woman's still got the hole."<sup>42</sup> That the womb (unlike "the hole") is the bodily site of "making generations"—Ursa's fundamental articulation of this loss and an ethical-political preoccupation as well (to keep the story of

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Carmen's insistence on the subjective capacity to be haunted (and her hesitancy regarding my take on Derrida) as her own version of the positive, love-bound content emergent from racial-sexual abjection. Carmen's wisdom haunts my thinking on this and every other aspect of Jones' novel—a novel that had haunted each of us separately and had brought us together.

<sup>40</sup> Li, "Love and the Trauma," 141.

<sup>41</sup> Casey Clabough, "'Toward an All-Inclusive Structure': The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones," *Callaloo* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 647.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 41.

the women alive)—does align that biological capacity to her love-bound desire and her utopian political impulse. Such is the point raised by trauma-centric critique, which posits that there is “nothing of either form or content outside the insoluble frame of Ursa’s traumatic present.”<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, to reduce her embodiment to this loss is to deny both form *and* content of that body *at present*—the form of the always already dreaming, the content of love, of wealth—in favor of an empiricist ‘science of wealth’ of cheap value-assignment.<sup>44</sup> Like Marx’s distrust of scarcity as a principle for sociality, Ursa’s utopianism already suggests a distrust of body-as-limitation as a political principle. With womb or without, Ursa has somatic “wealth,” her recognition of which is evident early on in the novel when she declares, “Shit, we’re all consequences of something. Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I’m a blood.”<sup>45</sup> The past that haunts, that which is at stake in making generations, also already *is* Ursa’s embodiment itself.<sup>46</sup>

## vi. Somatic wisdom and the incestuous grace of the generations

Attending to Ursa’s already-there somatic wisdom might appear to be at the expense of notions of futurity and generations within Ursa’s narrative (which, again, are no doubt notions that drive much of Ursa’s subjecthood), yet this somatic wisdom is already defined as the “consequence” of a past present. Such wisdom, that is, does not appear in a vacuum, an originary vantage from Ursa’s present, but rather is already the “consequence” of a past futurity projected by the prior generations. That is to say, Ursa’s subjecthood constitutes the material “break” from a prior utopian dream-making, from the love-bound present which is both Ursa’s past and her ultimate condition of possibility. Upon visiting her mother in her hometown, Ursa hears the true story of her

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<sup>43</sup> Goldberg, “Living the Legacy,” 463.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, to assert such economic value to the black female body is the precise historical mechanism for abjecting it, of which Mutt’s example is simply the latest instance. When Mama’s voice, in conversation with Ursa, morphs into a Great Gram monologue about the horrors of Corregidora’s sexual slavery, the terms of value-assignment are no less clear than Mutt’s: “He [Corregidora] didn’t send nothing but the rich mens in there to me, cause he said I was his little gold pussy, his little gold piece, and it didn’t take some of them old rich mens no time, and then I still be fresh for him. . . he said he wouldn’t’ve been nothing but a waste of my pussy, cause he said my pussy bring gold” (124-125). Corregidora, that is, is the original ‘empiricist’ of a political economy of the conflation of black bodies to sexual commodities.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> One way to augment this reading of Jones’ calculation of embodiment-as-memory comes by way of another imagined flashback involving Mutt:

“Forget what they went through.”

“I can’t forget.”

“Forget what you been through.”

“I can’t forget. The space between my thighs. A well that never bleeds.”

“And who are you fucking?”

“No one. Silence in my womb. My breasts quiver like old apples.”

“Forget the past.” (99)

Ursa’s repeated negative response, “*I can’t forget*,” can be read, in addition to Ursa’s holding on to and obeying the generations’ injunction to hold on to “*what they went through*,” as a literal statement regarding Ursa’s somatic situation. She is incapable of forgetting; forgetting is not at risk, for it is impossible given its engrained-ness in the body. Thought of this way, the centrality of not-forgetting can be taken as a given rather than Ursa’s (and our) strenuous anxiety about its potential loss.

father—that, in the words of Mama and contrary to what Ursa had known until then, ““He wasn’t a man I met at no depot.””<sup>47</sup> Mama describes the knowledge of her pregnancy in terms of a somatic break:

I couldn’t help feeling like I was saved from something, like Jesus had saved me from something. I went to bed real early that night. But still it was like something had got into me. Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn’t want no man. Cause I knew I wasn’t lookin for none. But it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you’d be a girl. But something got into me after that night, though, Ursa. It was like my whole body knew. Just knew what it wanted, and I kept going back there.<sup>48</sup>

Mama’s “feeling,” which she immediately equates to knowledge, can be characterized in terms of a futural break her own. It is significant that the seemingly vague word Mama uses thrice in describing this feeling-knowledge—“something”—has three meanings in its iterations, which work in sequence to combine the utopian break with a notion of deliverance—of Adornian grace. The notion of being “saved” *from* something introduces the idea of deliverance but also a threat to come; “something had got into me” is the feeling-wisdom of the promise of deliverance from that threat; and “my body or something knew what it wanted” describes the present-there positive substrate that points toward the break itself. Hence, this “something,” ultimately, is profoundly *there* at present—it “had got into me”—but is also the affective/somatic sign of the break to come. Yet this promise of the future also loops back to the first “something”: in her telling, Mama is saved *by* the something that she also had needed saving *from*. She is delivered by an affected knowledge that her “whole body” gives her, but which such knowledge also saves her from, since the threat of the ‘bad’ something would also be perceived and transmuted into knowledge through that whole body. Ursa’s very presence within Mama’s somatic schema instantiates the paradoxical grace Adorno locates in love: the immanent, affected, experienced grace borne in Mama’s “whole body” that points toward transcendental deliverance.

As Mama’s somatic-sensed break accords this empowered grace through pregnancy, it could be argued that the tragedy of such grace being biologically foreclosed to Ursa is hence redoubled by Mama’s telling of this experience to her daughter. Emphasizing Mama’s sense of grace in this way might contradict my ‘anti-trauma’ reading of Ursa in that it highlights not only the fact that Ursa herself can never have such feeling in her own “whole body” but that her awareness of this inaugurates then permeates her entire narrative. In echo of the tempting reading of Hölderlin’s “forever” from Adorno’s “Golden Gate” that suggests a possible melancholic waiting for “the cheated and foolish,” primacy on Mama’s grace-full affective knowledge (which, again, comes by the very physiological mechanism violently taken from Ursa’s body) could bring back the bad-melancholic, embodiment-as-trauma view of an irredeemably “cheated” Ursa.

This is where, at last, the final scene of *Corregidora* brings forth ultimate evidence against such pessimistic reading, by way of Scott’s emphasis on Ursa’s

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

“reenacting in the present a *sexual* act.” In sexual reunion with Mutt some twenty years later, Ursa gains her own somatic wisdom—specifically, knowledge about what it was that Great Gram did to Corregidora:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: “What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next?” In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: “I could kill you.”

I held his ankles. It was like I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?

