

**Against Form: Figural Excess and the Negative Democratic  
Impulse in American Literature**

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## Abstract

*Against Form* addresses the necessity of form as well as form's inevitable exclusions and violence. Moving between art and politics, *Against Form* shows how both literature and democracy depend on acts of representation through which various "parts" are organized to appear as a whole, whether a political community or a narrative structure. Yet the figures—bodies, tropes—on which representation depends are more dynamic than any configuration deems possible, for any represented form necessarily fixes and regulates their movements in a particular way. "Figurality" names the excess and lack that haunt every act of representation, and by following figural excess, I foreground the democratic potential of literature's egalitarian aesthetics, through which voices, bodies, or scenes excluded from official representation are able to appear in a way that disturbs the order of things.

Of course, exclusions and instabilities manifest in *any* political or aesthetic system of representation—even those aiming for equality. In politics as in art, you always leave something (or someone) out, and you always say more than you intend. Both politics and art can therefore stage a misunderstanding or disagreement between two parts: the part that counts and the part that does not. The texts in *Against Form* always force a confrontation—and a misunderstanding—between incommensurable regimes. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Jacques Lacan, I show how the democratic operation in politics and art disturbs the fantasy of a seamless totality.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation foregrounds the persistence of the democratic “miscount” or remainder. In the process of attempting to thank all of those who have contributed to this project, I’ve realized that an acknowledgment section registers this very persistence, for no linguistic strategy can adequately address and account for all of those to whom I owe a profound debt of gratitude.

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Lowe's suggestions during our conversations proved equally valuable, and I am also grateful for her astute comments and questions that will, I believe, prove crucial for the next stages of this project. Priscilla Wald generously agreed to join my committee as an outside reader, and I am very glad that this was possible. Her comments and questions on the project have pointed to many of the most essential aspects of my arguments, both stated and unstated, and I am certain our conversations will shape the book project to follow.

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Much of this dissertation developed in conversation with my friends and colleagues in the Tufts graduate program. My cohort has always been an amazing community. As I argue throughout *Against Form*, no “community of equals” can be realized, but my cohort has perhaps gotten as close as possible to such a

community. I'm indebted to and appreciative of our conversations, which I'm sure will continue beyond Tufts. My work on the Tufts Graduate Humanities Conference has been especially rewarding for the conversations it's generated. Emerson College, where I've been teaching for several years, has also welcomed me into the department and provided me a wonderful opportunity to "test" some of my ideas in literature courses, including a seminar in the Honors program, which I co-teach with Thomas McNeely. I'd like to thank Maria Koundoura and Wendy W. Walters in particular for their support and advice.

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I'd also like to thank my family and dedicate this dissertation to them. Without my parents I would not be where I am today. They've always provided me support and encouragement, even when I decided to pursue the rather non-lucrative career of an English professor. And I owe my most profound thanks to my wife, Nell Wasserstrom, who is currently completing her own doctoral degree in English at Boston College. Throughout this process, Nell listened with care to all of my ideas and challenges, and she always offered suggestions that both extended and enriched the project. Her incisive and brilliant insights have fundamentally shaped my own thinking. At this point, she knows at least as much about my project as I do, and her influence works on every page of this dissertation as a trace, as that which conditions and supplements every articulation.

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## Exergue

Afaa Michael Weaver's "Rambling" situates itself, via subtitle, "in Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary" and opens by declaring, "In general population, census / is consensus—ain't nowhere to run / to in these walls, walls like a mind."<sup>1</sup> The poem thus represents a space of incarceration. Given the subtitle, the "general population" refers to the prisoners, but it can also metaphorically be read as naming those national subjects beyond the prison walls. Similarly, the ontological claim, "census / is consensus," applies to both the prison population and the national subjects. The census, as the official means of "counting" individuals within a nation and its constructed social system, operates as a technique of surveillance, categorization, and control. The rhyme, census/consensus, also draws attention to a homophone of census: "*sensus*." In Latin, *sensus* refers to sense, but also to feeling, perception, emotion, and meaning. The sensible always ties itself to perception and meaning, for it provides these modes of intellection their sensible ground. The sensible grounds the project of the census, which needs to "count" individuals in order to reify abstract categorizations of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Since "consensus" implies a "feeling together," an agreement grounded in the sensible, Weaver's poem stresses the imbrication of agreement and a police logic of surveillance, categorization, and ordering. This agreement always masks its own divisions and its own non-sensible core. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> Afaa Michael Weaver, "Rambling," *The Plum Flower Dance: Poems 1985 to 2005* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 51. Hereafter cited in the text.

the order of the sentence stresses that the “consensus” of the “general population” does not preexist the “census,” but emerges through this meaning-making process.

