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AMBIVALENCE IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY U.S. LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

AMBIVALENCE IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY US LITERATURE AND CULTURE

JOSHUA JONES

Ambivalence in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century U.S. Literature and Culture reframes ambivalence from being a problem requiring solution to a source and force of politically and ethically significant transformative potential. Since its coinage in early-twentieth-century psychoanalysis, accounts of ambivalence, particularly those concerning stigmatized (e.g. queer, trans, racialized, disabled) subjects, typically conceive of it as a component of or catalyst for broader arguments around shame and repression and seek to resolve the problem of ambivalence resolutely through either assimilation or radical opposition. The literary works I explore chart more complex routes through ambivalence, disaggregating it from shame, understanding it as a constitutive, unavoidable, and irresolvable condition of subjectivity, and leaving the ambivalences the works explore – around gender, sexuality, race, and class – provocatively unresolved. In considering how these texts derive *with* (rather than *from*) their ambivalences the affective resources through which new resistances and worlds can begin to be built, my dissertation establishes ambivalence as an integral concept for approaching and conducting the work of ethical and political action in the troubled present.

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INTRODUCTION

"THAT HAPPILY CHOSEN TERM"

Ambivalence is a queer feeling. Defined, in its most straightforward sense, as the coexistence of contradictory feelings, emotions, or attitudes toward an object, ambivalence has the capacity to not only unmoor everyday life's anchoring normativities and to complicate or render untenable the clarifying oppositionality of categorical beliefs and assumptions, but to irrupt the viability of categorization itself. One possible effect of this temporary or permanent unravelling of the supposedly known and stable is that the subject is forced into an encounter with the profound irrationality, misrecognition, and irresolution – in short, the nonsovereignty – that drives and shapes both psychical and social life. At the same time, ambivalence is a fundamentally normal feeling, in that everyday life is saturated by, productive of, and even structured around responses to, ambivalence and its management. Ambivalence is thus both radically disruptive and supremely banal. To actively take ambivalence as the optic through which one perceives and encounters the world and oneself is to engage vertiginously the slipperiness and precipitousness of attempts to render coherent our experiences and understandings of our worlds: things become unstuck, norms and certainties become more palpably compromised by the vicissitudes – the

pleasure and the pain – of contingency, uncertainty, and improvisation. Moving with rather than resisting or disavowing ambivalence can, though by no means necessarily will, generate a sense of the potentiality of *something else* – something more, less, or just differently liveable – that compels a response from the subject in the form of action (agential or otherwise). It is in this basic sense that learning from ambivalence in ways that make it more generatively liveable, and understanding it as a constitutive and unavoidable condition of subjectivity rather than as a resolvable problem, can be framed as a politically significant and potentially transformative endeavor. With this in mind, ambivalence can more broadly be defined as: a subjective feeling, albeit one that is often substituted colloquially as shorthand for a complex array of interrelated affective states (indecision, inaction, uncertainty, anxiety, indifference, boredom, etc.); a structure of feeling mediating affective life and the subject's capacity to act or be acted upon; and a psychic manifestation or iteration of social and material contradictions and antagonisms organized around any number of structural and identitarian differences, hierarchies, and inequities.

Coined in 1910 by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler and quickly adopted and expanded upon by Sigmund Freud, the term has tended to be understood and applied most prominently in the context of discourse on human feeling and emotion and framed negatively as a sign of distress and disorder. Ambivalence does not, however, pertain only to affective matters. It is also characteristic of semiotic systems in general, and of language in particular. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, ambivalence is language's "permanent companion — indeed, its normal condition" (1). According to

Bauman, this is due to the inevitable failure of one of language's main functions, that of naming and classifying the world in ways that aim to maintain a(n illusive) sense of the world's "orderliness" in order to keep at bay "the contingent world of randomness" (2) that both circumscribes and saturates any form of epistemic structuration and the everyday life it mediates and delimits. As such, Bauman continues, naming and classifying have, as their "ostensibl[e] . . . purpose," the prevention of ambivalence – which he defines as "a failure of [language's] naming (segregating) function" – via the production and maintenance of "[neat] . . . divisions" (1-2) that typically serve to reinforce and administer dominant ideologies and norms along exclusionary lines. It is, however, precisely commitment to the possibility of this function's efficacy that heightens ambivalence in relation to language by construing it as a source of "disorder," "anxiety," and "indecision" (1) about language itself and our capacity both to use and to be used by it. To this extent, ambivalence language demonstrates a contradictory dual character: it is both a fundamentally normal, if in practice frequently disavowed, aspect or condition of language, and a constant and immanent disruption of language's normative functionality. Conceived of as such, ambivalence operates as a sign and a permanent threat of disorder that consecrates as legitimate, desirable, and necessary the struggle for an order that, by the logic of its own terms, will never come, and that is, ironically, itself a state of perpetually disavowed disorder. In relation to both affect and language ambivalence can thus be said to at once shore up and sanction the operations of regimes of normativity, and to expose the foundational contradictions by which they are marked, while also suggesting potential

lines of resistance, transformation, or at least mitigation. It follows that the problem of ambivalence, for those invested in identifying, challenging, resisting, transforming, or outright destroying dominant ideologies and the hegemonic normativities such semiotic, affective, and material regimes foster and reproduce, is not in the first instance ambivalence itself but the ways ambivalence has been characterized, responded to, and instrumentalized.

Despite its ubiquity in everyday life and the prevalent role it plays in work across the range of disciplines, fields, and genres explored in this dissertation, ambivalence has most frequently been addressed as a component of or catalyst for broader arguments, rather than being singled out as a topic of inquiry requiring sustained attention and analysis in its own right and on its own terms. In this dissertation, ambivalence takes center stage, functioning as both my method and my principal object of critique. The primary domains of ambivalence are affect, language, and hermeneutics, all of which are intermeshed and bound up in the open of constitutes the speculative conceptual entity and materially embodied, ideologically-conditioned praxis known as "the subject." One of my key claims is that ambivalence can productively be articulated as a queer concept, and that, in turn, "queer" in its numerous everyday, academic, and grammatical senses and applications is a fundamentally ambivalent concept. The ambivalence of queer derives not only from the prevalent stigmatization of queer subjects by cisheteronormative cultures, expectations, and interpellations, but from queer as a category's practical and theoretical capacity to both affirm and negate (itself), particularly in relation to the

normativities against which it is frequently defined. In describing queer's "productive indeterminacy" – its simultaneous viability as "both an identitarian position and the refusal of such" – Carla Freccero astutely locates the inherent ambivalence of queer as a category, while rejecting its "hypostatization" into an either/or (identity or the negation of identity). Freccero calls for the reframing of queer as "the inscription of a negativity that nevertheless may be said to have force," in order to resist its concretization as primarily an identitarian construct and to keep queer vibrantly mobile as a mode of critique. In other words, queer's indeterminacy, deriving in part from its ambivalence, allows it to continue "its outlaw work as a verb and sometimes an adjective" (14-18), rather than stagnating into a solely "nominal status designating an identity, a thing" (4). In light of this, the queerness of ambivalence both emerges from and incorporates the ambivalence of queer while framing the simultaneously normative and antinormative function of ambivalence as the source of much of ambivalence's potentially transformative force and power — both an irrevocable component of and a pressing challenge to the viability of normativities and the forms of distinction they require, in being finally irreducible to either the normative or the antinormative ambivalence can function as a disruptive force of productive negativity in its gestures toward *something else* that might escape these distinctions' ruthless carving.

Throughout, I operate from the assumption that far from being an obstacle requiring navigation geared toward resolution, ambivalence can instead be understood as itself a necessarily ambivalent source of transformative potential because of its

fundamental irresolvability. Efforts to resolve ambivalence, in both everyday life and in critical practice, tend to produce at best a temporary and illusory sense of relief from its sometimes detrimental effects and affects. As such, they are liable to either compound the deleterious impacts of ongoing but unacknowledged ambivalence, or to facilitate critically negligent disavowals of ambivalence in service of what I characterize, sometimes pejoratively and sometimes not, as *strong thought*— that is, academic or everyday theories that exhibit a significant tendency to approach and encounter their objects based on presuppositions and methodologies informed, implicitly or explicitly, by belief in the possibility of mastery and capture of their objects at the expense of their objects' complexities, ambiguities, and incommensurabilities. Not so much against as in dialogue with and response to such tendencies, I propose that centering ambivalence in everyday and academic practice requires the cultivation of *weak thought* when encountering and engaging the objects that we use, for better and worse, to move (and sustain our sense of relational continuity) with and in our worlds. Where strong thought seeks to master and to impose from without meaning, coherence, and declarative or authoritative certitude upon its objects, weak thought approaches its objects from within "the muddied middle" (Berlant and Edelman, 5) of the scene of encounter while deriving its claims about and understandings of its objects from both their and its own perpetual contingency, while rejecting in advance the possibility of and desire for neat or unequivocally assertive hermeneutic resolution. How, I ask, might inhabiting the irresolution of ambivalence beneficially transform the critical and practical approaches

we take toward our objects? Do current conceptions of ambivalence and its relationship to proximate concepts delimit or mitigate the potentially generative impacts of encountering ambivalence radically and our worlds ambivalently? How might altering our understanding of and engagement with ambivalence transform existing norms and the capacities they (for better and worse) condition? Could doing so further equip us with the intellectual and affective tools, at individual and structural levels, to reconceptualize both the inevitability and necessity of different, more equitable norms while facilitating our capacity to experience and live with (both our own and others') difference? What can we learn from reconceptualizing ambivalence not as something to be worked through or against but as something to move with? How might this contribute toward a renewed sense that things could be different?

Chapter one explores the connections between heteronormative and queer experiences of ambivalence in texts by Maggie Nelson, Michelle Tea, and Richard Yates, in order to complicate understandings of queer's capacity to be both radical and reactionary. Chapter two reads Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* alongside contemporary scholarship from queer and Black studies to show how its conception of Blackness as something irrevocably ambivalent enables the formulation of "disidentity" – adopting disidentification from the very tenets of identity and identification as itself a kind of ambivalent non-identity – as an alternative to politically neutering processes of identity formation. Chapter three explores, in the "epistemic ambivalence" (a feeling or condition in which one knows that definite knowledge may not be possible or even desirable, and yet remains unable to fully detach from the desire for such knowledge)

of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, the relationship between ambivalence and transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

"KEEPING FEELINGS IN CIRCULATION": PRIVATE/PUBLIC QUEERNESS IN A TIME OF ASSIMILATION

On 26 June 2015, in the case of Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled by a five-to-four vote that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. In the words of Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, concluding the majority opinion, marriage is a "keystone of our social order" (Kennedy, 4). The verdict represented a significant but ambivalent victory for many queer communities in the U.S. While federal recognition granted to same-sex married partners the benefits, rights, and privileges associated with heterosexual marriage and private citizenship, it remained and remains the case that, as many queer activists and theorists have pointed out, marriage can be used as a tool of anti-black racism, of immigration enforcement, of gendered social control, and is at core about protecting private property (see, in particular, Duggan, Conrad, and Spade and Wilse). In this chapter, I take the ambivalent implications of Obergefell v Hodges as a prompt for rethinking the relationship between queerness and normativity in the United States in the late 2010s. This period was unprecedented in queer history, characterized by the development of both unparalleled public acceptance and concomitant internal political conflict. While

assimilation, grounded in respectability politics, resulted in greater tolerance of and visibility for some queer people than ever before, many have castigated assimilation for "fracturing away . . . queer alliances in adherence to the reproduction of class, gender, and racial norms" (Puar, 31-32). Both perspectives, I argue, and their adherence to strong distinctions between queerness and normativity, were predicated on the resolution of ambivalence: whether through incorporation into dominant culture, or through radical social transformation. Literary texts, however, reveal a more complicated and irresolute picture than oppositional accounts of queerness and normativity often present. In what follows I explore three different but inextricably connected forms of ambivalence, manifesting in literary texts, in order to argue that the foregrounding and occupation of publicly ambivalent positions is essential for renegotiating what it can mean to be queer in the historical present.

Normativities and their Discontents

Heteronormativity describes the structural conditions that establish and maintain reproductive heterosexuality and the binary, often bioessentialist approaches to gender and/or sex upon which it depends, as normal. The term was coined in 1991 by Michael Warner in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, and has roots in particular in the work of Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin. In a collaborative essay entitled "Sex in Public," Warner and Lauren Berlant argued that heteronormativity not only organizes heterosexuality as natural but attributes to it a sense of "society-founding rightness"

(312). Far from simply indicating in normative binary terms the gender and/or sex of those toward whom one is romantically and sexually inclined in one's "private life," heterosexuality constitutes "the basic idiom of the personal and the social." This takes place via heteronormative culture's "organiz[ation]" of "a hegemonic national public around sex," which it purports to do "in order to protect the zone of heterosexual privacy," but which in practice serves to protect the "institutions of economic privilege and social reproduction" – in Justice Kennedy's words, the "social order" – that prop up and are propped up by heteronormativity (312-314). To this end, marriage and the couple-form are consecrated by heteronormative culture as the legitimate forms of intimate social relation through which national existence is mediated. The ideal citizen according to this model is heterosexual and part of a family unit — a worker and consumer who complies, more or less willingly, with the economic demands of capitalist society.

The key point Berlant and Warner make is that intimacy and sexuality in heteronormative culture are generally relegated to the sanctioned zones of the couple- and family- forms, which are constructed as private rather than public realms. This private realm is the realm of personhood, of "personal life," a space apparently distinct from the public realm of work and politics into and out of which people move on a daily basis in a more or less linear fashion. However, because heteronormative culture takes as given the reproduction of heterosexuality and constructs heterosexuality as the default position integral to its continued operation, even those aspects of society that superficially appear to have nothing to do with sex can in fact be read in the

register of sexuality, because they are predicated on the assumption of heterosexuality. In this context, then, heterosexuality describes not only the private relations between so-called opposite-sex individuals, but also a naturalized, naturalizing, and fundamentally public form of cultural and social organization, expressed by and equally expressive of that culture which sanctions it and which, in turn, is sanctioned by it. Furthermore, this private realm of intimate personhood, in being conceived as separate from public life, also becomes the primary site of consolation against the tribulations, oppressions, and inequalities of public life consequent upon the social reproduction of economic privilege. Mitigating the affective and material fallout of living according to the dictates of capital then becomes a private rather than a public concern. Heteronormativity as a structural force thus encourages individuals to conceive of their private lives as "prepolitical," rather than as contingent historical products of sociopolitical circumscription (317). Even though the intimate worlds heteronormativity sanctions often fail to provide the "good life" happiness it promises, this failure is typically seen as the fault of individuals rather than the institution(s) of heteronormativity.

A further key point is that heteronormativity and heterosexuality should not be understood as synonymous. While heteronormativity creates and maintains the social conditions necessary for the reproduction of normative heterosexual expression, heterosexual activity can often deviate from and even repudiate homonormativity. Heterosexuality in practice thus often occupies a complicated place in relationship to heteronormativity. Similarly, as suggested by the legalization of same-sex marriage,

homosexual activity is not necessarily opposed to heteronormativity. The term homonormativity has been used to describe gay and lesbian politics that prioritize assimilating into heteronormative culture over contesting naturalized ideals of matrimony, procreation, and systems of binary gender. In Jasbir Puar's words, homonormativity "aids the process of heteronormativity through the fracturing away of queer alliances in favor of adherence to the reproduction of class, gender, and racial norms" (Puar, 31-32). From this it follows that whiteness – understood as referring to a "historical structural race-based superiority" (Wander et al., 15) – is bound up in both heteronormative constructions of heterosexuality and homonormative constructions of homosexuality in the United States. Much as heteronormativity works to imbue heterosexuality with a normative and natural "rightness," whiteness alongside heterosexuality emerges into and out of "the very air we breathe": "strategically invisible, universalized, naturalized, and taken for granted, seemingly formless, shapeless, and without content, and normalized to evade theoretical scrutiny and critical analysis" (Yep, 34). However, the relationship between heterosexuality and whiteness is ambivalent. As Richard Dyer argues, heterosexuality is at once "the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of [whiteness]" (20). Sexuality is, for whiteness, a "conundrum": "To ensure the survival of their race, [whites] have to have sex — but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white." The "spirit" of white people, Dyer claims, consists in their normativized self-conception as prizing mind over body, rationality over irrationality. Sexuality is cast into the "darkness" of

irrationality, through the "projection of sexuality onto dark races [as] a means for whites to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires" (26-28). Much as the heterosexuality heteronormativity calls into being often cannot live up to and thus serves to critique the latter's demands, so the heterosexuality whiteness demands (as well as the whiteness heterosexuality indexes) calls into question the coherence and tenability of whiteness and heterosexuality as unified or unifying categories. As such, in aspiring for access to the legitimations provided by normative heterosexuality, homonormativity can also serve as a means of shoring up access to the benefits of normative whiteness or of registering aspirational proximity to the protections bestowed by whiteness.