“I could kill you.”<sup>49</sup>

In the same way Mama’s body bestows knowing, Ursa through her body *knows* “what it was.” Lighting up her body in Adornian fashion, such knowledge comes “in a split second.” Constituted by a somatically received, non-differentiated “moment of pleasure and excruciating pain,” this knowledge is akin to Mama’s knowledge she “wanted you.” The wisdom accrued in this moment extends beyond just drawing a parallel between Ursa herself and Great Gram (‘fellatio with teeth’); this wisdom enables Ursa’s claiming Great Gram not just by way of her body but *in her body*. By way of the recognition that her sexual act might be the same as Great Gram’s, Ursa arrives at the stunning affective claim of a non-differentiation between herself and her ancestor: “I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora.” In this moment, beyond somatic contact with Mutt, Ursa can be said to be touching her ancestor; Great Gram is inscribing herself into this moment of fellatio. This is a depathologizing reversal of the (rightfully pathologized) incest at the heart of Corregidora’s sexual violence: Ursa takes on the incestuous terms in and of her ‘generations’ to claim, if only for a moment, her progenitor in this sexual act. In this incestuous love of Great Gram is what might be called Ursa’s own sense of grace: the inheritance of her progenitor’s “pleasure” and empowerment (in addition to “pain” and violence), but also the directly felt and somatically contacted love for Great Gram’s own constitutive love-being.

Augmenting this reading of incestuous progenitor-loving and the comparison to the prior scene of Mama’s somatic wisdom is the fact that Mama, too, has intense moments of ancestor-self non-differentiation, alluded to in this very passage in simile: “like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram.” Hence, these scenes already beg such comparison about the somatic possibilities for grace that arrive by imagining, contacting, and fucking the generations. Moreover, the scene of Mama’s grace-in-

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 184.

pregnancy is the very same scene in which she inhabits Great Gram's voice, prefatory to it. Mama's grace, then, points forward—toward break, toward Ursa—but for Jones this also means to point backward, to claim the past in and by direct somatic contact: to *be* the generations in incestuous unity. This could be said, in echo of Lorde, to be the ultimate narcissism of the Other, for in Ursa's case the other is the very condition of possibility for any narcissism at all. To love herself is to love—directly—the ancestors. Jones' 'fellatio with teeth,' it turns out, threatens not only to cut, to castrate, to negate ("I could kill you") the historically contiguous sources of violent oppression (Corregidora, Daddy, Mutt); it bites through the thick membrane-like circumscription of love bonds past and future in order to enable loving grace in and as the present. In this way, emboldening Adorno's narcissism, Jones reveals the grace that inheres in narcissism. What is Ursa's graceful narcissism, then, if not a mega-social 'reinvention' of Bersani and Phillips's 'relational possibilities of narcissism itself?'

### vii. The wisdom of narcissism (again); or, why somatic "knowledge" isn't a thing

One advantage of considering Ursa's sexual finale in this way is (by what I have been suggesting idiomatically all along) that it takes somatic feeling as a kind of wisdom, rather than the bodily knowledge typically associated with affect. It is not empirical knowledge that is borne out of the "split second" of Adornian 'lighting up,' but rather a reception that cannot *not* be trusted. In contrast to Berlant's rationalist suspicion of a love that might not "feel like love," there is no possibility for such paranoia here. There is, after all, no trace of doubt in either Mama's or Ursa's moments of knowing.<sup>50</sup> Calling this bodily knowing "somatic wisdom" is to assert a blessed assurance that encloses the proper relationship of immanence to transcendence discussed earlier. In the same way narcissism is the ineluctable structure of love bonds and thus can be trusted as the internal measure of mega-social love, the split second of somatic wisdom is also a reception borne out of a trust in the subject's love-being and the possibility of the reception of grace therein. On the other hand, the paradox persists: such love-being is already proof of that grace. All that remains on the outside of this paradox is one's at-present self-trust in their somatic wisdom: the possibility of—and self-bound demand for—graceful breaks to come. Hence, this somatic wisdom is a narcissistic one; narcissism is the condition of possibility for grace.<sup>51</sup> In terms of feeling, it cannot feel like anything *but* love.

While not reducible to any instrumentality, this wisdom is affixed in precise enabling relation to another version of the break: incipient utopian impulse. Ursa is the

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<sup>50</sup> Admittedly, Ursa characterizes this moment as "a split second of hate and love," but calling it both has, revealingly, no bearing on her sense of assurance in receiving Great Gram in the scene of fellatio; if anything, the "hate" demarcates the expansiveness of this wisdom, which means taking on Mutt and Corregidora as well, of having to account for the fact that "I knew what it was, *and I think he might have known too*" (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's recent concept of "hapticality" for the sociality of the "undercommons." Hapticality shares the emphasis on building bonds by way of touch, and trusting haptics as a full-on metric of sociality rather than an empirical factor to be rationally judged toward that sociality. Harney and Moten's book appeared too late to be considered at length in this study, but obviously there is much in common between mega-social love bonds and their concept of the undercommons. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe and New York and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 97-99.

product of Mama's and Great Gram's break-making; she herself is the receptor of a powerful grace through a somatic wisdom her own; and her own already-there capacity for dreaming belies the diagnosis of trauma-bound subjectivity, which is her own break. Yet that is not the end of the story, for Ursa herself articulates impulses short of the break as well, resembling what José Muñoz calls the "utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment."<sup>52</sup> These impulses can be considered the play availed by Scott's "free present," a play whose inchoateness keeps us apprised of the futurity of (and as) mega-sociality. These impulses confirm the free present but also directly emphasize the future, using the resources of the generations to "create," in Amy Gottfried's estimation, Ursa's "new voices and new songs": "Great Gram's stories are repeated so that her daughters will memorize them and absorb her identity, but Ursa uses her history to create new voices and new songs."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Ursa articulate the desire to sing such new songs, specifically a "new world song":

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. She went and got her daughter, womb swollen with the child of her own father. How many generations had to bow to his genital fantasies? They were fisherman and planters. And you with the coffee-bean face, what were you? You were sacrificed. They knew you only by the signs of your sex. They touched you as if you were magic. They ate your genitals. And you, Grandmama, the first mulatto daughter, when did you begin to feel yourself in your nostrils? And, Mama, when did you smell your body with your hands?<sup>54</sup>

In this dazzling passage, it is no doubt true that "Ursa uses her history to create new voices and new songs," but it is worth noting that the sequential logic implied by Gottfried (and associated with Ursa's subjecthood more broadly) is here reversed. Rather than a history of the prior generations leading up to Ursa's new song, it is her desire for such song that commences this historical memory—a memory which only then begins in proper sequence, with Great Gram, "the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress," and ends with Mama. The newness of Ursa's song and historical subject-position is not at the end of the sequence of genealogical brutality but propped at its very beginning. Ursa's new songs, then, are not the *telos* of a historical memory of which she is some final consequence; yet that history remains the ineluctable condition of possibility for Ursa's present desire for new song, which is to say that the reversal here does not deny the brutality of that historical memory (as the vividness herein testifies). Thus, the genesis of new songs comes both because *and* despite this brutality.