Weaver further encourages the reading of “general population” as both the prisoners and those outside the prison with the simile that compares the physical walls of the prison and its cells to the walls of the mind. The mind, itself a carceral space, privileges enclosure; the ego constructs itself as “a fortified camp” in a repressive, defensive gesture.<sup>2</sup> This poem, then, sets itself within the space of a prison in a way that emphasizes the connection between the violence of incarceration and the violence of internalized incarceration operative both within and beyond the walls of the prison. The prison becomes figured as an intensified or explicit form of a generalized logic.

In the broader context of *Against Form: Figural Excess and the Negative Democratic Impulse in American Literature*, incarceration represents an exemplary instance of the violence of a regulative principle of “democratic” society in the United States and of both political and aesthetic form more generally. The production of a form always requires the production of consensus, order, and regulation that strive to be total. Yet such totality is always already compromised by a certain errancy, a certain rambling from within. Weaver’s poem articulates the tension between a fantasmatic totality and its own incompleteness through the repetition compulsion of the refrain. The poem unfolds across three stanzas, each of which concludes with a version of the refrain that

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 78/97.

corresponds to the title: “I got rambling, rambling on my mind” (51). The poem’s speaker distinguishes himself from the “general population” when he speaks in the first stanza as “We visitors.” This suggests a mobility denied the prisoners and adds another layer of implication to the “rambling” of the title. The “I” of the refrain—“I got rambling, rambling on my mind”—configures rambling in the context of this carceral space, where the impossibility of “rambling” is made explicit as a constitutive fact of the physical walls (51). On the one hand, this refrain punctuates the poetic narrative, a repetition that both supports and undercuts the “progression” of the narrative. These repeated refrains signal the desired yet impossible freedom from incarceration. On the other hand, this refrain emphasizes that the poem performs its own stasis. The first two stanzas begin, “In general population,” while the third opens, “In the yellow circle,” a circle both different from and similar to the “yellow circle” described in the opening stanza in which the “visitors stand” (51). This positioning within the “yellow circle” of light provides the means by which “the tower can frisk us with light, / finger the barrels on thirsty rifles” (51). As Michel Foucault succinctly points out, “Visibility is a trap.”<sup>3</sup> Or, in the terms of Thelonious Monk, “It’s always night, or we wouldn’t need light.”<sup>4</sup> Visibility inevitably leads to the production of consensus, of sense-making out of the knot of sensible materials and their non-sensible Real. Yet, paradoxically, visibility is also the means by which that

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

<sup>4</sup> Thelonious Monk, qtd. in Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), epigraph.

consensus is disturbed, as with the repetition that both governs and disturbs the poetic narrative. The insensible void of night that generates the necessity for light keeps invading the sensible order of that light.

The repetition that structures “Rambling” articulates a tension between narrative progression and stasis, and the poem also figures this tension as psychic. While the opening stanza shifts from the “general population” to the census-as-consensus, the second stanza shifts to “madness runs / swift through the river changing” (51). The non-sense of madness undercuts the sense-making project of the census and of *sensus*. Something of this irrational core escapes the sensible, and yet the excessive regulation of the prison space and of the census—with its stress on rationality—produces this madness, which emerges as the structural antagonist to the sense-making project.

The second refrain also deviates from the first and third. Rather than “I got rambling, rambling on my mind,” this iteration appears as, “I got rambling, got rambling on my mind” (51). Each refrain therefore depends on the repetition of “rambling,” but the second refrain depends on the repetition of a phrase, “got rambling.” This metric addition registers the poem’s rhythmic fluctuations, despite its regular, repetitive structure. The poem’s repetition marks its dependence on a supplementarity, an errancy, that exceeds the bounds of consensus. The “rambling” potentially describes the train of thought in the three stanzas of the poem, but it also describes in compressed form the dissensual content of the poem: the desired immobility of ordering and meaning-making practices and the mobility of unregulated rambling. At the same time, the refrain

emphasizes the dissensual form of the poem, which structures itself according to *both* the principled order of narrative, which allows for the reader to impose meaning and thus a form of “consensus,” *and* the unprincipled disorder of “rambling,” of an errancy within the narrative, both structuring and deconstructing this consensus. The supplementarity of repetition “inscribes the count of the uncounted, or part of those who have no part”;<sup>5</sup> that is, repetition names the figural excess of the poem’s representational strategies and the persistence of those not included in the “general population,” as well as of the division masked by the adjectival qualifier, “general,” of “population.” The politics of the poem appear in the movement of this “surplus” or miscount of the count of consensus.<sup>6</sup>