The term queer has generally been mobilized against heterosexual and homosexual normativity to describe an orientation that is not only "anti-heteronormative, but . . . anti normative" (Halberstam, 77). In the words of David Halperin, queer refers not to any specific sexual or gender identity but to "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin, 62). Queer, then, is particularly useful in signifying not only sexual and gender identity but also politicized commitment to difference, non-normative modes of being, and perhaps the abolition of fixed identity categories altogether. However, as Cathy J. Cohen has noted, work in queer theory, while laudable in its efforts to "challenge heteronormativity," has too often been built in its attempts to do so "around a simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual" (440) in a manner that can elide how other categories of identity, for example race, inflect or complicate understandings of

gender and sexuality, with the effect that queerness is often normatively associated with whiteness.

Heteronormativity, homonormativity, and queerness are thus all similarly riven by contradictions and irresolutions – in short, by ambivalences – that threaten to render them incoherent. It is, however, precisely through disavowal of these ambivalences that they seek to become tenable: through, for example, the construction and maintenance of categories such as private and public, where public (or structural) ambivalences are shunted into the realm of the private (or personal). Inextricable from such processes is the broad maintenance of normative and antinormative as opposed categories, each of which is, ideally, to be adhered to unambivalently. In recent years, however, work in queer studies has sought to interrogate "the enduring charisma of the normative" (Berlant, 44) in a less manner, emphasizing indeterminacy, incoherence, and the messiness of embodiment, desire, and affective life in the context of queerness. My intention in this chapter is not to pit homonormative assimilation against radical queerness in a reductive binary; nor to vaunt confrontationally public queerness as the only morally and politically legitimate response to the legalization of same-sex marriage; nor necessarily to pit queerness against projects of normalization. Instead, my aim is to describe some of the main ambivalences in heteronormative, homonormative, and queer experience. I argue that heteronormative ambivalence describes the public suppression of contradiction and the privatization of their negative effects in order to reinforce and reproduce the status quo. Homonormative ambivalence, arising in part from shame induced by heteronormativity, seeks

resolution through inclusion within the structures that produced the ambivalence in the first place. Queer ambivalence foregrounds the experience of ambivalence itself, in order to expose and interrogate the conditions that produce it. It seeks, in the suspension of resolution, new, more successful and sustainable ways of resisting the toxic elements of privatized intimacy and sexuality, and reframes the experience of ambivalence as valuable in itself. Finally, queer ambivalence is perhaps especially useful for dismantling the ease with which dichotomies like normative and queer themselves become normalized, in search of more open and inclusive ways of thinking and being.

Scenes of Ambivalence

In cultures organized around heteronormativity, ambivalence tends to be understood as a problem requiring resolution, and as an individual (private) fault rather than as a product of structural (public) conditions. The management of ambivalence also tends to be feminized, reinforcing naturalized differences between masculinity and femininity and upholding binary notions of gender. In situating ambivalence within the private, domestic sphere, heteronormative culture acts to minimize the radical or disruptive potential of ambivalence by psychopathologizing its effects. For example, Sigmund Freud argued that ambivalence arises during Oedipal conflict. As the (male) child begins to compete with his father for his mother, he is forced into a contradictory position: hating his father as competitor but retaining for him his "old established

affection and admiration" (2769). In order to find relief from this conflict between love and hate, the child displaces his hostile feelings onto a substitute object. This displacement can result in neurosis-formation, as in the famous case of equinophobic Little Hans. The child who successfully resolves Oedipal conflict is better able in later life to deal with the ambivalence that inheres in all intimate relations; the child who fails to do so is liable to become or remain neurotic, and thus unable to healthily confront their ambivalence and correspond with social norms. The point is that, if ambivalence is intimately bound to the "heteronormative reinforcement" the Oedipus complex enacts by inducting individuals into accordance with dominant heteronormative culture, then the successful (i.e. normal) resolution or suppression of ambivalence can be said to be an important aspect of the reproduction of heteronormativity (Boyarin, 206). Failure to resolve one's ambivalence can then be described as an individual failing; furthermore, the successful resolution of ambivalence becomes tied up with often corrosive heteronormative conceptions and regulations of masculinity.

Nancy Armstrong complicates this understanding of ambivalence by arguing that the liberal notion of the subject as a rational actor more or less in charge of *his* feelings and emotions is historically dependent on the relegation of ambivalence-management to the private realm of "femininity". Contending with the often-debilitating affective intensity of ambivalence becomes a feminine task, leaving masculinized subjects free to act decisively and directly in both public and private realms. The ideal subject-position thus becomes one in which ambivalence is suppressed; to succumb to

irresolution is feminine or even antisocial. In practice, of course, these ideals are difficult to sustain.

Richard Yates's fiction consistently explores the contradictions and constraints of heteronormative ambivalence. His first and most famous novel, *Revolutionary Road*, depicts the dissolution of Frank and April Wheeler's marriage. Focusing on the discrepancies between Frank's internal life and external actions, the novel charts his construction of compensatory fantasies to gloss over the disappointing facts of his existence and quell his ambivalence. From a perspective of ironic detachment, Yates documents the contrasts between Frank's private thoughts and his public performance of conformity with heteronormative demands.

Early in the novel, following a vicious argument with April the night before, Frank awakens hungover to see April "wearing a man's shirt" (34-35) while mowing the lawn. His thoughts wander as he watches from their bedroom window, preparing to reaffirm his masculinity by going outside and taking the mower from her "by force if necessary" (40). The narrative traces Frank and April's shared history from their early relationship to the present. Their engagement and subsequent marriage, it transpires, was prompted by April unexpectedly becoming pregnant. April responded to the news by withdrawing from Frank, producing anxiety that he is not in control of their relationship and its heteronormative evolution: "Your wife wasn't supposed to turn away from you, was she? You weren't supposed to have to work and wheedle to win her back . . . as if you were afraid she might evaporate at the very moment of this first authentic involvement of your lives" (49). April emphatically wanted an abortion;

Frank, while privately agreeing, struggled to accept that she decided this on her own. April eventually breaks down following a long argument and agrees to have the baby: "no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than . . . holding that tamed, submissive girl and saying 'Oh, my lovely; oh, my lovely,' while she promised she would bear his child" — never mind the fact that he "didn't even want a baby" (51-52).

This scene demonstrates the complex relationship between heteronormativity's suppression of men's ambivalence, and its subsequent impact on specific individuals. April behaves contrary to the role she is expected to take in the traditional marriage plot by confidently deciding she does not want her baby. In doing so she shows how, even in the novel's mid-1950s middle-class Connecticut, individuals in reality resist and challenge to varying degrees heteronormative culture's gendering of ambivalence. Frank, meanwhile, occupies a more traditionally "feminine" position, full of emotive outbursts and affective intensity. He is ambivalent about the pregnancy. He wants "shared" excitement with April about this "first authentic involvement" of their lives – this heteronormative legitimation, this proof of his viable masculinity – at the same time as not wanting to have a child yet and privately agreeing with her decision (49). Heteronormative culture saturates Frank's ambivalence: he wants to live up to its sanctioning of procreation and matrimony as natural, desirable, and essential aspects of any authentic romantic relationship, because to capitulate to his disinclination would render his experience of the world and of himself as a normal heterosexual man illegible, and thus expose the private contradictions his public identity seeks to mask.

The need to suppress this troubling ambivalence is exacerbated by April's masculinized unambivalence. Frank therefore utilizes the power and privilege of his structural position, forcefully denying April's agency and reducing her to submission. He thus "pro[ves] his manhood," suppressing his own ambivalence while consigning April to the feminine position of ambivalence-management on which his sense of masculine agency depends. Frank resolves his ambivalence by according with heteronormative patriarchy. Instead of finding in their ambivalences the public, structural conditions that have produced them, both characters eventually conform to type against their own desires. They privatize their ambivalence and attack one another, destroying in the process their desire for a less sanctioned existence and reinforcing the norms that have stifled them in the first place.

The relationship between ambivalence and queerness has tended to be understood in the context of the shame that derives from stigma. Where heteronormativity establishes as normative and natural the "rightness" of heterosexuality, it also attaches stigma to sexualities and gender identities that deviate from its dictates. Subjects thus often experience internal conflict in the form of ambivalence about their sexualities and gender identities, resulting in shame. For Deborah Gould, ambivalence as it pertains to queerness involves "a contradictory constellation of simultaneously felt positive and negative affective states about both homosexuality and dominant, heteronormative society" (12). Ambivalence, Gould suggests, is the defining affective backdrop within and through which queer people experience both private and public life because their sexualities, gender expressions, and even their simple right to exist,

have been consistently and often violently impugned at both micro and macro levels. Attempts to resolve the ambivalence that arises from the shame of inhabiting stigmatized identities underlie one of the central points of contention in recent queer culture and politics: the division between those who seek to resolve their ambivalence through *assimilation* based on a politics of respectability geared toward incorporation into society *as it is*, and those who seek to resolve it via *liberation* based on the assumption that queerness is fundamentally opposed to heteronormative culture and geared toward radical social transformation.

While the divide between assimilation and liberation has structured queer politics in the postwar United States, the 1990s witnessed the emergence – in the form of a public "takeover" – of a "new respectability [in] gay and lesbian politics" (Warner 2000, 75). According to Warner, this development stemmed from "the desexualization of the lesbian and gay movement and the depoliticization of queer sex" (76), and can be characterized by the following changes: 1) a shift in the AIDS epidemic from "crisis to . . . chronic, manageable problem"; 2) "the decline of direct-action activism"; 3) "the loss of political memory that attended so many deaths in a culture with few institutions of memory"; 4) "Clintonian politics"; 5) "the growing importance of big-money election campaigns and lobbying"; 6) "the consequent prominence of a fat-cat donor base . . . often consisting of well-heeled men with very little lived connection to the most despised parts of the queer world"; 7) "the growing centralization of gay politics by national organizations"; 8) "the appeal of 'a place at the table'"; 9) "the rise of highly capitalized lifestyle magazines as the principal public venues of the

movement"; 10) "the consequent rise of a politics of media celebrity, in which a handful of gay pundits . . . dominate opinion making"; and 11) the neoliberalism of said pundits (76-77). In other words, queerness underwent neoliberalization – a process that benefited the most privileged members of queer communities – with a shift in focus from the queerness of sexuality to homosexuality as politically viable identity category. Homonormativity (and, concomitantly, homonationalism) names this process, whereby queer people who cease to make sexuality central or, more importantly, visible aspects of their identities are permitted to become accepted and legitimate national subjects. Queers who fail to do so, or who are, willingly or otherwise, unable to do so due to the racist and gendered assumptions that undergird both homonormativity and dominant US culture, remain and are further excluded from the benefits of mainstream cultural acceptance: the culturally untenable, shamed others upon whose illegitimacy the legitimacy of homonormativity depends.

The collision of heteronormative, homonormative, and queer ambivalence can be seen in *Valencia*, Michelle Tea's fast-paced novelistic memoir that narrates the author's promiscuous twentysomething years, set in the early 1990s in a then predominantly lesbian area of San Francisco's now increasingly gentrified Mission district. Midway through the text, narrator Michelle and her girlfriend Iris leave their relatively shame-free, openly queer life in the Mission to attend Iris's sister's wedding in conservative Georgia. Though Iris's family do not outright reject their daughter for being gay, they do expect her to hide her queerness when in their presence. In other words, Iris' acceptance by her family is contingent upon her ability to pass as a

normative and thus permissible participant in conventional family life.[1] Upon doing so – that is, upon privatizing the public queerness she is permitted by her queer community in San Francisco – Iris is granted conditional access to the unfolding matrimonial scene and is allowed to partake in the reproductive rituals of the sanctioned family form. Despite their outward compliance, Michelle and Iris nevertheless privately attempt to resist the family's demands through the ultimately thwarted and thwarting practice of sexual roleplay: "[we] thought it would be fun to have sex . . . in the house where [Iris] grew up . . . and we did attempt some weak teenage boy-girl seduction in front of the television, but . . . we couldn't smack each other or play around with the recycled bicycle tire whip because it would wake Mom" (113-114). They subsequently abandon their desire for the remainder of the trip, which is characterized by them occupying a "slug-like position on the couch" (114) — not just desexualized but dehumanized.

The chapter is striking in two regards. The first is in its depiction of the collision between homonormative and queer ambivalence. On the eve of Iris's sister's wedding, Michelle breaks down and considers not attending the ceremony: "Maybe I Just Won't Go. I Can't Go. I was crying on Iris's bed. It's Just Wrong That I Can't Hold Your Hand. We Always Hold Hands. I was wracked by the injustice . . . And Iris, it seemed so easy for her to pretend we were pals" (129). Michelle becomes resentful: "Little tough-shit-kiss-my-ass Iris, all self-righteous in San Francisco . . . and she can't even

[1] This in turn is to preclude any heteronormative shame on the family's part, any ambivalence they would otherwise feel about their child, illustrating the way in which shame/stigma as a disciplinary process infuses heterosexual as much as homosexual practice, Frank's shame etc.

hold my fucking hand. But it's her family, and that's a big deal, and you can't force someone" (130).[2] Iris, who has a lot more at stake in this family context than Michelle, is coerced into suppressing the ambivalence she feels about denying her queer identity and behaving, at least toward Michelle, as if she is okay with playing straight. Toleration by her family is conditional upon her minimizing her queerness and conforming with heteronormative protocol, and she complies without question – to Michelle's frustration – as a result, the narrative suggests, of shame and, more specifically, to avoid being shamed. While upset by what is, from her perspective, uncharacteristic behavior from her lover, Michelle nevertheless understands and accepts Iris' response to the loaded complexities of the situation even as she disagrees with it. Their responses illustrate different reactions to ambivalence. Whereas Iris' ambivalence stems from homonormativity, in that she seeks its resolution through conformity, Michelle's ambivalence – her simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the terms of Iris' concession – is queer in its accommodation of Iris' concession. Michelle's response evinces disgust with the need to conform at the same time as acceptance of the conditional desire to conform, through acknowledgment that, in scenes of overwhelming heteronormativity, one sometimes feels compelled to conform provisionally with demands to which one is, in principle and in other more accepting and more public contexts, opposed in practice. Significantly, neither of their

[2] Notable here is the contrast between Frank Wheeler's immediate willingness to use force, and Michelle's immediate repudiation of the possibility despite her desire to force the situation into a more livable one for both her and Iris.

ambivalences find resolution: Michelle remains disgusted yet accommodating, and Iris is conditionally and thus unsatisfyingly accepted by her family.