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<sup>52</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2009), 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> Amy S. Gottfried, "Angry Arts: Silence, Speech, and Song in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *African American Review* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 568.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 59.

Here, then, is an instance of Scott's sense of Jones' "conjuring of time not as a line but a loop," but one that arrives without the ultimate, somatically wise break affected by sex. Jones thus insists on *beginning* with positivity-content and suggests that the negative movement of history (as discussed in chapter three) cannot be conflated with negative content. Both forms of content, that is, are simply *there*. Addressing all three progenitors directly—beginning with "you with the coffee-bean face"—reveals the depth of Ursa's "absorption" of this twin thereness; she can conjure their "survival," their having successfully "suppressed hysteria," of the jubilant fact of having made generations regardless of horrific and constitutive "genital fantasies." Ursa's absorption thus runs deeper than just her progenitors' "stories;" she has absorbed their very love-beings: indeed, Ursa's own love-being can be said to be constituted by this absorption. Hence, beginning the entire sequence of memory this way—that her own desire for new songs inaugurates this absorption of all three prior generations—brings into relief the self-love that structures it. Ursa's narcissistic embrace of her own song recursively reveals the same embrace—absorption—of the ancestors. This is a narcissism of the Other that bends sequential, genealogical time in order to honor and love the Other ineluctably as one's own.

### viii. Queer future, queer reading, and the heuristic preference for optimism

Perhaps such narcissism-bound and mega-social sequencing of history can be thought of as a revision of time itself: a queering of the wounds embedded in the past and constituting the present. In her magnificent *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman discusses how "time not only 'binds' flesh into bodies and bodies into social but also appears to 'bind' history's wounds."<sup>55</sup> Perhaps there is no clearer example of how a "historical subject" is "bound" by and to "history's wounds" than Ursa's. And yet: Ursa's intermittent, scattershot, and unconventionally sequenced invocations of her version of the "social" suggest that time's binding features are mutable—even reversible. In fact, within the hermeneutics of racial abjection, consider how much more accurate to Gayl Jones and *Corregidora* a full reversal of Freeman's formulation reads: History's wounds bind the social which binds bodies which binds, at last, flesh, the source of somatic wisdom. Much more proximate to the sociality and historical memory originated by the reduction of black life to flesh, there is one more Jonesian looping to even this reversed sequence, which brings *Corregidora's* sense of time into accurate and reflexive relief: history's wounds *are* flesh; flesh *is* history's wounds. Rather than flattening time or neglecting past time (history), this non-differentiation does the opposite of each. Firstly, it vivifies the present's sense of past *and* future, in Eliotic flourish, by reminding us of the continuity of the socius that constitutes all three. Freeman emphasizes the ways in which "time *binds* a socius," but Jones insists on how a socius binds time.<sup>56</sup> Secondly, this non-differentiation of flesh and history shows that the hermeneutic threat of disavowing, forgetting, or otherwise not doing right by that past is not as big as it appears. In echo of Baraka's positive essence-talk in chapter two, if history is bound to flesh, then there is no such forgetting as long as there is embodiment.

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Can either this embodiment or the conception of time within it be called queer? As in chapter four's discussion of Adrian Tomine, this never-least query comes last: what, within this set of ideas, is queer? And as in *Shortcomings*, Jones deploys heterosexual relations throughout; *Corregidora's* problematic invocations of same-sex relations has been well-documented, and it is by way of its status as a "straight" text that it adheres as a text of black womanhood: of "making generations" by a gendered reproductive function and of staking a political position of 'yes-future.' Yet to see time as Ursa does—to enclose the nearly unspeakable past within the future's promise of breaks and grace, while also enclosing that promise in and as the present, embodying that promise while demanding more—is to conceive of time utopically and queerly. As Muñoz argues,

Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian... Indeed, to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer. To participate in such an endeavor is not to imagine an isolated future for the individual but instead to participate in a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique.<sup>57</sup>

What is Ursa's yearning for if not to "imagine another time and place" of "collective futurity," a futurity that would honor the past by *being* its own "historical materialist critique?" In her utopic longing, the queerness of such an "endeavor" comes into view. Queerness itself, in this way, is an ideality, "not quite here" yet.<sup>58</sup>

Yet for Jones' cast of what Muñoz calls "queer hermeneutics," it is crucial to stay apprised of the presentism therein: the wisdom of the always already existing that enables such utopic longings and visions (or, glibly, the "hermeneutics" part of "queer hermeneutics"). *Corregidora*, even outside the realm of Ursa's dreamscapes and flashbacks, contains such evocations of the already existing. Near the end of the novel, Ursa converses with a fellow musician at the club that employs her. Discussing the politics of black musicians' professional chances in the record industry, the fifty-eight year-old, unnamed character says,

"Yeah, I been singing all my life. You know how long Thelonious Monk was playing in that place all that long time before they discovered him. You know, I don't like to use that word 'discovered,' cause it's already there, ain't it?"

I nodded.

"Yes, indeedy, it's already there, but don't seem like they can see it."<sup>59</sup>

In Monk (which is to say: his thriving, his wisdom, his love-being), who was "already there" long before he became a mainstream cultural fixture, Jones seems to suggest, by way of a musical voice itself yet "undiscovered" (who is also an "undiscovered," minor character within the novel), the surety of things as they are with or without 'discovery.' The wisdom located in thinking in terms of the always already existing itself *exists* regardless of any metric of recognition, whether it "seem like they can see it" or not. That the conversation between this stranger and Ursa directly concerns recognition and

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<sup>57</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 169.



memory—he asks her over and over not to forget where he is playing next, so she might come hear him play (“You won’t forget, will you?”)<sup>60</sup>—further emboldens Jones’ thematization of this wisdom: there is no forgetting, if it is already there. Locatable in a novel that has rightly been associated with the death-bound, spectral, and history-as-defeat negativity-content of black female abjection, then, is not only a utopian hermeneutics that looks outward but what Moten calls “the rightness and the essential timelessness of the always already existing.”<sup>61</sup> In this timelessness, we are reminded of Adorno’s grace and the antinomian transcendental love that abides in immanence. Such looking outward combined with the already extant together form the twofold structure of *Corregidora*’s love-bound positivity-content. The hermeneutic preference toward (or attitudinal avowal of) this content is one stake of the query but also the enablement of this kind of query. This option can be properly described as a heuristic *optimism*, a graceful and loving mode of both waiting for and narcissistically demanding mega-sociality. Both Jones and Adorno, in this way, and against respective critical discourses to the contrary, can be said to be rigorous and love-bound optimists.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>61</sup> Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1746.