These dissensual forces gesture to what will be named the negative democratic impulse. The figural and rhetorical readings that follow attend to both aesthetic and political “texts,” and in each case, they follow the work of the negative democratic impulse that inheres in consensus democracy and produces dissensus. Dissensus registers the democratic drive, the structural antagonist to consensus democracy. Consensus democracy stresses the articulation of democracy as a form, which necessarily entails regulative principles of policing those figures constituting it and contained within it. Weaver’s analogy to the mind emphasizes the imbrication of the psychic and social. Therefore, like the death drive, “a structuring (and destructing) principle of the psyche,”<sup>7</sup> the negative

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 41.

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

<sup>7</sup> Julia Jarcho, “Cold Theory, Cruel Theater: Staging the Death Drive with Lee Edelman and Hedda Gabler,” *Critical Inquiry* 44.1 (Autumn 2017), 1.

democratic impulse structures and destructures democracy within which it inheres and persists. By staging dissensus, “Rambling” stages the politics of aesthetics as a disruptive, reordering force. At the same time, “Rambling” draws attention to the aesthetics of politics in its formulation of the census as consensus. These entanglements inform the following readings of this dissertation, all of which foreground the tension produced from within aesthetic and political forms by those very destabilizing figures on which these forms depend for their desired consistency.

## Introduction: Democracy's Death Drive

There is no future, only the onslaught of time. Unaccountable, vacuous, amorphous time, towards which she is expected to move. Forward. Ahead. And somehow bypassing the present. The present redeeming itself through the grace of oblivion. How could she justify it. Without the visibility of the present.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (1982), 140.

We might like to believe that with patience, with work, with generous contributions to lobbying groups or generous participation in activist groups or generous doses of legal savvy and electoral sophistication, the future will hold a place for us—a place at the political table that won't have to come at the cost of the places we seek in the bed or the bar or the baths. But there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers, chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all.

Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), 29-30.

Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. This is confirmed by the artistic labor of forming, which is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form, and this prolongs guilty domination in artworks, of which they would like to be free; form is their amorality. They do injustice to what they form by following it.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), 144.

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*.

Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (1999), 28.

## Pulsions of Democracy

As its first claim, *Against Form* insists that the United States of America is not, nor has it ever been, a democracy. Andrew Sullivan's *New York Magazine* article written during the 2016 presidential primaries carries the title, "America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny," and the revealing subtitle, "Democracies end when they are too democratic."<sup>8</sup> I want to refer to this title and subtitle pairing, which implies both that the United States exists as a democracy and that democracies destroy themselves when they encapsulate too well their democratic principles.<sup>9</sup> At least as far back as Plato, critics and theorists have recognized that democracy, by virtue of insisting on the equality of the people, inevitably risks being overtaken by a tyrant who emerges out of or because of the people through electoral processes. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, Socrates argues that

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<sup>8</sup> While this exceeds present concerns, Sullivan's article is also notable for the way in which it demonstrates a symmetry between the left and right in politics. Sullivan's apocalyptic tone mimetically reproduces the threat of apocalypse by Trump.

<sup>9</sup> In a later article, Sullivan's title designates the United States a Republic. Perhaps the election changed his mind on the nation's status, but more likely, this slippage from Democracy to Republic emphasizes the blurred boundaries of mainstream conceptions of political organizations. Such a slippage appears already at the nation's founding moment in the debates on the Constitution detailed by the *Federalist Papers* and *Anti-Federalist Papers*. See *Anti-Federalist* No. 57 for the conjunction, "democratic republic," and see *Federalist* No. 14 for a critique of such conflation of the two governmental regimes. A discussion of the distinction between democracy and republic exceeds this dissertation, but I generally maintain the distinction Jacques Rancière formulates in *Mute Speech*, in which the "republican symphony harmonizes the occupations, modes of being, and tone of the community" (95). This "harmony" "stands in opposition to democratic anarchy" (95). In this opposition, and using terms that I will soon discuss, we might align the republican with the police and the democratic with politics. See August H. Nimtz's *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America* for a sustained engagement with the differences between republic and democracy.

democracy's "insatiable desire for freedom and the neglect of other things" leads to dictatorship, for he claims, "Extreme freedom can't be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether for a private individual or for a city."<sup>10</sup> Such logic has particular resonance given our recent election of Donald Trump, who both used populist rhetoric and took full advantage of social media during his campaign to reach large numbers of voters. Democracy therefore comes under threat and can be undermined by the very principles on which it depends.