The second striking aspect of the chapter resides in the fact that it is not necessarily Michelle and Iris's homosexuality that bothers Iris's family, so much as it is their deviation from the family's understanding of heterosexual normativity. This is demonstrated by Iris's sister, the conventional bride, perceiving Michelle's green hair and butch appearance as potentially overshadowing her wedding. After reluctantly "scrub[bing] the lime color from [her] scruff," Michelle concludes that the bride "didn't want everyone to be paying attention to me and my green hair on her big day" (129). Nonnormative queerness, or simply nonnormativity in general, here figured through Iris' green hair, is perceived as a threat to the smooth flow of matrimony. So long as any distractingly, threateningly visible signs of Michelle and Iris' queerness are removed and thus privatized and made separate from the heteronormative ritual they are attending, they are allowed to attend the ceremony; whatever ambivalence Iris' passively homophobic family have about, on the one hand, their love for their daughter, and on the other, their fear, confusion, and disgust about her sexuality, is disavowed – rather than confronted and negotiated – for them through their coercive privatization of Iris's queerness. Therein resides the problem with homonormativity and with what its assimilative tendencies purport to resolve: to be accepted as normal, one must publicly conform to established norms that are at odds with the queerness one feels one lives. The assimilationist emphasis on homonormative conformity aims to resolve ambivalence by legitimating queer sexuality as being no different from

normative heterosexuality. The hope is that, as public opinion changes, the public kissing and handholding Michelle ambivalently foregoes will eventually be accepted by culture as the same as its heterosexual equivalent. However, the radical public intimacy and experimental approach to community and relationality that is elsewhere depicted in *Valencia*, and which grants the text – and queer forms of intimacy in practice – much of its invigorating and galvanizing force, must in this instance be foregone if its characters wish to attain the public acceptance accorded by normative private personhood.

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, an autotheoretical text exploring the topic of queer families in the 2010s, develops and complicates understandings of queer publicity in a moment of unprecedented and yet still conditional acceptance by heteronormative culture of non-normative intimate forms. Whereas Tea's text depicts queer ambivalence as a response to and understanding of homonormative desires for acceptance from one's family in order to be granted the ambivalent pleasure of inclusion within the rituals of the family form, *The Argonauts* attempts to challenge and dismantle understandings of queerness as being constitutively antinormative and to establish, via its presentation of queer domesticity, what Nelson views as a more encompassing sense of queerness as an expression of the desire to have, or rather, to "want[] it both ways" (29). The text explores the evolving relationship between Nelson and her husband Harry, a trans man, throughout and following his transition. Through a sequence of poetic fragments, observations, and passages of varyingly linear narrative, it traces Nelson's shift away from an understanding of queerness as being

defined by radical antinormativity toward an embrace of marriage, parenthood, and comfortable domesticity that she would previously have dismissed as heteronormative. Ambivalence is foregrounded throughout as a way of resisting what Nelson characterizes as "the tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other*" (75, italics in original),[3] and of rejecting as limitingly untenable categorical distinctions between queerness and normativity as both concepts and practices. In refusing the "[unsustainable] binary of normative/transgressive," Nelson conceives of queerness instead as a "perpetual excitement" made up of "molten or shifting parts" that, drawing on the work of Eve Sedgwick, provides "a means of asserting while also giving the slip" and "retain[ing] . . . a sense of the fugitive" (29).

Much of the drama of *The Argonauts* focuses on how the lived moments of married life and parenthood are not always conducive to or reflective of such dynamic motion while nevertheless continuing to evince it when more closely considered. This is made evident in a scene in which an unnamed friend visits her and Harry's home and finds a coffee mug, gifted by Nelson's mother, on which is featured a photograph of "my family and me" – Nelson pregnant with her and Harry's child, Harry, and his son – "all dressed up to go to the *Nutcracker* at Christmastime." They look "happy," Nelson asserts, in front of "the mantel at my mother's house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it." The friend comments, cattily, that they have "*never seen*

[3] *The Argonauts* quotes other writers through italicization, with the only citation being the quoted author's name beside the quotation in the margins of the page. In this instance, the italicized passage in question is from Fraiman, 157.

anything so heteronormative in all my life" (13, italics in original). While acknowledging that the mug scene could very easily and conventionally be understood as such, and admitting that she was "horrified" (12) upon receiving it, Nelson goes on to suggest that, should one feel the need to vindicate, the queerness of the scene in fact stems from this supposed conformity, or rather, to the response it provokes, specifically the challenge it mounts to what she characterizes as queer's "privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality" (14). In other words, what might appear to be "the essence of heteronormativity" points instead to the difficulty of pinning down in the complexity of specific instances what is normative and what is transgressive according to the logic of queer antinormativity. What specifically, Nelson asks, is "inherently heteronormative" about, for example, her pregnancy, an experience that "profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one's body?" (13) What, she continues, "about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female?" (14) Without providing answers to these questions, or rather by suggestively leaving open answers to such questions and the assumptions behind them, Nelson suggests that one important aspect of queer ambivalence inheres not only in its refusal of categorical certitude and acceptance of difficulty and complexity (echoing Tea's ambivalent acceptance of Ivy's shamed response to her parents' shame) but in the capacity for any supposedly fixed and known scene to reveal itself through closer examination to be ambivalent: characterized by the fugitivity of shifting parts. That she neither confirms nor denies the scene as *either* heteronormative *or* queer highlights what could be described as the

generative uncertainty of queer ambivalence itself and its inhabitation of the possibilities for transformation nestled within the ambivalence of binary oppositions and categorizations.

Nelson's text extends and connects this queer sense of ambivalence to writing itself, suggesting that what is queer about ambivalence is not only a matter of content but also one of form. Nelson questions whether, when considered against the dynamism and irresolution – the "pure wildness" – of embodied experience and queer relationality, writing may be, in its "fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to *argument*," the "gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness" (52). In other words, Nelson expresses concern that the certainty and clarity to which writing often aspires can throttle what is generative about ambivalent experience. Elsewhere, however, writing is celebrated precisely for its ambivalence: via Wittgenstein, the "idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed" (3), that writing can never with unambivalent certainty and clarity argue, assert, make sense of, or express what it aims to communicate, and yet must nevertheless to some extent aspire to and believe in, provisionally or otherwise, its capacity to do so. This ambivalence, Nelson states, is "*why I write*." What this suggests is that, while writing sometimes strives for unambivalent expression of specific content, it is not only impossible to achieve such a thing but in likelihood doing so would, if it were possible, serve as a gravestone for what remains compelling about writing: the ongoing, generative, and frustrating tension of ambivalence. Similarly, while established forms such as marriage and the coherence and normative cultural legibility they can grant individuals can be at once

gratifying and stifling, they can also contain vital and even radical force by being explored queerly, that is to say ambivalently. Nelson's text, in form and content, does both: not only *wants* it both ways but seeks, in its ambivalence, to *have* it both ways. For Nelson, ambivalence emerges as a way of merging irresolutely the poles of binaries she doesn't believe in in order to redefine queerness, and the writing that seeks to describe it, as both causing the collapse of such poles and naming the indeterminate spaces of their merging.

Such an understanding of queer ambivalence, however, neglects what might be called the privilege of such a position. Simply put, not everyone has access to the norms Nelson's text explores and inhabits, whether they wish to queer them or not. The queer ambivalence of normativities, then, should not easily be universalized. Put differently, Nelson's exploration of ambivalence in the context of queerness takes place within a classless context of uninterrogated whiteness — and, arguably, can conceive of ambivalence as predominantly generative and productive, as generatively and productively discomfiting, in part because of the absence of the pressures of racialization and the disproportionate material disadvantages experienced by poor and non-white queers.

The tension generated by the text's disavowal of class and racial consciousness, and the individualism and liberalism of Nelson's sense of queer ambivalence, emerges strikingly in one of the few passages that address political commitments and engagements. Commenting on Oakland's 2012 Pride festival, which Nelson describes as an "intervention," the text addresses a banner that was unfurled by "antiassimilation

activists" (26) that reads CAPITALISM IS FUCKING THE QUEER OUT OF US and an accompanying pamphlet they distributed. The pamphlet in question expressed disdain for Oakland Pride's "capitalist queer" array of "[s]oap shops with rainbows, bars with 'gay' themed drinks, clothes shops with 'local' queer designed 70 dollar tee shirts," and invited solidarity and collaboration among those who "fantasize of a world where all of the exploited of the world can come together and attack. We want to find you, comrade, if this too is what you want" ("Angry Queers Drop Banner At Pride").

The pamphlet, parts of which Nelson quotes, signs off with a couplet: "For the total destruction of Capital, | bad bitches who will fuck your shit up" (27). Where elsewhere Nelson's text is nuanced and thorough in its attention to the texts and ideas it explores, her response to the banners and pamphlet seems superficial. Rather than engaging with the basis for its claims or exploring its rhetoric, Nelson expresses

detached gratitude for what she also describes as their "intervention," alongside bland agreement that "there is some evil shit in this world that needs fucking up." She moves swiftly on, however, to muse on how she has "never been able to answer to *comrade*, nor share in this fantasy of attack," and to suggest that "[p]erhaps . . . the word *radical* . . . needs rethinking," and to wonder whether "we" could "angle ourselves toward" something like "openness" instead" (27). The subsequent three pages are given over to Nelson's consternation as to whether she should accept a lucrative speaking appointment at a homophobic evangelical university. After much deliberation, after outlining the various iterations of homophobic restrictions imposed upon students by the university in question and still being unable to decide, Nelson finally hones in on the sentence "that kept me up at night":

> "Inadequate origin models [of the universe] hold that (a) God never directly intervened in creating nature and/or (b) humans share a common physical ancestry with earlier life forms." Our shared ancestry with earlier life forms is sacred to me. I declined the invitation.
>
> (30)

What is striking about these passages is the eschewal of a desire for or recognition of the political necessity of solidarity in the wake of what is signified and enacted by, for example, the gentrification and corporatization of Pride festivals, especially in the racially charged environment of early-2010s Oakland, and the explicit foregrounding of private, individual moral deliberation and ethical accountability — not to mention what could, amusingly, be taken as Nelson's admission that she finds solidarity with fish easier and more significant than she does with the desires and demands of queer

protestors at a Pride festival. Nelson's detachment from direct action and from a sense of community and resistance the activism in question sought to cultivate is evident in her description of both the festival itself and the attempts to disrupt it. This suggests that, for Nelson, both the corporate-sponsored festival and the protests againts it operate in the same register or with some kind of equivalence. As poet Wendy Trevino has written, the liberalism and individualism of such a position is perhaps why

> […]in her book *The Argonauts*, [Nelson]
> Has something to say about a pamphlet
> Some marchers made in that 2012 queer-
> Fem march against Pride in Oakland & not
> A fucking thing to say about what they
> Did to that Bank of America branch.[4]

My point is not to castigate Nelson's text for being insufficiently radical or overly individualist so much as it is to highlight how the relatively secure material position the text indexes makes ambivalence easier to withstand and to understand as generative and beneficial: associated with experiences of plenitude, wildness, and multiplicity, rather than, as I explore in chapter two, tactics and techniques for navigating structural oppression and material violence. While *The Argonauts* foregrounds queer ambivalence, challenging what Nelson frames as queer's closed or exclusionary basis in nonnormativity through its public presentation of domesticity and interiority, in doing it also arguably extols the private and the individual at the

[4] I have been unable to locate the a copy of the publication in which Trevino's poem was originally published, and instead cite Trevino alongside the social media post in which an image of the poem has been circulated.

expense of community and political action, and as such remains, appropriately, an ambivalently useful text when seeking to unfurl a fuller sense of ambivalence as a concept. In the following chapter, I explore the relationship between blackness and ambivalence in the United States, in order to provide a more thorough understanding of the multiple and contradictory roles played by ambivalence in US life.

CHAPTER TWO

TO BE AM NOT: BLACKNESS, DISIDENTITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE WORK OF RALPH ELLISON

In the prologue to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, the concept of ambivalence is introduced and then swiftly dismissed by Ellison's titular narrator. After getting high unexpectedly on a "reefer" (*IM*, 8) mistaken for a cigarette while listening to Louis Armstrong, the narrator, a man who is "invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see [him]" (3), recounts a surreal stoned descent through "layers of racial history" (Hayman, 137). Addled but attuned, he discovers in this spatiotemporally distorted excursion "a new analytical way" (*IM*, 7) of approaching and interpreting the world, one that splits from the "orthodoxies" and the "dogmatic certainties" (Wolfe, 622) that characterize the epistemic frameworks he has previously tried out, in particular the Marxism of the Brotherhood and the militant Black Nationalism of Ras the Destroyer. He thus finds himself "descend[ing]" into the music's "depths" (8) through a disorienting dreamscape that functions as a well of Black American collective memory, as an indeterminate excavation of the substance, essence, or lack thereof of blackness, and as a kind of spectral historical theater. The complexity of delineating what blackness *is*, *was*, or *might be* – as well as Invisible Man's own understanding and (dis)embodiment of it in relation to invisibility – plays out in a state of galvanizing irresolution and equivocation. As an experience of suspension in contradiction, the

descent instils in Invisible Man both a "compulsion" to make, and a sense of the generative, prospectively liberatory potential of making, "music of invisibility" (13) in the form of literature and as a form of "demanded action" (12). The theoretical underpinnings of this action, hinted at and explored in nascent form in the prologue, are made explicit in the novel's epilogue, although critics have often criticized the epilogue for ameliorating what is viewed as the prologue's radical potential. Fred Moten, for example, argues that the action taken in and advocated for in the epilogue comprises a "domesticati[ng] . . . nationalist reconfiguration" of the prologue's presentation of "hope," a hope that Moten attributes to the prologue's positing of blackness as a force that exceeds and is irreducible to the (Black) subject (2003, 69).

In this chapter, I perform an extended close reading of the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man*, while also consulting Ellison's critical work. Neither fully accepting nor rejecting Moten's claims about the theorization of blackness that occurs in the prologue and the domestication that he argues concludes the novel, I suggest that what stands out most strikingly and radically in the text is its ambivalence — about blackness as a racialized category, an embodied experience, and a concept that can be disarticulated from Black people. This ambivalence is also about the text's narrative trajectory and the political position(s) it takes or doesn't take, and about the desire to become a coherent subject enmeshed in the politics and functioning of identity and identification. While rejecting ambivalence in name, Invisible Man's eventual embrace and weaponization of invisibility utilizes ambivalence as its ontological and epistemological basis (his "new analytical way"). From this, I suggest, he is able by

the novel's end to understand his invisibility as what I am calling *disidentity*: a form conceptualization of identity that neither fully affirms nor fully rejects identity and identification as possibilities but instead names and equivocally valorizes an ambivalent relation to them, understanding them as necessities one cannot escape that are to a certain extent required in order to endure, in a relationship that can be but is not necessarily cruelly optimistic. Incorporating scholarship from contemporary U.S. Black Studies, I explore how *Invisible Man*'s narrator partially rejects both discourses of racialization and discourses in which blackness is disarticulated from race. He does so to foreground instead how disidentity's ambivalence can serve as a source of worldbuilding and as an integral response to the action demanded of him by invisibility, an action and worldbuilding that moves in search of what Ellison elsewhere describes as a "complexly and challengingly human . . . 'something else' which makes for our strength, which makes for our endurance and promise" (1986, 276).

1. A Now that is Never Finished

At the base of his stoned descent through Armstrong's song, Invisible Man encounters a congregation of heard but unseen voices engaged in a ghostly call and response with an unnamed "someone" preaching a disorientingly equivocal sermon entitled "The Blackness of Blackness" (8-9), before being chased away by "a voice of trombone

timbre" (10) that questions Invisible Man's willingness to commit "treason" in a way that suggests something treasonous is stirring within the sermon. He then finds himself in an inconclusive dialogue with an old, plaintively moaning woman who recounts to him her simultaneous love of and hatred for her slave master, who is also the father of her children:

> "I dearly loved my master, son," she said.
> "You should have hated him," I said.
> "He gave me several sons," she said, "and because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too."
> "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence," I said. "That's why I'm here."
> "What's that?"
> "Nothing, a word that doesn't explain it. Why do you moan?" (10)

Confused by the sermon's equivocations and beguiled by his interlocutor's contradictory feelings toward the man who owned and repeatedly raped and impregnated her, Invisible Man seeks to find common ground with her – and in doing so attempts to find a ground from which to comprehend his unexpected foray into the shifting landscape of the descent – in what he initially supposes to be a shared affective experience named ambivalence. It is, however, a term with which she is unfamiliar, and her query as to its meaning prompts him to immediately retract and dismiss it as being inadequate to the task of understanding and explaining what he is hearing. Why might Invisible Man be so quick to discard the concept upon which so much of his own understanding of the world, himself, and his place in it will come to depend? While the text does not provide a clear answer to the question, it is possible to infer, by paying attention not only to his continuing dialogue with the old woman, but to the

sermon preceding their interaction and Ellison's sparse and precise use of the term in his critical writing, that it has to do with Invisible Man not yet understanding the extent to which ambivalence drives his world.