## Epilogue

### The optimism in and of love; or, love in the time of “cruel optimism”

Love having been a slave here, the serving implicit in love-talk... Love in the commonest sense, love in the sense of relief.<sup>1</sup>

- C. S. Giscombe, “The Black River”

It is not usually our ideas that make us optimists or pessimists, but it is our optimism or our pessimism, of physiological or perhaps pathological origin, as much as the one as the other, that makes our ideas.<sup>2</sup>

- Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*

#### 1. Adornian optimism and the rebuttal to metaphysical politics

It is tempting to bring this project to a close with a discussion of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, as the tongue-in-cheek title to this chapter suggests. Berlant’s luminous thought has been criticized enough, in my estimation, in the previous chapter alongside (her elective tethering to) Michael Hardt. Suffice it to say, I hope the matrix of thought presented herein already implies a strenuous (if not too obvious) objection to a notion of “cruel optimism,” wherein the affected futural promise of a better world is accepted pathologically as the worst stripe of false consciousness and gives lie to both that promised embettered future as well as the terms of the present, now embittered, which birthed that promise. The immense popularity of Berlant’s recent study is profoundly depressing, as if such popularity is, in real-time, revealing the extensity and intensity of the internalization of negativity-content, of a pathological pessimism whose ally and masquerade is the misunderstanding of critique itself. Adding to this bad sense of things is for me the fact that cruel optimism’s popularity is owed to *my* generation of thinkers, upstart inheritors of many intellectual vagaries and vacancies before this one while also those spoiled by the immense intellectual wealth at present, to which this project hopefully testifies by way of its engagements with Anne Cheng, Lee Edelman, David Eng, Michael Hardt, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, José Muñoz, Fred Moten, Antonio Negri, Elizabeth Povinelli, Darieck Scott—and, no doubt, Berlant as well. What I mean to say is that the regime of negative-bound content in critical thought, particularly (and surprisingly) in discussions of love (of all things!), appears at present to be a dominant one. Bringing this regrettable dominance into relief is the fact that such negativity extends to claim the territory of positivity, romantically taking on the burden of a hermeneutics of suspicion of ineluctably positive terms such as “love” and “optimism.” Consider this thought experiment: where in the present American academy could one begin a discussion about Adorno as an optimist? Rather than Berlant, I would like to build up further the argument for Adorno’s uncruel and proper optimism and then, with Adorno in tow, turn to today’s most fertile, ambitious, and significant debate in black

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Giscombe, *Prairie Style* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (New York: Dover, 1954), 3.

studies, between Fred Moten’s “Black Op” and Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson’s “afro-pessimism.”

Contrary to the commonplace caricature of Adorno as an incorrigible cultural pessimism, in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* he speaks of the “freedom” and “happiness” of thought that together bespeak a purity of insistence on positivity-content. This, I would assert, is the true Adornian inheritance of German Idealism, which Adorno describes as the power of thought itself, its surplus: “The speculative surplus of thought over mere existence is its freedom.”<sup>3</sup> The heuristic optimism in this formulation is traced by the nominative affiliation between speculative surplus and freedom; rather than surplus-*qua*-thought leading to or yielding freedom, Adorno insists that this surplus already always *is* thought’s freedom. Adorno goes on to interrogate the anti-freedom notion of “an idea of tragedy” borne from an ontological insistence of finitude, not unlike Marx against the empiricist-as-political-economist (as discussed in chapter five). Adorno hits a certain dialectical peak here:

I believe that the position I am trying to explain to you could not be expressed more clearly than by pointing out that it is not prepared to endorse an idea of tragedy according to which everything that exists deserves even to perish because it is finite, and that this perishing is at the same time the guarantee of its infinite nature—I can tell you that there is little in traditional thought to which I feel so steadfastly opposed as this. What I am saying, then, is that this concept of depth, which amounts to a theodicy of suffering, is itself shallow. It is shallow because, while it behaves as if it were opposed to the shallow, rather mundane desire for sensual happiness, in reality it does no more than appropriate worldly values which it then attempts to elevate into something metaphysical. It is shallow, furthermore, because it reinforces the idea that failure, death and oppression are the inevitable essence of things—whereas important though all these elements are and, connected as they are to the essence of things, they are avoidable and criticizable, or at any rate the precise opposite of what thinking should actually identify with.<sup>4</sup>

Thought, according to Adorno, must strive to identify with the opposite of “failure, death and oppression,” the triumvirate of metaphysical essence that emerges from the “traditional” structure of depth. This principle of depth is begotten by the good intentions of attempting the negation of a shallow “desire for sensual happiness” but is set awry from the beginning, from its foundational axiom that existence is reducible to finitude. This axiom founds “an idea of tragedy” that sets the epistemic bounds—not to mention the ontological capacity—of thought itself. In the corrective to this foundational misunderstanding of thought’s capacity and project, Adorno takes for granted the proper relationship between immanence and transcendence discussed in chapter five; the avowal of (and operation from) the “theodicy of suffering” struts about as the salve to the deep wound of existence but also as metaphysical proof of that wound, of the unavoidable suffering at the constitutive core of being. The cheapness of this metaphysical assertion

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. R. Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 99. [Original work published in 1966.]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

could, Adorno suggests, be understood in terms of a misrecognition of immanence, that the beneath-transcendence position of proof-and-salve is the only one thought can rightfully occupy within the very bounds of suffering-*qua*-existence set by that position in the first place. The rejection of this model is thus Adorno's alternative assertion: immanence is always already richer and deeper than a notion bare-life existence, which is thus always already to have access to the outside, an assertion here grounded in the contrarian "guarantee" of existence's "infinite nature" but one that is not borne from the poverty-avowing negative content of finitude and "perishing."

This antinomian negation of the "theodicy of suffering" is one way to understand the well-known but easily misunderstood dictum at the heart of *Negative Dialectics*: "The need to lend suffering a voice is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed."<sup>5</sup> Like the objective metric of offense felt by the slighted in "Golden Gate," suffering is in Adorno's idiom the subjective experience of an objective truth-content; while bound to the ontologies of "subjective experience," it is precisely in its intense phenomenological aspect that proves it is "objectively conveyed." Suffering, that is to say, is not the irreducible structure of subjectivity. As the objective, transcendental there-ness of suffering is exclusively felt in the immanent form of "subjective experience," there is no need for a "theodicy of suffering" that reduces the weight of this subjective content to "the inevitable essence of things" in and as immanence. As the there-ness of suffering is already a condition of truth to begin with, the role of thought is not to identify with suffering but rather to "lend a voice" to it. This craft of lending voice is the space of play, where thought's will or attitude is inseparable from the content of the thought itself. Elsewhere in the *Lectures*, Adorno describes this space as the location in which the "right thing" can be limned, and rather than an additive ethical component to thought's content, such will is thought's constitutive and "truly animating power":

I mean that it is not possible to think a right thought unless one wills the right thing [to happen]; that is to say, unless, underlying this thought, and providing it with a truly animating power, there is the desire that it should be right for human beings to enter into a condition in which meaningless suffering should come to an end and in which—I can only express it negatively—the spell hanging over mankind should be lifted.<sup>6</sup>

The stakes could not be clearer for 'what thinking should actually identify with,' as here Adorno's idiom asserts that heuristic preference "underlying thought"—the preference for "the right things"—propels thought toward entry "into a new condition in which meaningless suffering should come to an end." This preference, limned by the love-content of "Golden Gate" in chapter five and conceived as the proper relationship between transcendence-in-immanence, has the final word for Adorno vis-à-vis the powerful negative content of "the spell hanging over mankind"; indeed, it is precisely this spell that "should be lifted" by the more powerful "truly animating power" of such preference.