While this first claim of *Against Form* is simple, even straightforward, innumerable scholars and writers who discuss democracy deny it. Sullivan's article assumes the United States to be—or to have been—a democracy. This assumption operates even for scholars critical of the United States. Eddie Glaude, in *Democracy in Black*, for example, challenges the racism inherent in the ideals that shape "our democracy," yet he nonetheless assumes the United States to be representative, even if in flawed form, of a democratic nation.<sup>11</sup> For Glaude, what many consider the gap between the idea of the United States as a democracy and its undemocratic practices obscures the way in which these practices are directly tied to exclusionary ideas.<sup>12</sup> Glaude's discussion emphasizes the value of distinguishing between what *Against Form* will name consensus democracy, or

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<sup>10</sup> *Republic*, 562b-564b.

<sup>11</sup> Glaude, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016), 34.

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

the formal realization of a system of inequality, and the negative democratic impulse, or the political drive that figures equality.

Other critics of democracy, such as Julia Kristeva, call for an expanded and more inclusive form of democracy. In a talk critical of the treatment of disability in France, Kristeva remarks, “[W]e need a new secular discourse, capable of speaking honestly about ill-being or lack of being, moving not toward *integration* (a term that involves a denial of suffering and a rush toward normalization) but toward *interaction* between citizens who are disabled and those who are not. This is about a democracy of sharing.”<sup>13</sup> Kristeva’s comment reveals another problem inherent in democracy. Rather than too democratic, as suggested by Sullivan, democracies are also and at the same time never democratic enough. Kristeva reveals that some group always gets excluded from the *demos*; as a result, democratic rule always emerges from—and always accounts for—a part of the people rather than the whole of the people.

Democracy depends, then, on a constitutive surplus and lack that prevent in advance the transformation of democratic figures and impulses into an appearance of instituted or formed democracy. *The Washington Post* misses this crucial point in its recently unveiled motto, “Democracy Dies in Darkness.” This well-intentioned critique of the Trump administration, which with each passing day seems to spiral closer toward a corporatized version of fascism, offers both an ominous warning and a proactive eulogy for democracy in the United States. Yet

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<sup>13</sup> “Secularism: ‘Values’ at the Limits of Life,” *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 28.

this motto fails to recognize that democracy has been dead from the beginning. What remains in its place is a spectral repetition, an insistent democratic drive borne out of an always already compromised democracy.

Democracy's failure to appear as instituted form—as a nation-state, for example—emerges from the complex interplay between surplus and lack, between the imposition of an imagined whole onto parts that are expected to conform to this whole and the substitution of a part or parts for the whole.<sup>14</sup> There needs to be a formulation of “the people” to constitute democracy, yet “the people” inevitably excludes some part of the population. Giorgio Agamben has noted the strange logic at work in the political articulation of “the people.”<sup>15</sup> “The people,” Agamben writes, refers at once to the political subject and to “the poor, the underprivileged, and the excluded. The same term names the constitutive political subject as well as the class that is excluded—de facto if not de jure—from politics.”<sup>16</sup> “The people” therefore always carries with it an assumed substitution of part for whole, as well as an imposition of an organizing whole onto parts that become categorized according to inclusion and exclusion.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Lee Edelman, “The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of ‘Race’” in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* for a discussion of this substitution in the visual economy of race. For Edelman, “Synecdoche [...] can be read as the master trope of racism that gets deployed in a variety of different ways to reinforce the totalizing logic of identity” (44). Synecdoche also works as the master trope of democratic rhetoric and constructions of the *demos*.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, “What Is a People?” *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 29-35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere Agamben also notes the strange way in which “democracy” refers at once to “a way of constituting the body politic” and to the form of rule (“a

Agamben also shows how these conceptions of the people shift depending on context. The opening of the Constitution— “We, the people of the United States”—relies on a general notion of the people, while Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address in its “repetition implicitly sets another people against the first”: “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”<sup>18</sup> The (at least ostensibly) undifferentiated people of the Constitution becomes reconfigured and differentiated by Lincoln to form a hierarchical division. In the terms of Jacques Rancière, this shift reveals a change from a political subject—“the people” as anyone and everyone—to the subjugated people under a police order—“the people” as a name for inequality and hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Trump’s inauguration speech on 20 January 2017 depends on particularly insidious constructions of the people that obscure the relations between parts and whole. After his initial acknowledgements, he begins with an ostensibly inclusive rhetorical gesture: “We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people.” While he will later employ the “I” position, here Trump’s “we” speaks

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technique of government”): “To put it another way, democracy designates both the form through which power is legitimated and the manner in which it is exercised” (“Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy,” *Democracy in What State?* 1).