The old woman's moaning, he learns, stems not only from the ambivalent feelings she holds toward her master, but from the fact that she murdered him. The slave master, she tells Invisible Man, "never could bring hisself" to free her and their children, and despite loving him, she "loved [freedom] more." Rather than allow the children to "tear him to pieces," she poisoned him, thus saving him from a more violent death at their hands while saving them from the consequences of enacting the "bitter[ness]" (11) of their murderous desires. Uncertain about how to respond, Invisible Man asks her what she means by freedom, but she is unable to tell him: "'It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head'" — a task of which, ironically, she is barely capable, as demonstrated by the sudden incapacitating headache she develops from attempting to describe freedom and her subsequent bathetic collapse into tears and confusion: "Too much is done happen to me in too short a time" (11).

In part, his retraction of ambivalence can be connected to the fact that it is a technical term with which one has to become "acquainted" even if one is for any number of reasons already familiar with it as a structure of feeling. This is supported by the contempt with which Ellison consistently treats sociologists and psychologists who, he contends, diagnose minoritized populations from a distance and with

categorical certitude, in a manner that "abstract[s]" and "reduce[s]" the complexities of life and experience (1986, 276-277). Perhaps the old woman's pain, intuited more from her moan than from her capacity for description, is seen as exceeding the capacity for diagnostic language in both its depth and racialized particularity, even if the many layers of her pain are riven by multiple overlapping ambivalences. Regardless, the failure of their conversation complicates efforts to grasp what, for Invisible Man, ambivalence does and does not explain, why the term was deployed in the first place, and what Invisible Man understands it to mean in relation to how ambivalence has brought not only the old woman but himself "here." While the old woman's actions were for her in their mercy an act of love, saving her master from their sons' violence, the love she has for her him is inextricable from the hate she simultaneously feels toward him. As such, while she is moaning for his death, for the loss of her love-hate object, and while she characterizes her killing as an act of love, it is also an act of hate, and one that provides neither resolution, negation, nor even a suspension of the ambivalence of her feelings. Furthermore, as her "mixed up" thoughts on the freedom she sought suggest, the question of whether she managed to achieve it in any meaningful sense, along with the question of whether she managed to secure any relief from her ambivalence, remains ambiguous. What their interaction suggests, then, given the cluster of complicated interwoven ambivalences it reveals, is not so much that ambivalence doesn't explain "it" or have explanatory force, but that it is Invisible Man himself who, despite his initial textbook deployment of the term as descriptive of contradictory affects, is uncertain about what ambivalence can explain. While he

intuits (in a phrase whose importance will become apparent as this chapter progresses) from the "lower frequencies" (*IM*, 561) of her moan a complexity of painful feeling to which he feels a sense of proximity if not quite commonality – a pain that seems to have something important to do with ambivalence but also to run deeper than neatly delineable and diagnosable contradictory feelings – he nevertheless remains unable to conceive of ambivalence as a concept whose logic and explanatory potential exceeds the affective. By the novel's end, he will embrace ambivalence as not only affective but as the ontological condition and epistemic logic upon which the disidentity of his invisibility depends. For now, however, he remains "snarled in incompatible notions" (14), preventing him not only from taking action but from comprehending why he feels the need to act and what action that might be. What the prologue seems to suggest, then, is that embracing and inhabiting ambivalence to foster a better understanding of its importance is precisely the action he needs to take in order to transform his time underground from "covert preparation" to "overt action" (13).

The sermon preceding his interaction with the old woman lends credence to this, while illustrating the more expansive function granted to ambivalence by the novel itself beyond the contingencies of Invisible Man's present understanding of it. Feeling at home in the certitudes of neither the Brotherhood's nor Ras's racialized identifications of him – the former using him strategically and tokenistically as a pawn in the game of their scientific socialist project, the latter expecting identity of purpose and goals from him due to the color of his skin – Invisible Man is nevertheless confounded by the inconclusivity of the sermon's theory of blackness. This

confounding is exacerbated by the sermon's snarling – or rather, its willful entangling – of blackness with a more constitutive form and logic of ambivalence, one that is at odds with Invisible Man's current grasp of what ambivalence, and blackness, can mean: an ambivalence that goes beyond the affective, and a blackness that goes beyond the subject. The questions it raises around blackness and ambivalence anticipate and remain in dialogue with contemporary theories of blackness that seek to radically transform how blackness is conceptualized today. Specifically, the sermon presents a notion of blackness that is not dependent upon or latched inextricably to people racialized as black (via pigmentation, biology, and other notions with long and bloody histories). Instead, it appears to propose the existence of a blackness that is disarticulated from a subject *of* blackness. In doing so, it gestures toward the possibility of reconceptualizing blackness as something that is excessive of or distinct from the subject and subjectivity, at the same time as questioning the viability of such a possibility by suggesting that efforts to actualize it are liable to remain perpetually unfinished or unfinishable.

The sermon begins after being introduced by an unnamed preacher, who declares to his audience that the "text this morning is 'The Blackness of Blackness'":

> 'In the beginning . . .'
> 'At the very start,' they cried.
> '. . . there was blackness.'
> 'Preach it . . .'
> '. . . and the sun . . .'
> 'The sun, Lawd . . .'
> '. . . was bloody red . . .'
> 'Red . . .'

‘Now black is . . .’ the preacher shouted.
‘Bloody . . .’
‘I said black is . . .’
‘. . . an’ black ain’t . . .’
[. . .]
‘Black will git you . . .’
[. . .]
‘. . . an’ black won’t.’
[. . .]
‘It do . . .’
[. . .]
‘. . . an’ it don’t.’
[. . .]
‘Black will make you . . .’
[. . .]
‘. . . or black will un-make you.*’* (9-10)

In beginning from the beginning as a concept or trope, the sermon positions itself as a text operating within the mode of the origin story by evoking, in order to disorderingly rewrite, the opening of Genesis by removing the biblical God and his act of creation from the equation, reframing prehuman darkness as blackness, and thus blackness as what “there was” before there was a there. Genesis, of course, begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the freshly created earth, preceded by God, is, in its darkness, “without form, and void.” God “divide[s] the light from the darkness,” creating day and night, and reflects that the light, not the dark, is “good” (Genesis I: 1-4), introducing an oppositional division that permits the darkness to be named, no longer just void but bad night to the good light’s day — introducing, in other words, a hierarchical binary system of value. In the sermon’s origin story, it is blackness, not God, that already is: it precedes creation, either always already extant or, as I will suggest, posited discursively as such. Alongside blackness, the sun emerges in

conjunction ("*and* the sun . . . was.") While it is unclear whether or not the sun is being said to have been *created* by blackness, its conjunctional emergence occurs sequentially after the text's assertion of the uncreated originary existence of a primordial ("at the very start") subjectless blackness — a conjunctionality that, on the one hand, resists the diametric oppositionality and implicit ascription of value found in most translations of Genesis. On the other hand, the sun's emergence alongside or immediately after the announcement of primordial blackness can be read as imposing violently upon blackness a similar, albeit human, logic and language of distinction and classification — a logic and language that seeks, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, to impose an illusive(ly unambivalent) sense of order along inevitably exclusionary lines, in this case upon the vast originary indistinction of primordial subjectless blackness.

Whereas blackness at the start is without attributes, and is unattributed to any kind of being or agent, the sun is introduced immediately as "bloody red." A red sun connotes both morning and night — promising, in the Bible's New Testament, "fair weather" the following day if it appears in the evening, and "foul weather" later in the day if it appears in the morning (Matthew XVI: 2-3). In the sermon, however, there is no mention of night or day, no confirmation of fair or foul, no orientation or situatedness in apprehensible time or space beyond the past tense of "was," which here seems not to be referring to an actually existing past so much as an abstracted linguistic *before now* within the text of the sermon's mythic story. Ungrounded from reference to day or night, the bloodiness of the sun's red synecdochally evokes, for the first time in the sermon, recognizable life: the red blood that is pumped around the body by the

heart. This signals a shift away from Genesis as the sermon's initial referent, toward a focus on the movement from unambivalent blackness to ambivalent black via the impact of the sun's bloody red. The grammatical temporality of the sermon shifts from the "was" of a prior state of primordial blackness, pivoting on the word "now" – which functions as an adverb of time that signals a shift from the temporally suspended primordial scene to some kind of present moment and as a discourse marker organizing the scene's unfolding – to become "black." This shift appears to mark, or to be marked by, an act of violence: the spilling of blood, with one of the voices suggesting – neither correctly nor incorrectly according to the sermon's explanatory logic – that the emergence of the sun has bloodied blackness ("Now black is . . . bloody"), has committed a wounding act of violence against or upon it, although the mark of the wound, the wound's blood, is imposed on rather than drawn from within the blackness that is not itself attributed as a quality of living beings. The sun's invention – or intervention upon blackness – of bloody life that is or will become human can thus be understood as enacting an at once destructive and creative violence upon primordial blackness. While blackness and the sun can potentially coexist within the nonopposition or confluence of conjunction, the life that emerges in relation to the sun appears to result in the existence of ambivalent human categories of distinction: blackness is instrumentalized into the necessarily exclusionary and conflictive language of classification and categorization, a process that is addressed to "you" and becomes situated for the first time in locatable temporality — the ongoing present of the "now."

Blackness as something more, less, before, or in some sense independent from the human is thus acknowledged at the same time as being marked from the very start by an act of humanizing, racializing violence: a grimly ironic humanizing, in that racialized black arrives in the sermon at the same time as the human life from whose categories of recognition Black subjects will go onto be excluded. The emergence of racialized black in conjunction with the positing of disarticulated blackness, in which both may or may not, as the unacknowledged voice asserts, be simply "[b]loody," suggests that this conjunctional act of emergence may not only influence but constitute as impossible the possibility, now, of conceiving of a blackness unbloodied by the foundational violence perpetrated against it — that is, of a blackness unmarked by the (de)humanizing violence of racialization.

The preacher, however, neither confirms nor denies that blackness even *has* been bloodied, nor does he clarify the impact of the sun, instead passing over the responding voice's claim and making a series of equivocal assertions in a way that leaves what exactly happened, and how, unclear — although the shift from blackness to black and the introduction of an unspecified "you" upon whom black acts indicates without confirming cause that some change has taken place, and that an apostrophic subject of black(ness) is "now" present where it "was" not before. Where blackness seemingly unambivalently "was," black ambivalently both "is" and "ain't," "will" and "won't [. . .] git you," both acts ("do") and does not ("don't"), and will – in the sermon's sole instance of distinction rather than conjunction – either "make" or "un-make you." If understood as being the cause of the shift, then the bloodying of blackness into black

represents on the one hand the wounding imposition of human meaning and embodiment upon the vast indistinction of primordial blackness; and on the other, the distinction-producing violence upon subjectless blackness of the sun's bloodily human(izing) light, a light that is reflected now in the ongoing violence perpetrated against people racialized as black. If not understood as being the cause, then the effect is nevertheless similar, in that a (black) subject of a previously subjectless blackness is present "now," and the ambivalence of this black can be read as gesturing retroactively toward a prior and presumably unambivalent blackness that precedes or exceeds ontological categorization. In other words, a blackness irreducible to subjects racialized as black is projected into a presently constructed past in such a way that the ontological ambivalence of black depicted cryptically by the sermon is entered into dialogue with the notion of a prehuman, deracialized, primordial blackness. This latter blackness is held, contradictorily, as preceding humanized/racialized black at the same time as emerging *from* humanized/racialized black, in a process I call *retroprojection*: that is, a process in which cause and effect become inextricably looped to the extent that whether or not something happened in the past or was projected onto the past retroactively is undecidable.

This is the sermon's dual maneuver. On the one hand, it presents a notion of blackness without a subject that in some sense precedes or exceeds subjectivity, and as such constitutes a kind of primordial nothingness that is unbound by the ambivalence that arises when distinction is introduced. At the same time, the sermon contests the possibility of such a blackness through conjunction. It does this by hinging

the emergence of blackness as (or in) the "was" of before to the ambivalence of a "now." In (or from) this now, a blackness without ambivalence – that is, a blackness that *precedes* ambivalence – is impossible. Its impossibility is rooted in the fact that such an unambivalent blackness, existent or otherwise, remains within the sermon snarled, via distinction, to the now of ambivalent black. In other words, primordial blackness is both posited as in some sense prior to black at the same time as emerging impossibly, *retroprojectively*, from within the black it precedes. The sermon can thus be read as being ambivalent about both the possibility *and* the impossibility of primordial blackness. Either way, its obtuse revelations are cut short as Invisible Man is chased away by the trombone-timbred voice questioning his willingness to commit treason.

Recent scholarship exploring the notion of disarticulated blackness works within and seeks to parse a similarly knotty theoretical terrain as the sermon, while making explicit the relationship the relationship, hinted at by the sermon, between blackness and treason. Theorists of disarticulated blackness conceptualize blackness as something that should be understood as disarticulable from Black people. While far from uniform, such theories tend to agree on the assumption that "race, racialization, and racial identities [are] ongoing sets of political relations that require . . . the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human" (Weheylie 2014, 3) and that it is as such "crucial to disarticulate blackness from black people" (2008, 333). This disarticulation is necessary in order to better comprehend and implement the challenge posed by blackness – its "critical insurgency" (Spillers, 262), its anarchic valence as a

"poetic force" (Bey, 281) and as a "modality of . . . constant escape [that] takes the form, the held and errant pattern, of flight" (Harney and Moten, 51) – to those political, epistemological, and ontological relations (of power) that aim to contain it and, in so doing, constrain subjects racialized as black. Expanding upon Franz Fanon's claim that ontology and humanism neither "explain the existence of the black" nor provide "the black man [with any] ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (110), theorists of disarticulated blackness reject ontological categories that purport to offer "symbolic coherency in the world," because of the constitutive "antiblackness" of these categories and the ontological "procedures" that produce, reproduce, and maintain them. These processes "preclude" and "foreclose" any possibility of black people establishing meaningful "being-in-the-world" within them. Thus, they argue, blackness should instead be understood as a form of "nothingness" that is "without being," lacking what could ever be recognized and consecrated as "a proper grammar" (Warren, 271-272). What is most "exciting and generative" about such work, Fred Moten contends, is its speculative interrogation of what it might mean "to think from no standpoint," to think from "outside the desire for a standpoint" (2013, 737-738):

> What emerges in the desire that constitutes a certain proximity to that thought is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or . . . is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, [and] is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space (738-739).