This hermeneutic preference thus turns out to be heuristic as it already *is* its own positivity-content. Adorno nominatively equates the aforementioned notion of "speculative surplus" to the substrate-like language of an "element of freedom": "This

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 53.

speculative surplus that goes beyond whatever is the case, beyond mere existence, is the element of freedom in thought, and because it is, because it alone does stand for freedom, because it represents the tiny quantum of freedom we possess, it also represents the *happiness* of thought. It is the element of freedom because it is the point at which the expressive need of the subject breaks through the conventional and canalized ideas in which he moves, and asserts himself.”<sup>7</sup> This assertion avows the “expressive need” (the aforementioned ‘condition of all truth’) within subjecthood while also maintaining (subjective) recognition of its relative smallness vis-à-vis truth itself, for such need is only “the tiny quantum of freedom.” Adorno’s language of ‘doing right’ by this tiny quantum conveys a debt to Leibniz and the infinitesimal preference (for the positive), an infinitesimal-ness that paradoxically makes a totalizing difference for thought. Indeed, Adorno’s affinity for the monad makes explicit this Leibnizian inheritance. For instance, in “Monad” of *Minima Moralia*, the subject resists its “crystallization to the forms of political economy” by the individuated “streak of independence within”: “What enables him to resist, that streak of independence in him, springs from monadological individual interest and its precipitate, character.”<sup>8</sup> Here the logic of the always already there meets the language of philosophical disposition and attitude, wherein the essential “streak” (otherwise conceived as the ‘element of freedom’) “springs” from an essential philosophic “character” of the subject. (In the epigraph to this chapter, Unamuno echoes Adorno in describing this character-like quality as “physiological.”) Adorno’s “character,” in essence, is a positive one, defined by a rejection of pessimism. As he also rejects the cheap “theodicy of suffering” in favor of an immanence-friendly (and proper) vision of what may be possible from what always already exists, such preference cannot be called hope, either, for the “element of freedom” is lived immanently (as is, not to mention, the grace described in chapter five); the rejection of the “theodicy of suffering” does not imply a replacement theodicy of messianic deliverance. God will not save us; or rather, the only deliverance is in nothing other than the already internalized “element of freedom.” In this way, the “truly animating power” behind Adorno’s thought—not to mention his prescription for all thought—can be defined as a heuristic optimism.

## ii. “Afro-pessimism” as intellectual tendency and affective presentism

At stake in the recent field-shaking debate in black studies between Frank Wilderson’s “afro-pessimism” and Fred Moten’s “black optimism” is precisely this notion of heuristic preference. Not unlike Adorno and Unamuno, Jared Sexton puts the matter in terms of disposition rather than content-driven “positions”: “In a way, what we’re talking about relates not to a disagreement about ‘unthought positions’ (and their de-formation) but to a disagreement, or discrepancy, about ‘unthought dispositions’ (and their in-formation).”<sup>9</sup> Wilderson defines the foundational limits of Enlightenment’s “political ontology” by way of an idiom (or “grammar”) of ineluctable black suffering:

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions*, no. 5 (2011): 24-25, accessed May 20, 2012, [www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsextion.php](http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsextion.php).

In short, political ontology, as imagined through Humanism, can only produce discourse that has as its foundation alienation and exploitation as a grammar of suffering, when what is needed (for the Black, who is always already a Slave) is an ensemble of ontological questions that has as its foundation accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering.<sup>10</sup>

The episteme of Wilderson's Afro-pessimistic disposition is staked upon this index of "a grammar of suffering," which is the condition of possibility for the proper (historical-materialist) conception of blackness as a social given under the "political ontology" ineluctably posed by and "imagined through Humanism." Moreover, such an index is the gauge of not only the historical present (a present made possible only by "the gratuitousness of the violence that made the Negro"<sup>11</sup>), but of the disposition required of and in the present situation. Indeed, historical contiguity—not simply the inheritance of that gratuitousness but political ontology's continuance of such constitutive violence in current lived experience—is the proof, according to Wilderson, of that "structural, or absolute, violence," which "remains constant, paradigmatically, despite changes in its 'performance' over time—slave ship, Middle Passage, Slave estate, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the prison-industrial complex."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a definitive stake, it seems to me, in the attitudinal preference toward pessimism in Wilderson's formulation (of the inescapable ontology of Humanism/Enlightenment and the (non-)station of blackness founded by its structural violence) is the argument for historical contiguity made by such declaration of historically constituting "political ontology," a formulation in which ontology and the historical present are equated explicitly. That is to say, Wilderson's "grammar of suffering" is afro-pessimism's political/pedagogical linchpin in the here-and-now.

In Sexton's summation of the debate surrounding afro-pessimism, he explicitly links Wilderson's sense of the contemporariness of this 'intellectual disposition' to Saidiya Hartman's notion of the ongoing "afterlife of slavery."<sup>13</sup> In fact, Sexton's

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<sup>10</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps no other thinker exemplifies the productive convergence of asserted disposition and historical consciousness better than Saidiya Hartman. Hartman thematizes contemporariness from the standpoint of afro-pessimism by way of the self-reflexive form of the professional travelogue. The now-famous notion of the continually inhabited "afterlife of slavery," which one identifies with toward a political pedagogy, functions as something like afro-pessimism's pedagogical mission statement: "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery." The entire passage leading up to this beautiful nominative declaration is worth quoting for its precision in the elaboration of anti-blackness: "I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance. Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery." In echo of my introduction's invocation of José Muñoz's metaphor for a futural queerness—the queer club drug Ecstasy—there is a joke to be made in light of the self-seriousness of Hartman's formulation. As one well-documented side effect of Ecstasy is what is dubbed "afterglow"—the feeling that follows the intensity of the MDMA and imbues the following morning with the same negation of suffering as while on the drug—one could reverse the attitude of Hartman's formulation of our inheritance of black

succinct definition of the aforementioned “intellectual disposition” is backlit by the utility of such disposition in staying apprised of such contiguity in “a post-emancipation society”:

This “afterlife of slavery,” as Saidiya Hartman terms it, challenges practitioners in the field to question the prevailing understanding of a post-emancipation society and to revisit the most basic questions about the structural conditions of antiblackness in the modern world. For Wilderson, the principal implication of slavery’s afterlife is to warrant an intellectual disposition of “afro-pessimism,” a qualification and a complication of the assumptive logic of black cultural studies in general and black performance studies in particular, a disposition that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way. This critical move has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, or even a denial of black social life, and a number of scholars have reasserted the earlier assumptive logic in a gesture that hypostasizes afro-pessimism to that end.<sup>14</sup>

Here, in Sexton’s own hypostasis of the afro-pessimist disposition, it is striking that he poses Wilderson’s notion of “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human” as *consequent from* the pessimist disposition in addition to the other way around. While pessimism is ‘warranted’ as the “principal implication of slavery’s afterlife,” the disposition itself “posits” the ontological distinction as well, creating a feedback loop of avowing the originary “grammar of suffering” by rearticulating it with the aim of warranting more pessimism. That is to say, afro-pessimism’s function as an appraisal of the historical present—of staying attuned to “the afterlife of slavery” (specifically, the way a constitutive political ontology constitutes “post-emancipation society” and makes it synonymous with something called “the afterlife of slavery”)—can only function by being rigorously asserted, studied, and *thought*, despite Sexton’s declaration to the contrary. In this way, despite its station as “intellectual disposition,” afro-pessimism is far from “unthought.”