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, “What Is a People?” 30.

<sup>19</sup> Like Badiou’s St. Paul, “the people” named by the Constitution has the appearance of Rancière’s political subject, but this construction of a subject itself already entails the police order. The Constitution’s designation of every African American as 3/5 of a person, as well as the omission of indigenous peoples, reveals its fundamentally exclusionary construction of “the people.” See also Jacques Derrida’s “Declarations of Independence” in *New Political Science* for a reading of the aporias inherent in the founding document of the United States that anticipates these problems of the Constitution.

for the multiple, for the mass. While this marks a rhetorical gesture of inclusion and unity, it can only be articulated through a singular figure who appropriates the plural to speak on its behalf. “The people” do not determine themselves as this collective “we”; rather, Trump decides on and imposes the collective. This “we” is also almost immediately compromised by the qualifying “citizens of America,” which does not necessarily include the later designated “all of our people.”<sup>20</sup> As Lisa Lowe has argued in her study of Asian American culture and politics, “the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally.”<sup>21</sup> Other scholars have shown how this antagonism between citizen and non-citizen changes depending on context and motive.<sup>22</sup> The “citizen” thus imposes a limit on any ostensible gesture toward a universal inclusivity. While the “our” that appears at the end of Trump’s opening sentence seems, syntactically, to refer to “citizens of America,” it could also indicate another substitution, in which Trump speaks for a personified America. In either case, the “people” possessed by this “our” remains ambiguously figured. Most

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<sup>20</sup> See Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* for one example of an approach to the exclusionary practices of citizenship in the United States.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>22</sup> See *Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness*, eds. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Jacqueline Stevens (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014) describes the way in which black Americans are both counted nominally as citizens and excluded from the rights granted to citizens.

obviously, “our people” is a phrasing that doubles back on itself: the “citizens of America” named—and through this nomination, enacted—by Trump refers at once to the “our” and “people” at the close of the statement. Trump’s opening claim can therefore be read as hermetically sealed, as naming a collection of the people who feel a sense of inclusion by excluding and by not naming those who do not inhabit the opening “we.” Another reading might suggest that “our” refers specifically to possession and domination: the citizens of America impose their order on the more generalized “people” of the United States, much as would be the case in a classic democracy such as Athens.<sup>23</sup> This intensifies Lincoln’s distinction between the people who govern and the people governed by relying on the possessive pronoun.

Though he campaigned on an ostensible appeal to dissensus, Trump’s speech constructs an image of unity or consensus through these rhetorical constructions of inclusion. Yet the implicit exclusion of these constructions bespeaks the dissensus that his speech attempts to disavow. For Rancière, dissensus appears with a political act that interrupts the distribution of the sensible organized by the police order such that the police order is made to confront something that it does not permit to be visible. The police order refers to “the set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for

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<sup>23</sup> Athenian democracy excluded 80-90% of the population given that only citizens counted as part of the *demos* (Brown, “We are all Democrats Now,” 51). See also Étienne Balibar’s discussion in *Citizenship* of the “antinomic relationship” between democracy and citizenship, as well as the genealogy of their relation beginning with Plato and Aristotle (1-7, 10-18).

legitimizing this distribution.”<sup>24</sup> Rancière thus renames politics, as commonly understood, the police. In contrast to the police, “Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.”<sup>25</sup> Political dissensus therefore confronts the police order with something not included in its distribution of the sensible, in its account, that is, with something that should not exist. Or, to put it differently, “the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes”: between the process of governing (the police) and the process of equality (politics).<sup>26</sup> In one of his clearest examples of politics, Rancière cites Jeanne Deroin. “[I]n 1849,” Deroin “presents herself as a candidate for a legislative election in which she cannot run. In other words, she demonstrates the contradiction within a universal suffrage that excludes her sex from any such universality.”<sup>27</sup> This demonstration presents “the staging of the very contradiction between police logic and political logic.”<sup>28</sup> One of the striking features of Trump’s rise is the way in which he frequently appealed to such a

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<sup>24</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 63. Rancière uses “the political” in a variety of ways throughout his work, but generally it refers to the staging of dissensus between the police and politics. For a recent discussion of the differences between *le politique* and *la politique*, which grounds Rancière’s distinction between police/policy and politics, see Emily Apter’s “‘Small P’ Politics” in *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic* (New York: Verso, 2018), 21-36.