Moten here, in deploying the concept of anoriginality, is drawing on the philosopher Andrew Benjamin's theory of "anoriginal heterogeneity," which, Benjamin argues, "cannot be thought within the concepts and categories of the dominant philosophical tradition," and which describes "the presence, the actuality of the 'original' dis-unity [. . .] [I]ts presence within as well as its constitution of the frame" — in other words, "the presentation of an origin that is not original: the impossible origin, hence the anoriginal" (1991, 10).[5] Blackness, as the anoriginal displacement of ontology, irreparably disturbs the tenability of dominant antiblack traditions and thought, and in doing so practices black thought, which can be defined as thought that foregrounds "interstitial space[s] of volatility" that "threaten to disintegrate the hegemonic polarity between . . . humanness and thingness, humanness and machine, law and unlaw, and so forth" (Bey, 283). In other words, disarticulating blackness from Black people exposes the antiblackness that is constitutive of and thus inseparable from ontological categorizations that cannot but reproduce the violence of racializing blackness. If ontology itself is understood as being fundamentally antiblack, it can offer no home, no being, no grounding, no identity for blackness. Disarticulating blackness from racialization can thus be understood as disarticulating blackness from (the possibility of) ontology, from the category of being itself, from which, such scholars argue, Black

[5] Thomas Huhn glosses this definition with the claim that "in attesting to an impossible original," anoriginal heterogeneity "also thereby attests to an impossible site of interpretation, an impossible subjectivity," and the phrase and its meanings are thus "projective": "it projects the impossibility of a unified experience based upon any supposed original unities or traditions. Tradition, in this light, is something like the belief in continuity, and the inevitability of repetition, flowing undisturbed from a timeless, unified origin" (2).

people are always already excluded, or held against within as exemplars of the limitpoints of the human. Disarticulated blackness therefore frequently embraces blackness as a nothingness that precedes and exceeds the possibility of ontological categorization, haunting it irruptively from before, beyond, and within with the force of its impossible nothingness. Understood in this way, disarticulated blackness, Moten argues, compels consideration of the paradoxical question of "*what nothing is*," not from the standpoint of blackness – which in any case cannot be said to solidly or meaningfully exist as an entity or positionality but is instead a "mobility of place," a "fugitive field" – but from what he calls the "absoluteness of [blackness'] generative dispersion of a general antagonism." Through this antagonism "we ask, paraontologically, by way of but also against and underneath the ontological terms at our disposal: What is nothingness? What is thingliness? What is blackness?" (741-742).

Responding to Moten's work, Marquis Bey makes the strong claim that, as nothingness, blackness constitutes "the foundation of everything's foundation" (fn. 2, 291). Blackness, for Bey, was and is "already here": it is "[a]lways moving, always the elusive thing escaping," and it "stands . . . as a perennial refusal of lawfulness – indeed, of law – and is unable to acknowledge the law" (282). The force of blackness, Bey continues, is its "anoriginal lawlessness" (283). The declaration of this anoriginal lawlessness thus occupies a disjointed and ambivalent temporality, responding to but also preceding the racialization and systematic dehumanization of subjects identified as black (who are, Bey argues, "metonymic flashes" of the poetic force of

disarticulated blackness [278]). As something produced as black within and by antiblack legislative and categorizing procedures while also being constitutively excluded from them, the Black subject for Bey serves as a privileged human iteration of blackness' anoriginal lawlessness: at once there and not, exceeding categorization, metonymic embodiments of the irreducible generative nothingness of blackness, which itself is representable only as a chaotic poetic force of rupture and disruption. Blackness is thus posited as anterior to without being itself the cause of black subjects' racialized and dehumanized status: not an origin, but an always already lawlessness that law (regulatory and disciplinary explicitly or implicitly racialized categorization and classification) arises to incompletely contain and constrain in the service of reproducing dominance and the discourses that maintain the conditions of domination. However, where Moten appears to locate the force of blackness in the knotty paradoxes and ambivalences his theorization of blackness performs, Bey seems, in his unequivocal claim regarding the foundational status of blackness, to want to evacuate ambivalence as problematic or counterproductive from conceptualizations of blackness as a generative anarchic poetic force of lawlessness.

Bey's disinterest in ambivalence becomes explicit what he leaves out of his quotation from Hortense Spillers' "Moving on Down the Line." Bey writes:

> Blackness is "a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a *wounding*" (Spillers 2003: 262), and in this constant wounding, this constant cutting, it is the "abeyance of closure" (Carter 2013: 595) [279]

The passage Bey is citing reads as follows:

> But if by ambivalence we might mean the abeyance of closure, or *break* in the passage of syntagmatic movement from one more or less stable property to another, as in the radical disjuncture between "African" and "American," then ambivalence remains not only the privileged and arbitrary judgment of a postmodernist imperative, but also a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a *wounding*. (Spillers 2003, 262.)

I cite Bey's elision here to highlight what it reveals about the importance (or perceived unimportance) of ambivalence to different conceptualizations of disarticulated blackness: specifically, that when ambivalence is removed from the equation, it becomes easier to make strong foundational claims about the possibility of an unambivalent blackness that Ellison's foregrounding of ambivalence in the sermon presents as impossibly knotty.

Read in light of these theoretical conceptualizations of blackness, I suggest that the sermon can be understood as presenting, through the deceptively tricky deixis of "was" and "now", not an originary but an *anoriginal* theory of blackness in perpetual (dis)articulation, a disarticulation that unfolds in the ambivalent potentiality of a now that is never finished — a now from which the was as impossible origin continually (re)emerges. Disarticulation's perpetual unfinishedness marks the "now" as perpetually but contingently necessary when seeking to escape the ongoingness of (de)humanizing racialization. In doing so, the sermon performatively anticipates Moten's claim regarding blackness' displacement – not, or at least not yet, *destruction* – of ontology's time and space. The sermon also anticipates, by connecting blackness to the possibility of treason, Bey's claim that blackness is a form of anoriginal

lawlessness. Furthermore, the sermon exemplifies connections made by Spillers between ambivalence and wounding. It also highlighs, through its performance of ambivalence, some of the conceptual and practical difficulties of achieving radical escape from what is, at the same time as questioning the desirability (or at least the livability) of doing so, given that racialization at the very least provides (wounded and wounding) coordinates for living.

In other words, (disarticulated) blackness and its relationship to (racialized) black functions in the sermon according to a logic of ambivalence. The sermon both partially accepts and partially rejects Bey's strong theory of a foundational blackness that, disarticulated from subjects racialized as black and incapable of being captured or finally represented, functions as an escape from the ambivalence of categorization. It both posits a primordial "was" from which unambivalent blackness became ambivalent black, and frames that unambivalent disarticulated primordiality as necessarily constructed from within the ambivalent and ongoing present of the "now". In this "now," the "was" persists as the possibility of escape. The "now" is, as such, never finished — it is a now in which neither disarticulation nor racialization can cease, for both continue to exist snarled in ambivalence. To escape finally would be to commit treason: to permanently rupture the law to the extent that one could escape out from it into the errant and unrepresentable nothingness disarticulation. Invisible Man is, it seems, unable to commit such treason or, as the novel's epilogue suggests, recognizes that some of the amelioration provided by belief in the possibility of escape is not only fantasmatic but is a turning away from the experiential complexity of

inhabiting blackness in an antiblack world. It is through commitment to this complexity that, I argue, Invisible Man ambivalently accepts and rejects both disarticulation and racialization. He does so by embracing his invisibility as a form of disidentity, and he finds in the ambivalence of disidentity an imperfect means of navigating the simultaneity of escape and containment entailed by accepting and also rejecting both racialization and disarticulation.

2. Disidentity, Ambivalence, and the Word

I have argued that the sermon in *Invisible Man*'s prologue functions as an anorigin story of the production of racialized blackness and, concomitantly, of the possibility of a blackness that can be generatively and even freeingly disarticulated from black people. It is a story in which ambivalence is shown to structure theorizations and experiences of blackness. In this way, the sermon both anticipates and complicates contemporary theorizations of blackness. The sermon posits a blackness that "was" prior to the racialized category of black that now "is." At the same time, disrupts the linearity of cause and effect, of blackness into black, suggesting that the desire for a blackness prior to racialization might be viewed as a product of this very racialization and the troubling ambivalence of lived, embodied blackness. In other words, the desire for an unambivalent, disarticulated blackness unbloodied by racialization and its ambivalences speaks as much to the complex reality of these lived ambivalences as it

does to the possibility of disarticulation. In staging a text that takes an equivocal approach to both racialization and the possibility of disarticulation from racialization, the only thing about which the sermon does not evince ambivalence is ambivalence itself: not just the ambivalence of black that it depicts, but ambivalence about disarticulated blackness as something that is actually possible and that would be possible to meaningfully inhabit in a world that remains antiblack. Where Bey figures disarticulated blackness as, paradoxically, both nothingness and a source of dynamic plenitude, Ellison frames the possibility of encountering such a blackness as riven from the very start with ambivalence. Far from radical escape, the treason blackness implies is felt by Invisible Man as both promise and threat. Disarticulation and racialization are in a feedback loop, fueling ambivalence, which Invisible Man establishes as his new analytical way of interpreting himself and the world in a now that is never finished and a was that may never have been. The text appears less concerned with advocating for either option than with theorizing a response to the impacts of living in the simultaneous ambivalences of both racialization and disarticulation. Rather than commit to disarticulation or racialization, Invisible Man in the epilogue comes to see the invisibility that stems from the blackness of his racialization as something impossible to escape or will away and opts at the novel's end to return to the world he had fled or been chased from. In order to do so, he instead embraces his invisibility by conceiving of it and his many ambivalences as what I am calling disidentity.

While Invisible Man arguably never fully understands the treasonous implications of the sermon's obtuse revelations, it is clear that upon encountering the old woman he has nevertheless already felt the constructive and destructive impacts of racialized and disarticulated blackness — has felt them, in other words, as the ambivalence that brings him "here," where here is both the scene of encounter and the underground space in which the prologue and epilogue are situated and from which the novel's main narrative is recounted. He understands his invisibility not as an inherent condition but as an effect of relationality: not "a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis" but an effect of the "*inner* eyes" of those "with whom I come in contact," the "psychical eyes" through which these others, never directly racialized within the prologue, "look . . . upon reality" and see "only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). At fault is the perceiving other's inner eye – the eye inflected and conditioned by racialized ideological assumptions and prejudices, or in other words the law – that filters their gaze. While Invisible Man becomes nothing, in a sense, in the invisibilizing gaze of others, that does not mean he is not actually there: he remains "a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids . . . [who] might even be said to possess a mind" (3). His experience of being made invisible, of being seen as a no-thing rather than as a some-thing, puts him into a position where he both is and is not, and yet remains in relationality, even if as a subject without agential traction in the world of others, insufficiently apprehended even to be misrecognized — and thus without legible ontological grounding. The other's invisibilizing gaze comes from

black and white people alike, as demonstrated by his rejection of the Brotherhood and their identitarian assumption of shared purpose and worldview based around skin color. His embrace of disidentity thus entails first an expression of ambivalence about racialization and finally an expression of ambivalence about all forms and discourses of identity and identification. As such, Invisible Man's radical ambivalence emerges not exclusively as a condition of black identity but as the basis of a broader disidentity through which he might find grounding in the world according to his own coordinates, even if those coordinates are at root imposed from without. But what *is* disidentity? And more specifically, what is Invisible Man's disidentity and how does it relate to the ambivalences of disarticulated and racialized blackness?

Disidentity is a term that was introduced, but only "provisionally" theorized, by José Esteban Muñoz to describe "an anti-identitarian identity politics" (164, 176). Disidentity is "held," Muñoz suggests, "through deep disidentification with identity's very tenets" (178) — tenets that are part and product of the existing ineradicably antiblack ontological categories that are available for identification. Disidentification for Muñoz is "a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance" through which a (typically but not necessarily marginalized) subject "read[s]" themself "in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect'" (26, 12) with them. It is "an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences" (74). Thus, while disidentification is both a manifestation of and response to ambivalence, disidentity is an application of disidentification to "the representational

protocols of identity" itself (175). Neither "simply" a "counteridenti[fication]" nor an outright "reject[ion]" of identity, disidentity for Muñoz involves the cultivation of an "impersonal self" from which "those parts of oneself" that "lead[] beyond [and transcend] oneself" can flourish in such a way that the "moment of transcendence" can become "a moment in which counterpublics become imaginable" (175, 178). Muñoz derives his notion of disidentity from the sculptures and installations of Félix González-Torres, a queer Cuban-American artist whose work, Muñoz argues, "elaborated forms of representation premised on *invisibility*," invoking "a disidentity that is predicated on transparency and the everyday instead of the more familiar models of minority identity that invoke exotic colors and rituals" (166, emphasis in original). That is to say, disidentity for Muñoz does not necessarily refuse the terms of identity as such, but resists and challenges narrowly identitarian assumptions about what *x* identity should or should not look like around which only shallow commonality can be organized, and instead seeks to formulate more capacious points of identification and structures of feeling that can be shared beyond the constraints of being or identifying (or being identified) as *x* without fully rejecting the differences and similarities nominal identity categories normatively or counternormatively index. For Muñoz, the cultivated impersonality of disidentity opens the subject up to what is beyond them, to what exceeds the impositions of identity categories, in a gesture that makes the self and its cultivation a public and shared space of potentially transformative relationality through the exploration of structural and personal similarity with and difference from others.

My understanding of disidentity is less optimistic – which is not to say more pessimistic – than Muñoz's. Disidentity, I suggest, neither fully affirms nor fully rejects identity and identification as possibilities. Instead it names and equivocally valorizes an ambivalent relation to identity and identification, which are understood as necessities one cannot escape and which one must endure, in a relationship that can be but is not necessarily cruelly optimistic. Disidentity is *to be am not*. It is to inhabit in ambivalence acceptance and rejection of the necessities of identity and identification, and to cultivate where possible within this ambivalence a space of both being and not being held by impositional categories, of exerting constrained agency against (or above, or below) them at the same time as acknowledging the impossibility of fully or finally escaping as well as the sheer risk of doing so (even if the risk of remaining within them can feel unbearable). Disidentity thus functions as a kind of meta-(non)identity which utilizes ambivalence as a source and sense of generative ongoingness from which to navigate the the world's unavoidable interpellations and identifications. It is not so much ambivalence about *x* identity, but ambivalence *about* identity as itself a kind of (dis)identity in which one can continually if only partially escape the world's hailing. It is to be nothing and something at once. In its most optimistic register, something that is not can produce, always ambivalently, the sense of becoming something that is not yet. Disidentity thus inhabits the interstices of identity and nonidentity, of sovereignty and nonsovereignty, of racialization and its disarticulation.

Invisible Man adopts disidentity in the epilogue, becomes *am not*, by "reluctantly accept[ing] the fact" (552) of the invisibility that has been imposed upon him, at once accepting and rejecting racialization while performing and failing to successfully perform disarticulation. He is thus not so much making a choice to be or not be invisible as he is rejecting the logic of such a choice and asserting a constrained agency – not *to be or not to be*, but *to be am not* – in order to find in the disidentity of *being am not* a capacity for self-fashioning within and alongside the violences of categories of legibility and illegibility. In embracing invisibility, in cultivating disidentity from invisibility, Invisible Man finds himself in a position of radical ambivalence – he both is and is not – and from this ambivalence he locates himself as occupying a position of "infinite possibilities" (556), unbeholden to the totalizing strong logic of either/or, of yes or no. Instead, he finds himself able now to simultaneously "condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no," to "denounce and . . . defend," to "hate and . . . love," by claiming ambivalence as the principal optic through which he is and is not in the world, a world he can now only "approach . . . through division" (559). He becomes able to escape escape – partially, ambivalently – the sense that he can be reduced to his racialization, because the disidentity of his invisibility expunges from him his sense of attachment to or identification with a blackness he never chose. He chooses now, in becoming *am not*, to step aside from this blackness, to disarticulate himself without finitude from it. This allows him to situate himself as neither "'for' society" nor "'against' it," to reject its categories and "assign [himself] no rank or limit," in order to "[s]tep outside of the borders of what men call reality" into the

"chaos" of "imagination" (556-557) — that is, into something that is not yet but, in being not, could yet be. Doing so entails, as Muñoz suggests, depersonalizing himself, disidentifying to become many and possible: implacably ambivalent about all positions or standpoints and instead imbricated in everything and everyone, as much "*part of them* [whites] as well as a part from them," irreducible to the categories they impose and accepting of mutual imbrication — both *more and less than oneself*. From this acceptance, for Invisible Man, a sense of agency or its possibility emerges.