In this way, an asserted, *thoughtful* pessimism converges with historical-political consciousness to function as afro-pessimism’s pedagogical mode. That is to say, afro-pessimism is nothing if not a political pedagogy of the present, and this pedagogy is afro-pessimism’s invocation of the historical present. What is striking about this tautology is that the thematization of contemporariness occurs by the assertion of a politics of *feeling*, of an emotive structure of internal avowal and external assertion of the “grammar of suffering” staked as an irrevocable and uncontestable ontology of the present. To echo Adorno, such pedagogy might be called the “theodicy of suffering,” wherein the very insistence on reminding ourselves of the constituted historical present amounts also to an avowal of (the supposedly merely diagnostic) “grammar of suffering.” Wilderson’s and Sexton’s separate (yet tandem) insistence on this avowal extends the diagnosis of political ontology to the *feeling* or *mood* of the present, possibly foreclosing a configuration of the grammar of suffering as the condition of possibility for the black-love-bound present (not to mention, of course, the future). In this reduction of the present

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social death this way: “I, too, am the afterglow of slavery.” See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 23.

to the staying-apprieved of this constitutive grammar, the present, too (in addition to the past), borders on the foreclosure of an alternative grammar, ceding to a theodicy of suffering.

Thus, the question unasked by afro-pessimism is why a categorical insight necessitates political identification and affective investment. If Wilderson's diagnostic insight is to reconfigure those "ontological questions that has as its foundation accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering" in order to situate them as *constitutive* of Enlightenment humanism (and anti-blackness as central to the category of the human), why and how is it that such diagnosis comports a prognosis of an avowal of what, again in Adorno's idiom, "thinking should identify with?" The point is not so much to deny the possibility of a politics of liberation rooted in afro-pessimism's epistemological soil, or to reject the political significance of the pedagogy of the "afterlife of slavery." The point is to ask, if both a politics and a pedagogy are central goals of such an intellectual project, whether the project must necessarily proceed by "the idea of tragedy" associated with Enlightenment's conception of depth, which equates the way-things-are to a scarcity-bound "theodicy of suffering." Such an avowal or abetting of this theodicy might be interrogated thusly, albeit more precise to say that the epistemic insights of afro-pessimism can be *exfoliated against* the affective investments attached therefrom, bringing into recursive relief a reflexive category error: diagnostic-historical insight as conflated to an affective attachment to the present, then an attachment to the present conflated with scarcity-bound "theodicy of suffering."

To echo my discussion of Lee Edelman and *No Future* in chapter one, a conflation of epistemic and categorical insight and a politics of the present leads to a positing of the present as a transcendental given. How one inhabits the present, which is also how one conceptualizes the present, is answered by both anti-social queer theory and afro-pessimism with a depressing politics of the present that divests from the notion that things could get better only by way of a romantic emphasis on the negativity of the here-and-now. Thus, to brush the affective investment of the here-and-now against the foundational grain of anti-blackness is not only to counter the political pedagogy of suffering but to conceive of an allied political pedagogy as well. Black optimism, that is, also operates from the recognition of the foundational station of black social death, and insofar as such recognition requires declaration and exploration, it is forever friendly with afro-pessimism. The signal difference is between the attitudinal cathexis with that insight, whether social death is, in the end, understood as an enabling restraint or as condition of possibility. For Fred Moten, optimism is in one sense "necessarily futural"—it is *about* the future—while it is also affirmative of the present that is the condition of possibility for that future, what Moten calls the "necessity, rightness, and timelessness of the always already existing."<sup>15</sup> Which then begs the corollary question of how such a temporal paradox extends to pessimism: pessimism is also "necessarily futural" but envisions the future from a present affectively invested in the desire to negate itself, a present that wants "thought to identify with" a notion of futurity as (an over-determined history of) the surefire continuance of the grammar or theodicy of suffering. Thus, it is by way of the competing conceptions of the present that the gap between afro-pessimism and black optimism appears, if only for a moment, largest. Black optimism's logic of the present,

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<sup>15</sup> Fred Moten, "Black Op," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1746.



which is also a belief in presence, must be thought of as the social practice of the love-bound paradoxes explored throughout this project.

### iii. The Zen of black optimism

The homies said, Hov, it ain't many of us  
I told them less is more, niggas, plenty of us<sup>16</sup>

- Jay-Z, "Pound Cake/Paris Morton Music 2"

Which brings me to Fred Moten and his series of articles that addresses what he calls "Black Op," in which "Op" stands for both operation and optimism.<sup>17</sup> In the inaugural essay, titled "The Case of Blackness," Moten reverses the pervasive formulation I have just sketched regarding the relationship of blackness to ontology from afro-pessimism: "What is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events."<sup>18</sup> According to Moten, this is the proper understanding of the anoriginal station of blackness to the given world of theodicies of suffering. In this way, it is crucial to keep in mind how much black optimism shares with afro-pessimism: the same epistemic field and historical precision in describing blackness' relationship to what Wilderson calls "political ontology" and what Moten calls "already given ontologies." Yet if we follow Moten's language of "the always already existing," which is to say the standpoint of the here-and-now, a problem emerges in thinking through pessimism's take on that temporal paradox, which can be elaborated as a misconception of racial abjection and the love bonds therein.

The notion of "the always already existing" is, for Moten, precisely that which escapes or stands outside the grammar of suffering, even as it also understands that escape by way of the constitutive ways in which such a grammar structures lived experience. Such avowal of the completeness of the grammar of suffering and social death is, it seems to me, belied by afro-pessimism's own articulations at nearly every turn. For instance, Sexton begins a recent lecture on afro-pessimism, titled "People-of-Color-Blindness," with this formulation of racial abjection: "We are not the 99%. We are supernumerary. We are the uncalculated, the incalculable. 'We are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began.'"<sup>19</sup> It is

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<sup>16</sup> Drake, *Nothing Was the Same*, © 2013 by OVO Sound/Young Money, compact disc.