For Moten, Invisible Man's position by the novel's end constitutes a domestication of the treasonous potential of disarticulated blackness: both a neutering of it and a nationalization of it through what Moten understands as Invisible Man's embrace of the United States. While Moten is not wrong, I would suggest that he is also not right and that he misunderstands the significance of Invisible Man's disidentity and its inextricable relationship to the United States. Much as Invisible Man, in being not, is "woven of many strands," so, he asserts, is the U.S. itself. This connects his transformation into *being am not* to U.S. society. However, the connection he makes does not constitute an embrace. He pointedly takes no position for or against the various strands and, rather, "recognizes" them in order to "let them remain" (556). In other words, he admits their existence and acknowledges where his invisibility, and thus his disidentity, came from. While Moten labels this a diminishment in nationalist terms of the potential of disarticulated blackness, the radical ambivalence of Invisible Man's disidentity precludes strong or unequivocal identification with *anything*, including the United States. Rather than take a standpoint

for the U.S., he situates himself as a part that is apart, an entity that is not and that, as such, can take as a standpoint only the lack of a standpoint. While necessarily containing an acknowledgment of attachment to and dependence upon the United States, Invisible Man's disidentity also entails a refusal to identify or to be identified as anything at all. Furthermore, in the novel's final lines he wields the threat or promise that the disidentity his invisibilization has forced him to become could likewise very well become, in fact could "on the lower frequencies" (561) already be, *any and all of you*, if the lower frequencies are understood to refer to everything that underlies the violent and woven strands of identity in the United States. To label such a move as domesticating, I am suggesting, requires a commitment to disarticulated blackness which Invisible Man does not unambivalently have.

A more thorough understanding of Invisible Man's adoption of disidentity and its relationship to life in the United States can be found in how the concept of ambivalence is deployed in Ellison's critical work. In one of his earliest canonical essays, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison introduces the notion, central to his conception of what he elsewhere describes as "serious literature" ("Hidden Name and Complex Fate," *Shadow and Act*, 181), that human subjects are characteristically ambivalent — that they are at once "both good *and* bad" ("Twentieth-Century," *SA* 25, emphasis added), and that to suggest otherwise would constitute a failure to engage seriously with what he takes to be his corpus'

central concern: the "complexity of . . . actual situation[s]" ("Introduction," *SA* xxii).[6] This understanding of the subject stems in part from what he terms the "project[ion]" by "great literary art" of the "image of man [as a] sensitively focused process of opposites" (27), a projection that "effective and revealing" – i.e., *serious* – fiction must "mirror" (25). Black characters, however, "seldom [possess] the full, complex ambiguity of the human" (26). Concerned in this essay principally with demonstrating how "counterfeit" (27) – that is, unambivalently one-dimensional – literary depictions of black characters as "oversimplified clown[s] . . . beast[s] or . . . angel[s]" (25) contribute to their dehumanization within US society, Ellison attributes to representations of black subjects as ambivalent beings not just the quality of truthfulness to the complexity of reality, but also a morally and politically vital humanizing function. This, he argues, is because black subjects serve in the United States as "a human 'natural' resource" whose role is to enable white subjects to become "more human" through the "institutionalized dehumanization" (29) of black people. The struggle for ambivalent representation as a form of reparative truth-telling and resistance to structural dehumanization entails a "struggle . . . over the nature of reality" that extends beyond literature to life in the United States in general, in which "white and non-white groups" alike too frequently "impose [their unambivalent] ideals upon the rest." As the group with the most power, the "image" of reality reflected by white people is typically "accepted as *the* image of the American" (26). This struggle,

[6] Maybe something on 'complexity' in Ellison (and the ambivalence that informs it, that gives it form)?

Ellison suggests, in language that Moten would rightly see as suspiciously reproductive of U.S. exceptionalism and liberal myths of progress, indicates that "the 'American' himself has not . . . been finally defined"; furthermore, the struggle is "part of that democratic process through which the nation works to achieve itself," resulting, albeit "slowly," in the birth of the "ideal American character" (26). The problem for Ellison then, it seems, is not with the struggle itself, which he views as a necessary teleological process. The problem is that not all participants struggle from a position of relative equity and that the hegemonic position occupied by whites stems precisely from the subjugation of black subjects, from whose dehumanization US notions of race emerge as disciplinary categories ("Perspectives," 334-338). Dehumanizingly unambivalent fictional depictions of black subjects are thus one process among many through which whites impose their image of reality. As such, ambivalence, as an integral component of what constitutes the human, functions for Ellison, at the level of textual representation, as a rehumanizing moral force of resistance geared toward the achievement of foundational US ideals such as the "sacred [and] precious" ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights ("Perspective of Literature," *GT* 328).

The extent to which Ellison does in fact invest in U.S. ideals appesrs in what I call *the Ellisonian word* and its integral relationship to ambivalence. Literary representations of ambivalent black subjects are for Ellison a component of what marks literature as serious: that is, literature that is utilized by writers as a moral and political force tied to the achievement of what Ellison understands to be distinctly

American democratic ideals. Ambivalence in Ellison's critical work, however, goes beyond the moral contradictions of human personality, and describes the functioning, even the structure, of language itself. As he declares in "Twentieth-Century," "[t]he essence of the word is its ambivalence." Possessing "the potency to revive and . . . free," as well as "the power to blind, imprison and destroy" the "Negro," the word is, he claims "the most insidious and least understood form of segregation" (24-25). But what precisely *is* the word for Ellison, and what makes it such an insidious form of segregation? What is its ambivalent essence? Given the essay's focus on fictional representation, the word can in one important sense be understood to substitute synecdochally for 'writing' or 'literature,' particularly the kind that, through unambivalent representations of black subjects, exacerbates and legitimates their dehumanized status in the United States. Ellison was, of course, writing during the legally enforced racial segregation of Jim Crow. As such, literary segregation or segregation at the level of language reproduced the logic of legal segregation in subtler ways and provided cultural legitimation for legal segregation while also excluding black readers and writers. Such a reading, while not wrong, does not grasp the scope of the Ellisonian word, nor its ambivalence, nor the ambivalent word's implications for understanding Ellison's broader project of engagement with the complex reality of actual situations and, from there, the model of disidentity he presents at the conclusion of *Invisible Man*.

In "Society, Morality, and the Novel," Ellison suggests that novels compel "admiration" from readers to the extent that they "intensif[y] our sense of the real" or

"justif[y] our desire to evade certain aspects of reality which we find unpleasant" (*GT* 243). Readers admire fiction that confirms their sense of reality and their understanding of (their own) identity; they dislike that which doesn't. As such, while serious fiction for Ellison must do the work of founding a better reality, individual authors are bound by their own experiential sense of the world. Glossing this claim, Ellison concludes rather enigmatically that "[i]n the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word (243). He thus sheds light on his use of "the word" in "Twentieth-Century," while complicating the significance of both "reality" and the "beginning" in his work. Reality for Ellison is an ambivalent concept: simultaneously and inextricably subjective and objective. Subjective reality refers to the realm in which individuals understand and seek to manage their cognitive and affective responses to, and participation in, objective reality; objectively reality operates as something that can be inferred through "sense" and critical reflection, but which will necessarily be mediated and encountered from within one's subjective individuality.

In other words, reality is dynamic, processual, always mediated by experience, and never fully subjective or objective. Experience, for Ellison, is the particular and contingent material of individual human life, and is irreducible to what he understands disdainfully to be sociological discourse's harmful pseudo-scientific "abstract[ion]" and "reduc[tion]" of the complexity of life to manageable data points ("'A Very Stern Discipline,'" *GT* 276). Conversely, the novel "[b]y its nature it seeks to communicate a vision of experience" ("Society", 241) – both individuals' unique experience of themselves and reality, and the experiences of the group or groups of which they are a

part. “Describ[ing] our experience . . . creates it,” he writes (*SA* 183). With this in mind, the word can be understood as signifying both artistic mediations of reality through which experience is encountered, examined, and articulated, and as the broader discursive structures of meaning that shape, create and limit, the individual — all of which constitute more or less real but never finally and unquestionably objective *images* of reality. Word and world thus operate in dynamic co-relation, and while there is a world beyond the word, it is via the word in its many forms that we encounter and potentially transform the world. The word signifies for Ellison the forces, objectively existent but subjectively experienced, into which we are born and by which we are shaped, including language itself and its literary manifestations. Understood as such, the Ellisonian word anticipates Michel Foucault’s theory of *discourse* as describing “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 49). For Foucault, discourse refers to the very constitution of (what counts as viable and legitimate) knowledge and to “the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations” that inhere in competing forms of knowledge “and relations between them” (Weeden, 108). While my intention is not to posit neat parallels between the two, the sense in which discourse operates for Foucault as “a form of power that circulates in the social field” (Diamond and Quinby, 185) and bestows upon subjects legitimacy and illegitimacy (in Ellison’s register humanity and inhumanity) is instructive when seeking to understand what is meant by the Ellisonian word as a discursive structure with material, world-shaping ramifications.

The Ellisonian word, then, refers to something akin to discourse: the sometimes abstract forces, palpable in their effects and impacts, that structure and shape subjects' experiences and understandings of the world. The word is not just what it names, but its construction, through naming, of what it names. Thus the word and its contradiction: in naming what it aims to name through classification, categorization, and distinction, it in fact operates along ideological lines of exclusion, segregating subjects through distinction, while at the same time producing the ambivalence language aims to mitigate. This is the "is" and "was" of the word's beginning: it was and is always already ambivalent just as blackness is in itself impossible outside of what it is constructed discursively to mean and has never unambivalently been; it cannot be entirely separated from ambivalent or unambivalent attempts to categorize black subjects. The word is and was contingent, and this is made palpable by Ellison in his analysis of the dominant structuring discourse in the United States: the word out of which racialized blackness is constructed. The word of the United States – the word in which, as products of it, Ellison and Invisible Man remain ambivalently invested – is not only a theoretical abstraction regarding the functioning of language and discourse, but is also a concrete text in itself that provides the ideological and affective stage for everyday life within the U.S.: the Constitution, and its supposedly precious ideals. This, for Ellison, is the "covenant by which [all] Americans . . . are bound," the "script by which we seek to act out the drama of democracy and the stage upon which we enact our roles" (*GT,* 330). It is a text – a word – that is itself ambivalent from the start: while it names the US as a nation "dedicated . . . to the ideal of an *open* society,

a society in which a great land mass allowed peoples to move about [and] change their identities" (*GT*, 311), it is also "written in the language of the very hierarchy [that had been] overthrown" (331) in the formation of the U.S. state. Specifically, in glossing "the conflict between freedom and slavery" (333), the Constitution as foundational American word necessitated the invention of race as "the unheralded emergence of a new principle or motive in the drama of American democracy." The construction of race produced "a split in America's moral identity that would infuse all of its acts and institutions with a quality of hypocrisy," "fog[ging] the American's perception of himself, distort[ing] his national image, and blind[ing] him to the true nature of his cultural complexity."

Through race's emergence the now-racialized black subject is bloodied, is made into "a human 'natural' resource" that in theory guarantees the humanity of whites but in practice whittles away not only the human complexity of black people but of all people who partake in the violence of racialization. The foundational U.S. word and its ambivalence thus enacts the containment of blackness and the (de)humanizing racialization of black people, followed by the "identification of the socially unacceptable with the blacks." As a result of being founded upon an ambivalent word that precludes everyone's ability to achieve their full human complexity, the potential of American identity as laid out in ambivalent Constitutional ideas, Ellison contends, has yet to be achieved by anyone. While the Constitution's ambivalent promise "ensures the conditions, the stage upon which we act, the rest of it is up to the individual," and the individual is riven by the disavowal of the ambivalence

constituted by the snarling together of white and black, as is evidenced in the various struggles about which image of reality is unambivalently the correct one. It is only by confronting the ambivalent imbrications of blackness and whiteness, Ellison suggests, that an American identity that is not cleaved into whiteness *or* blackness but admits for their co-constitution without treating them as enemies or irreducible opposites might emerge and fulfill the Constitution's promise and thus negate the need to cultivate disidentity.

While Ellison's diagnosis of the construction of race in the United States and the integral role played by ambivalence in both this construction and the possibility of its unravelling is astute, there is also, as many critics have noted, a troubling liberalism at play, characterized by what can be understood as a jarring investment in progress myths that legitimate the very racism Ellison wishes to eradicate. Michael Nowlin describes this as Ellison's "paradoxical[]" rejection of white supremacist history that is coupled with attachment to, or rather, "ironic faith" in, "the founding fathers' principle of freedom that may yet undo the accidental tyranny of white patriarchy." Nowlin attributes the irony of this faith to Ellison's literary stylistics, his "emphasis on ambivalence, ironic mis-recognition, the uncanny in history, and aesthetic modes of mastery" that may "tall[y] well with the Cold War liberal suspicion of ideology," but also provocatively makes "collective racial trauma a fundamental component of every American's unconscious" (131). While Ellison's seeming belief, in his critical work, in the possibility of eventually overcoming the ambivalences that constitute life and (racialized) identity in the United States can seem jarring in light of the disidentity

with which *Invisible Man* concludes, this could in part be a product, as Jesse Wolfe notes, of genre: "[*Invisible Man*] refuses to espouse . . . confident faith in these ideals [of the US and its Constitution]. Perhaps the novel, as a genre, is friendlier to ambivalence than the essay is" (629).

I am less interested here in adjudicating Ellison's individual politics than I am in the relationship between his criticism's valorization of ambivalence as necessary for transformation and the culmination of *Invisible Man*. In both texts, not only is the word fundamentally ambivalent but ambivalence emerges as the principally viable response to the broader structuring ambivalences. Across Ellison's corpus, I suggest, the word and its ambivalences are connected with a blackness that remains a trap at the same time as proffering the possibility of escape. As we see in *Invisible Man*, disidentity emerges from within the interstices of blackness and the word, from within the ever unfinished "was" and "is" of blackness and the word. What this means is that disidentity operates as an interstitial positionality within the ongoingness of blackness and the word, of the unfolding of race, ambivalence, and identity in the United States. It both refuses a political stance and, in doing so, takes up a political stance: to be am not, to inhabit disidentity, is a way for Invisible Man to gain traction in a world where he has none, and to open himself to "the fugitive socialities and intimacies engendered by the queer experience of state illegibility" (Carter and Cervenak, 206-207) without having to give himself over to a blackness in which he doesn't fully believe and by which he wishes not to be determined. In becoming am not in a nationstate whose foundational word is at once promising and deadly, Invisible Man in a certain sense

detaches himself from it in favor of ambivalently inhabiting a queerly illegible (non)state. The novel itself, in its depiction of disidentity, becomes a form of overt action in disseminating the prospective worldbuilding commonality of "lower frequencies" on which it ends. For Invisible Man, this prospective commonality grounded in disidentity partially rejects all identitarian positionalities as in themselves sufficient grounds for community and as incapable of facilitating the lived complexity of people. Significantly, in both accepting and rejecting racialization and disarticulation, Invisible Man's conceptualization of disidentity extends the logic of disarticulation away from race exclusively. In a sense, it *disarticulates disarticulation* from principally blackness to identity and identification as a whole in search of the possibility of a life in which, against the constraints of the racializing American word, the impossible necessity of being am not might emerge as something it cannot yet be.

3. Conclusion: The Promise of Lower Frequencies

Discourses that operate from the assumption that black people are constitutively excluded from the category of the human do not hold that black people have *no life*. As Jared Sexton clarifies,

> black life is not . . . life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and

> heritage, of all the things colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. (28)

Thus, when Moten frames the ending of *Invisible Man* as domesticating the blackness of the prologue's sermon, this can be understood as suggesting that the epilogue entails not only a return to the antiblack world, but a mitigation of primordial blackness' unambivalence. The mitigation would take place through blackness becoming captured in ambivalence by the antiblack world it is supposed to irrupt, and thus be form of capitulation or reconciliation that rejects or disavows the disruptive force of disarticulated blackness. However, as I have argued, not only is this not what happens in the epilogue, the prologue also never truly embraces the notion of disarticulated blackness. Ambivalent about the livability not only of blackness in all of its iterations, but of *all* unambivalent iterations of *all* categories, Invisible Man instead forges from ambivalence a disidentity in the form of invisibility with a view to finding some inhabitable grounding in the contingency of the particular world he cannot but uninhabit: that of the United States. Within this ambivalent disidentity, neither attached to blackness nor not, but nevertheless shaped and structured by it and by the antiblackness of the world the world lives in, he has begun to find the possibility of some kind of individually meaningful, subjectively inhabitable possibility. This possibility projects itself outward on the lower frequencies, frequencies that are

attributed to blackness by Moten et al., but that Invisible Man treats as at least partially disarticulated from blackness and racialization.

Invisible Man exits the underground having rejected the notion that he is pathologically responsible for any sickness that may be attributed to his condition of invisibility. You "carry your sickness within you," he states, thinking either that the cause of sickness is a "dirty joke," or the "'political situation,'" but either way "deep down you suspect that you're yourself to blame." You can, he realizes, "either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting phase" (555). In other words, for Invisible Man ambivalence induced by racialization may have been inflicted upon him, but he is the only person who can, ultimately, decide how to respond to that sickness. For him, the solution is to be am not, to embrace invisibility, disidentity, and ambivalence, to locate "health" in "division" (556). For Sexton, such a decision requires an "acceptance" that is "active": "a willing or willingness . . . to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death." It is "not an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world," but an "affirmation of blackness [and] a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality" (28).

For Invisible Man, however, blackness in either its racialized or disarticulated iterations is itself not necessarily an affirmative category, and while he does not exactly reject blackness by seeking entrance into or accommodating the antiblack world, he also does not attribute to his embrace of disidentity any real attachment to

blackness as identity category or concept. Though he may appear to valorize America's woven strands, its minor differences, he neither attaches to nor detaches from them, instead recognizing and acknowledging their existence and opting to pursue the cultivation of a radical ambivalence about all and everything in existence, filtered or expressed through a disidentity that both is and is not, in hope of some yet to be articulated sociality or relationality signaled through the lower frequencies of ambivalence. This allows us to nuance Moten's charge of domestication, and to ask—does disidentity and ambivalence, as embodied by Invisible Man, necessarily entail a distancing from blackness or an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world? Does disidentity wittingly or unwittingly play into or perpetrate antiblackness? Does ambivalence about racialized and disarticulated blackness involve troubling and detrimental reconciliation with the world that lives in the world?

The short answer, probably, is yes and no—which is, in a sense, precisely the point. Yes, disidentity might consolidate a reactionary liberal ambivalence that promotes conformity to the norm and faith in progress, and no, disidentity fundamentally problematizes and resists all of the terms on which identification currently relies and takes shape, including those of disarticulated blackness. Rather than espousing liberal or radical politics, rather than embracing or rejecting blackness, the importance of disidentity and the ambivalence it cultivates can perhaps best be articulated in dialogue with Anne Anlin Cheng, who argues that *Invisible Man*'s "political thesis has always seemed . . . more radical than minority politics finds comfortable" in its "profound undermining of group ideology and communal

possibilities." The basis for this undermining is found in the novel's lack of reliance on identity. Invisible Man, she contends, "never arrives at [an identity]," reaching instead an embrace of "the nonexistence of identity," locating in invisibility both "assimilative and dissimulative possibilities." To reach such a place is, she concludes, to reach a "place of political discomfort," demanding "intense examination of what it means to adopt a political stance" (60).

For Cheng, such a place constitutes a "malady of doubleness": a "melancholy of race, a dis-ease of location and memory," in which identification signifies ambivalently the possibility of "*cleav[ing]* and *cleav[ing] to* the marginalized and the master" (60), stuck "within the Moebius strip of inclusion and exclusion: an identification predicated on dis-identity" (58). While Cheng's description of the ambivalent racial politics of *Invisible Man*'s conclusion is convincing, and her valorization of its radical calling into question what it means to identify and to adopt a stance is precisely in line with my reading of the text, her positing of a closed loop of inclusionary and exclusionary (dis)identification itself remains, at odds with the text itself. Fleshing out disidentity with an ambivalence that is a product of racialization, a partial rejection of racialization and of disarticulation at the same time as remaining an embodiment of both, disidentity's contingent refusal of anything fixedly solid, of anything that isn't determined and (re)constituted from within the always imbricated always impure disorder that is the experience of the complexity of actual situations – in Bauman's words, "the contingent world of randomness," in Berlant's, "the muddied middle" – exemplifies ambivalence's capacity to at once register the conditions one

inhabits and is determined by, while pointing in its irresolution to a something else that has yet to emerge, that in being not (yet?) still bears the possibility to become in ways that are not yet fully determined or fully determinable in advance. Invisible Man extends outward the obscure lower frequencies of his ambivalence, colored as they are by the ongoing violences of racialization and disarticulation, in the hope of the possibility of some new kind of emergence. That such an offering is incomplete, unsatisfactory, *not quite enough*, is the point — in putting this not yet quite enough into circulation, the terms of its irresolution may yet find new expression in the relationalities they, at once hopefully and defeatedly, engender.

CHAPTER THREE

AMBIVALENCE AND THE CAPACITY FOR TRANSFORMATION IN DAVID LYNCH'S *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*

The cinema of David Lynch has generated a substantial body of scholarly analysis. While approaches to interpreting Lynch's work are varied and often interdisciplinary, many of the more ambitious and theoretically rich engagements employ psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian theory filtered through a Žižekian lens, in seeking to make sense of the hermeneutic complexities presented by Lynch's films.[7] Such analyses often view Lynch's films as mobilizing the category of fantasy in a manner that enables ethically and politically transformative encounters with the Lacanian Real. In this chapter I suggest that, while there is much to be admired in such analyses, they often delimitingly practice what Maria San Filippo calls "closed interpretation" by making the texts they explore more or less representative and exemplary of – as well as answered and resolved by – their own onto-epistemological.

[7] Allister MacTaggart summarizes the "five main approaches to Lynch's work" as follows: 1) the "auterial approach"; 2) approaches that find "both the form and context [of Lynch's films] conservative and reactionary"; 3) approaches the find in Lynch's work attestation to "a form of 'New Age' wholeness"; 4) approaches in which "Lynch's work can be read 'otherwise,'" affirmatively and/or negatively, from e.g. feminist, queer, disabled, and, increasingly, racialized perspectives; 5) Lacanian and psychoanalytic approaches (21-22, n. 3). As MacTaggart acknowledges, these approaches often overlap to varying extents. MacTaggart's own work, I would suggest, helped inaugurate a sixth approach to Lynch's work

When applied to the cinema of David Lynch with the intention of eliciting ethically and politically transformative potential, such approaches, I contend, are liable to mitigate that potential through both their own unambivalence and, concomitantly, their neglect of the ambivalences that saturate Lynch's work. Lynch's films are, by design, resistant to monolithic interpretation. While pointing toward the possibility of semantic resolution – see, for example, the ten obtuse clues included on the liner notes to the initial DVD release of *Mulholland Drive* – the films generally retract the final possibility of such resolution by foregrounding, and even reveling in, their indeterminacy. In doing so, they both evince and elicit what I call *epistemic ambivalence*, whereby active desire to know and be able to say with resolution what a text means coexists alongside the knowledge that such resolution is impossible.[8] In other words, Lynch's films refuse, willfully, to function as static or exhaustible objects, instead remaining dynamic and mobile in their capacity to affect and to generate interpretation. At once provoking and confounding the desire for consistent and coherent interpretation, Lynch's cinema remains open to repeated re-interpretation *and* resistant to interpretation altogether. It is from within this epistemic ambivalence, and how this can prompt the bringing together of incommensurate interpretive approaches, that any transformative potential the films can be said to possess emerges.

1. <u>No Transformation Without Ambivlanece</u>

[8] I explore epistemic ambivalence in the context of Lynch's cinema in Jones (2020).

In *Sex, or The Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman engage in an extended dialogue that is, at least nominally, about sex. Specifically, they are concerned with theorizing how transformation can take place, in particular the transformative potential of encounters with forces of *negativity* and *nonsovereignty*. Negativity refers to "the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity," and to "the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty." Nonsovereignty, of which negativity is both a manifestation and example, "invokes the psychoanalytic notion of the subject's constitutive division that keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires" (vii-viii). What, they ask, can sex and desire teach us about living with negativity? How do such experiences transform us? Can their transformative capacities be harnessed for political goals? The major rift in *Sex, or the Unbearable* concerns how best to approach the process of transformation: how radical – in other words, how unequivocal – must transformation be in order to be considered genuinely transformative, rather than ameliorative? Are amelioration and transformation necessarily mutually exclusive? Much of the disagreement in the text centers, explicitly or otherwise, around ambivalence.

For Edelman, no experience of negativity or encounter with nonsovereignty can be sufficiently transformative unless it grants the subject "momentary access" (65) to the unbearable Real — that is, to the "compulsion [and] repetition" of "[the] drive" that underlies subjectivity. Anything that "disavow[s] the insistence of the

unconscious and the Real" (86) precludes radical transformation: that is, the possibility of "release . . . from the hold of a structuring fantasy" (94). Berlant's approach develops one of their central claims from *Cruel Optimism*, that the present moment – the space in which subjects continue perpetually to find (and lose) themselves – is "not at first an object but a mediated affect," and that as such "the present is perceived, first, affectively." The complexity of registers in which subjects perceive and experience the present thus produce it for them as an impasse: "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic" (2011, 4) while struggling to maintain a sense of (fantasmatic) self-continuity in light of the present's ambivalently inhabitable felt presence, the ambivalence of subjects' ongoing attachment to, reliance upon, and mediation by its uncertain impacts, and subjects' ambivalence about it and themselves as (in)coherent in response to the enigma of both its (and their own) presence. For Berlant, fantasy "manages the ambivalence . . . of attachment," permitting the subject to "appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness. That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it" (*Sex*, 122). Where Edelman seeks release from the constraint of fantasy's structuring illusions into what precedes and exceeds the subject as such, Berlant is interesting in exploring fantasy's relationship to the ambivalence undergirding subjectivity as the subject grapples with the ongoing fact of being – and of being ambivalent – in the present's perpetually unfolding impasse.

Edelman, following Lacan, argues that the subject is the product of originary division upon entry into the Symbolic order and is constitutively nonsovereign. He rejects as insufficiently radical Berlant's stance of working reflexively on "imagining how to detach from lives that don't work and from worlds that negate the subjects that produce them" (5) toward what Berlant elsewhere frames as a project of conceiving better "repair and flourishing" (2011, 48) within the ambivalence of the present, which Edelman contends can result only in "merely reparative" transformation (*Sex*, 111). Their discussion is concerned with ways of theorizing encounters with what is unbearable: for Edelman, the unbearable Real – our "lack *of* a center and the lack *at* the center" – and its "undoing of the logic that binds us" (107, 69); and for Berlant, the subject's encounter with the "radical incoherence [of] her fantasy of herself in the world" (89) and the incessant ambivalence that necessarily follows. Edelman asserts that Berlant's position, which "seeks changes of scene that rescript the insistence of the unbearable, that put it into motion and displace its pressure where it threatens to crush the subject," is not enough. Instead, he insists, we need to "focus on changing, on undoing, the subject rather than the subject's scene." This is because such "variations on scene can serve . . . as a screen to keep what produces them unthought," whereas "encountering what's truly unbearable, attempting to push through the barrier of ourselves, means approaching the limit of fantasy as the medium of desire and finding ourselves in the movement of the drive that *structures* our change of scene" (107). For Edelman, in other words, transformation is only of value if it undoes the subject toward the radical incoherence its origin *as* a subject attempts to cover over

and into the drive itself: the "primal" attachment – the need for attachment itself, which "alone makes our objects appear as desirable" (62) – which is also an attachment to negativity, "for that negative condition becomes the ground for the subject's ability to signify itself" (97). Significantly, Edelman does not explore what an acceptably complete undoing of the subject would look like, because to do so would be a form of *acknowledgment*, and "[p]roposing the acknowledgment of nonsovereignty as a path toward affect's redistribution [i.e., toward, in Berlant's sense, transformation] seems . . . to fetishize the knowledge whose limits you [Berlant] simultaneously maintain" (84).

Unbound by Edelman's strong adherence to an explanatory Lacanian framework preceding the terms of their discussion, the subject for Berlant is rather a scene of encounter between "the productive or negating disciplines of the world *and* the ordinary work of taking up a position that is never fully complete, never consistent, always elliptical, noisy, and threateningly incoherent" (88). In other words, while conversant in and making frequent reference to Lacanian and other psychoanalytic frameworks invoked by Edelman, Berlant remains ambivalent about their capacity to explain and are attentive, and thus resistant, to these explanatory frameworks' potential to capture, master, and hypostatize their objects into examples of an overarching theoretical supposition. That is to say, Berlant holds to ambivalence as "an openness to multiple ways of understanding" that "necessitates the suspension of . . . common assumption[s]" (Woods, 6) in favor of improvisation in response to the contingency of scenes of encounter. Berlant thus maintains that transformation as an

ongoing experiment in and toward better viability derives not from dramatic or stark confrontation with primal loss and constitutive division, but rather from how subjects might "[seek] to change the consequences and resonances of the appearance of the foundational antagonisms": "as we move with each other, when we can, we can shift the consequences of what's irreparable and out of joint in our internal and social relations" (117). Importantly, Berlant does not *dismiss* the framework via which these unshiftingly foundational antagonisms are theorized, but instead opts to focus on what we *can* potentially change: specifically, how we might reparse fantasy's parsing of ambivalence. Moving with ambivalence, as one of the most ineradicable and generative articulations of constitutive division, can help subjects create "[s]hifts in the atmospheres through which fantasy finds anchors," and while this "may not transform what a structure is – since fantasy is itself a structure within the negative," it might "shift what fantasy does . . . and what's available to be in play" (88). The effect of this play, for Berlant, is what the subject dynamically *is*. Furthermore, this shifting does not simply fill in the cracks of negativity — it is a form of *production*: bringing new forms of relation into play, changing atmospheres to create new affective binding to the world and one's sustaining objects. Newness here does not signify the eradication or overwriting of the old. Instead, it entails a widening, an expansion, an introduction of further difference into what already is, and a refusal to simply accept the terms of compulsive repetition. This newness as the possibility of flourishing takes place through, within, as, and against ambivalence, embracing ambivalence as what must and can never finally be parsed for, as Berlant asserts, "without allowing for

ambivalence, there is no flourishing" (12). To which I would amend that without ambivalence there is no transformation, and there is no transformation that is without ambivalence.