<sup>17</sup> Moten's optimism is shot through all his work, but it is explicitly thematized in a series of articles from the last six years, the most recent of which directly addresses afro-pessimism. In addition to "Black Op," see Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 177-218; Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737-780.

<sup>18</sup> Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 187.

<sup>19</sup> Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," YouTube, accessed May 20, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNVMi3oiDaI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNVMi3oiDaI). This formulation relies in part, including the segment invoking abjection, on a passage Sexton cites as a segment from Rita Dove's poem, "David Walker (1785-1830)," which in turn serves as the epigraph to Sexton's lecture. It is also found as the epigraph to the Sexton piece discussed in my introduction, "Curtain of the Sky." It is worth noting that this quote—"We are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began"—finds its

immediately tempting to point out the technical error of such a formulation (on which, it is tempting to charge, the entire afro-pessimistic enterprise hinges): If one were *that* abject, one could not be speaking in the first place, at all, and not least about one's abjection and the "we" that comes from it. This error, which is perhaps also the willful looking-away from the indelible positive-content of abjection in favor of the romance of negativity, reveals the same commitment to the teleological equation of negation to negative content that too-commonly characterizes the contemporary critical practice scrutinized throughout this manuscript.

Racial-sexual abjection, after all, is the very condition of possibility for not some romantic notion of subjectivity but for existence, for being, for lived experience. Such a critique enabled by the abjection analytic can also be extended to the afro-pessimistic formulation that there is social life within social death, in which the very existence of social life could be said always already to give lie to the ontology of social death, rather than combining their mutual existence as some conciliatory gesture regarding "bare life;" here we are, at present and always, talking about our abjection. Speaking directly to Wilderson's and Sexton's work, Moten makes a similar reversal in the idiom of love:

I have thought long and hard, in the wake of their work, in a kind of echo of Bob Marley's question, about whether blackness could be loved; there seems to be a growing consensus that analytic precision does not allow for such a flight of fancy, such romance, but I remain under the impression, and devoted to the impression, that analytic precision is, in fact, a function of such fancy.<sup>20</sup>

The answer, of course, is already found in the ears of anyone who has heard "Could You Be Loved," in which Marley and the Wailers' very question was, in the end, rhetorical. Blackness could and can be loved because any doubt to the contrary—the "could" that struts about as "analytic precision"—is borne from the 'fanciful' notion that blackness is already love-bound. Moten's love reversal thus suggests the necessary separation of afro-pessimism's assertion of structure, which it agrees is undoubtedly analytically precise, from this assertion's iteration as absolute decree—its insistence on social death's absoluteness. Black optimism rejoins this conflation (in echo of the yellow-melancholic critics of chapter three), "Why would we insist we come from nothing?" Which is also to ask, "How can we think we can afford to insist we come from nothing?" The nihilism that inheres to the conciliatory formulation that social life goes on within social death is a matter of a will or intentionalism of thought, itself a "function of fancy."

Such deep cathexis with the idea of irredeemable suffering (and of love being precluded in terms of both its constitution and its desire for more), can be said to be symptomatic of what Adorno diagnoses as the "depth" of Western epistemology, i.e., Enlightenment thought itself. Despite the ontological separateness of blackness that is its fundamental insight, antiblackness theory as elaborated by afro-pessimism might be said to over-rely on (and thus redouble) what Eve Sedgwick called the "eerily thin Western

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origin not in Dove's poem but in the very beginning of Walker's *Appeal* itself. See David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in four articles; together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2000), 2. [Original work published in 1829.]; Jared Sexton, "'Curtain of the Sky': An Introduction," *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 1; Rita Dove, "David Walker (1785-1830)," in *The Missouri Review* 2, nos. 2-3 (Spring 1979): 56.

<sup>20</sup> Moten, "Mysticism in the Flesh," 738.

‘phenomenology’ of knowing”—a thinness that masquerades, to echo Adorno again, as a thickness of knowledge that “reinforces the idea that failure, death and oppression are the inevitable essence of things.” Sedgwick’s turn to the practice and ritual of Buddhism offers a bridge toward an alternative wisdom of processing this ontological gap. In her “Pedagogy of Buddhism” essay, Sedgwick elaborates that even if we desire the recognition-moment of Western phenomenology, “Clearly such recognition can be no perfunctory cognitive event.”<sup>21</sup> In light of afro-pessimism’s categorical insight, it seems to me that in the rush to this “perfunctory” recognition, which appears in the world as the avowal of suffering that is pessimism, we might lose sight of an alternative phenomenological possibility: that things are actually way worse than antiblackness theory has recognized, that the brutality and terror is truly unspeakable and *absolutely* unimaginable, where the unspeakable and unimaginable stand as a category outside the cognitive, thus in proper sync with how blackness stands outside of Enlightenment ontology for Wilderson, Sexton, and Moten. My contention is thus that afro-pessimism might, in fact, only skim the surface of the phenomenal content of black social death, thus their repetition of Sedgwick’s “perfunctory cognitive event.” As a matter of the present, how can one respond to such brutality and terror in terms of simple perfunctory cognitive events?

Sedgwick’s interest in Zen Buddhism provides an alternative pedagogy, bounded by the presentism borne from one’s affective relation to *absolute nothingness*. Like Audre Lorde before her, Sedgwick was configuring a relation to the present in the face of imminent actual death from aggressive breast cancer. In search of a way to grapple with the impossibly deep phenomenological content of her own impending death, Sedgwick became interested in a pedagogy that would allow her “to be able to die as one lived... to be able... to learn or teach about emptiness through proximity to death.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike afro-pessimism, for whom the ontological absolute of the station of blackness is conflated with an notion of the nothingness of black being at present, for Sedgwick the imposition of the threat of an *absolute* nothingness was precisely why she could not equate pedagogy to identity-thought. At the risk of sounding glib, facile, or self-help-y, this for her meant the affected non-differentiation between the “means and ends” of thought itself. Her task in bringing “means and ends into unaccustomed relations with each other” began, paradoxically, from what she called a “nonpedagogic image”:

A nonpedagogic image, such as seeing the journey itself as the destination, makes it easy enough to see means and ends as inseparable. But with an image that necessarily evokes a scene of teaching, and in the context of the long, highly self-conscious tradition of Buddhist hermeneutical thought, it is apparently considered necessary to emphasize the nonidentity of pedagogical means and ends on a routine basis, and only rarely to invoke their inseparability.<sup>23</sup>

Sedgwick suggests that an alternative pedagogy, in proper relation to the incommensurateness of absolute nothingness, could not be anything other than an insistence on nonidentity and the non-differentiation of “means and ends.” This is what Sedgwick intended in turning attention to affects, a point that has been lost in both affect