2. The Radical Ambivalence of *Mulholland Drive*

Todd McGowan's authoritative psychoanalytic interpretation of *Mulholland Drive* shares numerous commonalities with Edelman's position in *Sex, or the Unbearable*. According to McGowan, *Mulholland Drive* takes spectators to a "point of pure loss" by "follow[ing]" fantasy "to its end point." The point of pure loss at the end of fantasy is the unbearable Real of the primal drive. In taking spectators to this point, they are, McGowan contends, permitted to "achieve the impossible": that is, to "free [themselves] from the illusory promises of ideology and the blandishments of capitalist accumulation," which is possible only if they are able to "sustain contact" with the moment of their confrontation with this loss, the "moment of loss that generates subjectivity itself and yet which all the actions of the subject attempt to escape." Through this contact, subjects can "see that enjoyment derives from not having the object rather than having [it]," and thus "avoid the struggle to have more" (218-219). Though Edelman views encounters with the unbearable Real and the nonsovereignty it reveals to subjects who are undone toward it as being necessary for meaningful, nonameliorative transformation to take place, he elects not to suggest

what this transformation may or may not actually look like, what it might entail or result in. McGowan makes explicit the kind of broad transformation such an encounter might allow for, and while his claims are somewhat hyperbolic his analyses of Lynch's work are compelling, rich, and nuanced. Nevertheless, his reading of *Mulholland Drive* ultimately sacrifices nuance in order to reduce the film to an exemplification of his theoretical framework by neglecting or misrepresenting those elements of the film that don't fit. Against this, I contend that the film insists upon maintaining indeterminacy *at the same time* as gesturing toward explicability, resulting in an intense and irreducible affective excess that is both inexplicably cathartic and exasperatingly indefinite. As such, I argue that the structure of feeling the film most prizes is ambivalence. While the trickiness of its structure and its deliberate littering of clues seems to request solution and suggest the possibility of its being broken down into accountable sense, what remains following attempts to do so is ambivalence.

According to McGowan, the importance of Lynch's films resides in how they consistently hold apart the realms of desire and fantasy. Equating desire with the Symbolic, McGowan explains how fantasy "emerges to cover . . . a real gap within ideology or the symbolic order" (6-7). While the logic of desire is confused and fragmentary in the wake of primary lack, fantasy mediates the incoherence of desire and, corresponding with the Imaginary, is the illusory order in which subjects spend their everyday lives. In its failure to fully gloss over the gap of the Real, McGowan contends, fantasy also paradoxically reveals what it was supposed to conceal. As such, it is only through fantasy that we can encounter the unbearable. "Every fantasy,"

McGowan contends, “is in some sense a fantasy of origins” (28), echoing Edelman’s claim that all attachment is also an attachment to negativity, which is to say an attachment to what precludes that which attachment seeks. Without fantasy we would not even be able to conceive of the unbearable loss at the origin of subjectivity, let alone experience it. For McGowan, *Mulholland Drive* fully embraces and “obeys completely the logic of fantasy” (219) and in so doing allows the spectator to experience constitutive loss and approach, in Edelman’s words, the movement of the drive. This, McGowan claims, is the film’s transformative “ethical act,” which moves us “beyond the false limitations that make up our everyday reality” and allows us to “disregard the entire field of representation and the dictates of symbolic law” (223-224).

Central to his thesis is Lynch’s formal distinction between desire and fantasy. Rather than literalizing the first section of the film into a dream that is contained within the second, McGowan understands the first section as depicting the machinations of fantasy — not a mimetic rendering of Diane’s *singular* fantasy so much as a figurative depiction of her attachment, and thus the subject-in-general’s attachment, to the realm of fantasy itself as a *structure*. The second section corresponds with the realm of desire. The film, McGowan claims, is structured as “a division . . . between the exigencies of social reality and our psychic respite from these exigencies” (218) — that is, as a division between the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. Diane’s fantasy necessarily fails and thus inevitably leads to its own end, which is also a return to the unbearable loss that instigated it. Lynch is understood to be illustrating not only

Diane's fantasy, but also the kinesis of fantasy in general. Diane's loss of her love-object, Camilla, depicted in the second section, results in the construction of the first section's wish-fulfilling fantasy, transforming Diane into an idealized version of herself, the pure and talented Betty, and Camilla into Rita, a defenseless amnesiac whose only grounding in the world is her attachment to Betty following the film's opening, in which an attempt is made on Rita's life.

Toward the end of the fantasy section, Betty and Rita visit an apartment they think might hold clues to Rita's true identity. (The same apartment, in the second section, is revealed to belong to Diane.) Inside, they are horrified to discover an unidentifiable woman's corpse in the early stages of decomposition. It foreshadows the fate of the 'real' Diane who, as we will see in the brief and liminal passageway between the film's first and second sections, lies sprawled and apparently sleeping in the exact position in which Betty and Rita find the corpse. This in turn anticipates Diane's eventual suicide in this same apartment at the end of the film, while signaling the film's non-linear temporality and rendering unclear when, and where, Diane's fantasy is taking place. Betty and Rita subsequently flee the apartment, and as they do so the camera lingers uncomfortably on their faces, which begin to blur into one another's, while Rita covers her own as if either trying to hide it or keep it in place.

Fig. 1: *Mulholland Drive* (2001): Negativity

For McGowan, this scene signifies the beginning of the fantasy's end: the illusory stability and coherence of Betty and Rita's fantasmatic identities begins to shatter and fragment in light of their confrontation with the inevitability of primal lack, here figured by the anomalous corpse in the bed who is, albeit indeterminately, connected to Diane. McGowan thus understands the film's formal play as figuring the subject's fundamental negativity and as mimetically intimating the movement of fantasy toward its own dissolution.

Immediately following this scene, a terrified Rita, fearful for her life, insists upon disguising herself. Betty helps her to do so, which results in a striking resemblance between the two. A shot of them both staring at their reflections and looking uncannily alike fades into a close-up of Betty's face as she lies in bed, suggesting the almost-complete melancholic assimilation of Rita, as love-object, into Betty. Betty invites

Rita to join her, and they have sex. This, for McGowan, is where the fantasy begins irrevocably to collapse. By permitting Diane, through the invention of Betty, to experience the lost object of her desire – that is, a fantasmatically possessable version of Camilla, who in the second section is revealed to have spurned Diane for another man – the fantasy's purpose has been served, it has returned to its hidden point of origin, and now it must fade. As McGowan writes: "fantasy holds the key to its own traversal because the logic of the fantasy itself pushes the subject to the point of its dissolution" (212). The Club Silencio section that follows is, for him, Lynch's way of staging the moment of encounter that fantasy, if given fully over to, finally allows: what Lacan referred to as "traversing the fantasy." It represents an act of mourning, enabled by fantasy, in which the subject is permitted to confront the pain of the loss – the lack, negativity, and nonsovereignty – that constitutes us as subjects, and to accept this loss as a structural necessity in becoming constituted as a subject. The lost object of desire, figured in *Mulholland Drive* by Rita, is revealed by the process of traversal to be a compensatory fantasy. As Diane's fantasy reaches its point of dissolution and Diane as Betty gets to mourn its loss alongside the fantasmatic object of her desire, the viewer, McGowan contends, is also permitted to experience the pain of the loss that constituted us as subjects.

This, according to McGowan, is the ethical component of Lynch's mobilization of fantasy in *Mulholland Drive*. The political significance of this "ethics of fantasy" resides in the film's capacity to transform viewers by staging a powerfully affecting encounter with their own unbearable negativity as subjects. The affective intensity of

such an encounter is rendered, for McGowan, in Betty's response to what she witnesses at Club Silencio. She watches the hypnotic performance, in which an emcee performs music while repeatedly asserting, in English, French, and Spanish, that there is no band ("no hay banda"), no orchestra ("i'l n'y a pas d'orchestre"), and that all is an illusion. The sequence attests, in its foregrounding of artifice, to Diane's loss even in fantasy of the impossible object of her desire. After the singer Rebekha Del Rio, playing herself, appears on stage and performs an arresting acapella version in Spanish of Roy Orbison's "Crying," then collapses as the song continues, Betty's body begins to vibrate violently as though the fantasy itself can no longer contain the trauma of the loss that necessitated its construction. Shortly afterwards, the first section ends, completing the film's depiction of fantasy's traversal and dumping the viewer without explanation into the warped temporality of the second section, returning Diane to the untenable world of her desire. Unable to withstand the loss of the object and fantasy's ultimate failure to gloss over it, she has Camilla murdered. Then, whether out of guilt or in response to the now absolute loss of Camilla/Rita, she commits suicide.

Interpreting *Mulholland Drive* conclusively as staging an encounter with the unbearable also highlights some of the problems with Edelman's adamant insistence that the unbearable must be encountered by subjects in order for any kind of genuine transformation, political or otherwise, to become possible. Edelman demands we "experience . . . negativity" (109), and McGowan insists we "sustain contact" with this "pure point of loss" (218), but as *Mulholland Drive* devastatingly illustrates, such encounters guarantee little: the confrontation with negativity, with the unbearable, and

with the loss that produces it, proves too much for Diane to withstand and results in her suicide. While the film is palpably amenable to readings such as McGowan's and positions such as Edelman's, it could just as easily be read along these lines as a cautionary tale *against* the construction of speculative subjects who are, in the words of Keston Sutherland in the context of political revolution, "strong enough already" (unpaginated) to undo the structures that have already defined and constituted, if not fully determined, them. Similarly, given the genders of its romantic protagonists, the film could also be read as warning against the unconditional and unambivalent undoing of the subject, particularly queer subjects whose positions within patriarchal, cisheteronormative society are frequently tenuous.

Berlant's approach to transformation perhaps offers a better way of approaching *Mulholland Drive*. Rather than the subject's unambivalent unravelling, Berlant desires a "materialism of a continuously contemporary ordinariness, in which beings try to make do and to flourish in the awkward, riven, unequal, untimely, and interesting world of other beings, abstractions, and forces, and in which we therefore have a shot at transforming the dynamics and the costs of our negativity and appearance" (116). The success of this approach is contingent on the maintenance of ambivalence. It utilizes the explanatory capabilities of psychoanalytic accounts of subject-formation, but resists being bound by adherence to them when considering the possibility of transformation, focusing instead on what is observable and thinkable *now*, affectively and materially, that can be transformed into flourishing. Ambivalence allows such thinking to hold in productive suspension antagonistic multiplicities; it allows thought

to unfold from "the muddied middle" (5) of encounter, rather than from or back to a single point of clarity or certainty.

On the one hand, then, *Mulholland Drive* seems to correspond with McGowan's reading and to provide an example of the subject's transformative undoing as desired by Edelman; on the other, it seems to suggest that the fundamental undoing of one's however illusory sense of daily cohesion and the complete revoking of stability can be, ultimately, unlivable. While it illustrates McGowan's claims for the politically transformative and ethical capacity of fantasy at an abstract level, it remains ambivalent about its material. Taken as a totality, the film willfully resists its own resolution, and prizes ambivalence as one of its major structures of feeling. By understanding *Mulholland Drive* as accepting and moving with, rather than foreclosing or reducing, its own ambivalences, we become able to retain McGowan's conception of the various sections as figuring desire and fantasy, while challenging the viability and even the necessity of such categorical certitude in order to keep other readings in play. In doing so, we remain attentive as viewers to the film's mobilization of ambivalence. This mobilization is made explicit by one scene in particular: the final appearance of 'Aunt Ruth' (Maya Bond).

The Club Silencio sequence ends when the emcee disappears from the stage into thin air. Immediately afterwards, Betty finds in her purse a blue box that appears to match the blue key Betty and Rita inexplicably find shortly after they first meet. (In the second section the hitman Diane hires informs her that the job has been completed by leaving her a blue key.) We then cut back to the apartment they have been staying

in, which in the first section belongs to Betty's aunt, Ruth, who Betty explains is working on a movie in Canada. In the subsequent section, it is revealed by Diane that Aunt Ruth is dead.[9] Rita enters the bedroom in which she and Betty recently had sex, but upon turning around discovers that Betty has disappeared without a trace. Visibly confused and afraid, Rita inserts the key into the box. The camera suddenly lurches into the black interior of the box, which then drops to the floor with a loud thud. According to McGowan's logic the fantasy, which he claims originated specifically in the psyche of Diane, is now completed. While the fantasy section in his argument is figurative as much as it is literally the product of Diane's mind, his position requires that the diegetic world of the fantasy section be reducible to Diane: what it stands for is structural, but what is actually depicted stems exclusively from Diane. As such, when the woman referred to as Aunt Ruth enters the room just after the box drops loudly to the ground, McGowan misrepresents what in fact takes place. Describing her as "the woman who owns this apartment" and claiming that we are now in the desire section, even though the scene that immediately follows, in which the mysterious Cowboy awakens Diane, very explicitly marks the shift via an indeterminate and liminal space (perhaps the world of the blue box?), McGowan informs us that she "walks into the apartment by herself, with no trace of either Rita or Betty" (215). This, however, is untrue.

[9] There is, according to a post on *The Rolling Picture*, an old showbiz joke that "acting in Canada" is "being dead." http://therollingpicture.blogspot.com/2012/03/lynchs-10-questions-to-help-explain.html

Fig. 3: ‘Aunt Ruth’ senses something

The red-haired woman we have thus far known as Aunt Ruth evidently hears, or perhaps more accurately *senses* something. She walks into the room Betty and Rita had inhabited moments earlier and looks around, perplexed, before exiting the scene. As the camera follows her gaze, we are shown (Fig. 2, panel 3) that the box she may or may not have heard dropping onto the floor beside the bed is no longer there. While McGowan’s description is not entirely inaccurate, it does not interrogate how or why ‘Aunt Ruth’ hears or senses something nor, importantly, where. If, as McGowan claims, the first section of the film exists within the film’s diegesis only as a fantasmatic manifestation of Diane’s consciousness in the film’s second section, then who is this woman? Why does she appear to have been affected by the sound of the now absent blue box? The passage into the second section, signified by the Cowboy’s

instruction to sleeping Diane that she wake up, has not yet taken place, therefore we are, on McGowan's terms, still within the fantasy. However, within the fantasy, Aunt Ruth is supposed to be in Canada, and the red-haired woman who senses something is one of the only characters *not* to appear in the second section. Her appearance here thus directly contradicts the formal distinction between the realms of fantasy and desire on which McGowan's reading depends. It exceeds, and is thus irreducible to, the terms of his reading and, as such, demands that we view the film more expansively than is permitted by McGowan's Lacanian framework.

While the scene is significant in demonstrating McGowan's necessary misrepresentation, its real importance lies in its calculated rejection of unambivalence and its adherence to inhabiting ambivalence as a structure of unresolvable excessive feeling. The appearance of 'Aunt Ruth' in a world that seems to belong neither to the first nor to the second section of the film fundamentally challenges the finality of McGowan's separation of the two sections. While there are other similar instances in the film, this one is unique in being completely unassimilable to the rest of the film. Its insertion as a scene that is unassimilable to the rest of the film's seemingly neat sectional divide can instead be read as a non-diegetic spoke in the wheel of closed interpretation. For example, in the first section, director Adam (the man for whom Camilla, in the second section, has deserted Diane) sees Betty across a crowded set, and they hold a gaze whose affective intensity appears to exceed the fantasy's logic. It is entirely plausible to read the scene as "a representational displacement of Diane's anxieties vis-à-vis Camilla's . . . relationship with Adam in the film's second part" (del

Rio, 189), even if the intense and beguiling hapticity of the shot-reverse-shot – each of their gazes toward the off-screen other seeming to reach through the screen itself – can leave such an explanation feeling too resolute. This scene, then, questions cohesive interpretation without fully disallowing, or disavowing, it. The 'Aunt Ruth' scene, on the other hand, has no such possible explanation. While it is minor enough to be neglected by strong interpretations such as McGowan's, attempts to contend with the film as a whole must confront the ambivalence it willfully introduces via its ultimate diegetic inexplicability when attempting to account for the film as a whole.

My contention is that her sense that *something* is happening, or has happened, expresses the film's own foundational antagonisms, its constitutive division, without being reducible to them or to anything else. What she senses is the promising *something* theorized by Berlant that stems from inhabiting the moment of suspension in ambivalence and *feeling* the sense that things could be different. It functions in a sense as the film's pure point of ambivalence, in which there is no possibility of resolving or reducing what we are witnessing to anything like an explanation in strictly binary terms. Instead, it requires us to remain suspended in a state of ambivalence and to inhabit the incommensurability of doing so. If one wants, the film seems to suggest, one can choose to move with any number of almost-resolutions, albeit in the knowledge that such movement toward resolution has always already been disrupted; or one can remain in a state of radical ambivalence, thereby choosing all and none of them at once but sustaining openness to potentiality and seeing what happens, what else could happen, what else might flourish.

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