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<sup>21</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 168.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

studies and identity studies, which quickly subsumed affect into another mode of discourse redoubling the Western model of thinness/thickness and negation/negativity.<sup>24</sup> This oppositional stance, looking away but also forward to a categorically absolute nothingness, in the least gives lie to the *relative* nothing—no thing, absence, lack, loss, ghostly matter, melancholia, trauma—that we romanticize in Western critique in the name of doing anxious right in the here-and-now. Such shallow attempts at redress and commensurability amount to what Sedgwick described as a limited Western focus on “consciousness,” backlighting her preference toward Buddhism’s “central rather than epiphenomenal” way into “the full entrance into the infinity of nothingness, having transcended the sphere of the infinity of consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, black optimism shares conceptual affinity with Buddhist pedagogy, striving toward the “infinity of nothingness” amidst a bad world that erroneously designates finitude (relative nothingness) to blackness. Of course, the temporal paradox that constitutes this configuration as “optimism” entails that such striving from the position of the here-and-now cannot be anxious because it is already the thing (the not-nothing) from which such striving comes, its condition of possibility, its own abreaction. It could be said, then, that black optimism *also* pays heed to the nothing that appears as “social death” in the bad world of immanence, and insofar as such recognition is necessary in this world, it is, once again, forever friendly with afro-pessimism. But insofar as such recognition is an end, in addition to a means, toward something like Buddhist knowledge of the “fact” of social death, black optimism is more than afro-pessimism’s dreamy adjunct but a slight corrective, reminding us that the absolute nothing we fear is not only the condition of possibility for escape but that our fear of the relative version of nothing, the nothing as scribed in the bad world, pales in comparison to the “infinity of nothingness.”

This reckoning with two versions of nothingness explains both Sedgwick’s turn to Buddhism as well as Moten’s recent attention to the Kyoto School, namely Kitarō Nishida.<sup>26</sup> In a very similar idiom, Nishida draws a distinction between “true nothingness” and the nothingness of “a particular moment in the development of consciousness,” which in dialectical turn leads to a transcendent consciousness apart from “quantitative limitations”:

When being is regarded as arising from nothingness in the physical world, the nothingness, as a fact of consciousness, is not true nothingness but a particular moment in the development of consciousness. In consciousness,

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<sup>24</sup> This ironic twist traceable in the history of affect studies will be explored in detail in my next manuscript, tentatively titled, *Redeeming Essence: Heuristic Optimism and Positive Affect in Black and Yellow*.

<sup>25</sup> Sedgwick, “Touching, Feeling,” 167.

<sup>26</sup> Moten sees in Nishida’s thought the proper relationship from immanence to transcendence (as I discussed in chapter five) routed in the idiom of nothingness. Moten sees in Nishida (and in convergence, he argues, with Frantz Fanon) the “negation of the condition of relative nothingness” that brings into view “blackness as the place where something akin to the absolute nothingness that Nishida elaborates and a radical immanence of things that is not disavowed so much as it is unimagined in that same elaboration converge.”<sup>26</sup> Signaling Nishida’s ultimate blindness in immanence (he was a significant conspirator in the rise of Japanese imperialism, akin to Martin Heidegger’s abetting the Third Reich), Moten sees Nishida as not having gone far enough in converging absolute nothingness with the immanent “thingliness” of the here-and-now: “This is to say that what remains unimagined by Nishida—not simply radical thingliness but its convergence with nothingness—is, nevertheless, made open to us by and in his thinking. Nishida helps prepare us to consider, even in the nationalist divagation of his own engagement with the heart of a teaching that has no center, that blackness is the place that has no place.” See Moten, “Mysticism in the Flesh,” 751.

how can being arise from nothingness? Consciousness is not affected by the quantitative limitations of time, place, and force, thus it is not controlled by the mechanical law of causality.<sup>27</sup>

In this equation of an ideal of consciousness to an absolute or “true” nothingness, we see the proper relationship between relative and absolute in Eastern pedagogy as parallel with immanence and transcendence in the Western. True nothingness could, in rhyme with Moten, be conceived of as the proper space of blackness, that “blackness is the place that has no place.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, the impasse of antiblackness theory is revealed again: is one to emphasize—which is to say, to avow, to will thought to identify with—blackness as the given ontology in the world of horrific social “facts” or as the counter-ontological open inaugurated by that givenness?

One reason to side with the infinitesimal preference toward optimism in this schema is that it reads, in its engagement with absoluteness, as the more equipped, expansive position. As long as we are here in the bad world in which such a preference is to be made, it seems to me likely only one of the given dispositions can account for and identify with the spirit of the other. Yet perhaps that is too unfriendly a criticism and against the spirit of thinking about preference itself—of thinking about the relation between will and thought in the way that brings Adorno and Nishida together. Perhaps the preferable way to articulate the desire for preference is with the pedagogy of collectivity and collective satisfaction that are the social precincts black optimism. There is one final recursion to trace in the preference between optimism and pessimism, which concerns the promise of the future, the affective investment in the possibility that the present is a rich condition of possibility. Black optimism, it must be made clear, does not promise black deliverance, nor does it proclaim that given conditions are OK; it is neither eager nor complacent. Rather, this hermeneutical optimism could be thought of as the affective signature of that place-of-no-place, a provisional space to reside in, trust in, and rest. Backlit by the epistemic recalibration that is antiblackness theory, optimism could be thought of as what Anne-Lise François calls the “transitive process” borne from the reprieve from the desire for “forward-looking intentionality”—hope. Traced in “hope’s own passiveness” (in Emily Dickinson), François traces this process as generative of a presentism that in itself unasks the question of the desire for promise fulfilled—of getting ‘something’ against nothingness—and, in turn, accords a different relation to teleological time: “This transitive process remains difficult to record as such because what is relinquished is itself a way of structuring time, of standing in relation to its promise. The giving up of hope’s unrealized claims changes nothing, only whether the present is colored by lack.”<sup>29</sup> Optimism, it could be said, is the affected assurance of the (black) answer to this query: the present *cannot* be “colored by lack,” as it is constituted by its relation to absolute nothingness.

The charge of political malfeasance against black optimism would be that it looks away from the affective, psychic, and structural violence of antiblackness in the historical present, that it irresponsibly deemphasizes the exigency of the function of black social

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<sup>27</sup> Kitarō Nishida, *An Inquiry Into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1992), 46. [Original work published in 1911.]

<sup>28</sup> Moten, “Mysticism in the Flesh,” 751.

<sup>29</sup> Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2008), 179.

death in and as the “afterlife of slavery.” Yet if one were to affectively recognize one’s social death, it would have to be through the recognition of it “as not other than oneself,” to use Sedgwick’s words.<sup>30</sup> So the *only* salve to the wound of raciality is Sedgwick’s version of recognition (as not some perfunctory cognitive event), a pedagogy she shared in Buddhist thought with folks as “a way to keep recognizing their elusive ends in their skillfully intimate means.”<sup>31</sup> Such skillful intimacy, affected as optimism, is always already shared in the collectivity of dispossession and could be said, with Moten, to *be* blackness itself. In this way, we remain assured, as Jay-Z is in my final epigraph, that there are, despite any appearance to the contrary, “plenty of us.” The nothing we share is the nothing we are, the nothing we *feel* together. This is love.

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<sup>30</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 168.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

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