<sup>27</sup> *Disagreement*, 41. Rancière continues, “She reveals herself and she reveals the subject ‘women’ as necessarily included in the sovereign French people enjoying universal suffrage and the equality of all before the law yet being at the same time radically excluded” (41).

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

confrontation, with (false) claims of dissensus in his stated antagonism toward the political establishment (i.e., the police order). Echoes of this appear in his inauguration, as he proclaims, after thanking the Obamas, “Today’s ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another—but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People.” The transfer of power suggests a change of place rather than a reconfiguration of the police order; instead of changing the order of things, Trump’s promise simply changes who wields power. As such, this transfer acts as another iteration of the police order, and given Trump’s appointees, many of whom have ties to the far-right and to Wall Street, his claim rings obviously false.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the tension between consensus and dissensus structures Trump’s administration. Though Trump merely shifts the police order, his appeals to dissensus, no matter how empty or rhetorically strategic to mobilize a people, still persist to trouble his constructions of consensus.

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<sup>29</sup> While Trump can be seen as a reactionary figure representative of a reactionary trend in the United States against social progressivism, he has in turn prompted reactions with his rhetoric and intentions. Though reference to Trump as a reactionary figure has become popular in media representations, he might better be understood as an obscurantist, in Alain Badiou’s sense of the term. For Badiou, the obscure subject is encapsulated by fascism: “*the body that fascism claims to represent has to be of the order not of an event but of a substance: a Race, a Culture, a Nation or a God*” (*Second Manifesto for Philosophy* 96). See also *Logics of Worlds* for a more philosophical discussion of this subject (43-78). Kalpana R. Seshadri takes issue with the simple reduction of Trump to traditional conceptions of fascism in “Stop Calling Trump a Fascist!” (*ctheory.net*, accessed 23 February 2017).

Less than twenty-four hours after Trump's inauguration, however, the Women's March visibly and symbolically worked to disarticulate the illusory universals he proposed. Where Trump relied on an imago of dissensus that aimed to generate instead a universalizing consensus, the Women's March attempted to produce dissensus, a political interruption of the police order, even though this interruption may have returned to the preservation of another police order. In these two events, we can see how "[t]he universals proposed by the political and cultural forms of the nation precisely generate the critical acts that negate those universals."<sup>30</sup> The Women's March, despite its limitations, can be seen as an attempt to produce a negating critical act. The Women's March has been criticized for reproducing an exclusionary brand of white, middle-class feminism, but at the same time, its organizers attempted to engage in intersectionality. This is apparent in the image used for the organization (**Figure 1**), in which three racially-coded representations of women align to signal solidarity. The triad of women in this image stands in for the multiplicity—the diverse masses—of women more generally, representing allegorically the solidarity of this multiplicity. This image gestures to the way the Women's March attempts to think, following Audre Lorde, a sense of “unity” rather than “homogeneity.”<sup>31</sup> The official website of the Women's March attempts to define this solidarity according to a logic of inclusion across differences. In its “Guiding Principles” section—a section that follows Audre Lorde's claim, “It is not our differences that

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<sup>30</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 119.

divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences”—the Women’s March declares, in language that also recalls Lorde’s theoretical proclamations decades ago, “Women’s rights are human rights, regardless of a woman’s race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, sexual identity, gender expression, economic status, age or disability.”<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1**

At the risk of substituting a part for the whole—an inevitable risk in any rhetorical construction—I now turn to Janelle Monáe’s speech at the Washington D.C. Women’s March to show the pervasiveness of the problem of democratic inclusion and the difficulty of expressing a political act as defined by Rancière. In her speech, Monáe opened with an acknowledgement of her own subjective

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<sup>32</sup> Women’s March Website, accessed 18 February 2017. This echoes also Lorde’s claims in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”: “[O]ur future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root our internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other’s difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles” (122).

position and inheritance: “Hello future. I’m so proud to stand here as a woman, an African-American woman. My grandmother was a sharecropper; she picked cotton in Aberdeen, Mississippi. My mother was a janitor, and I am a descendant of them, and I’m here in their honor to help us move forward and ‘fem the future.’”<sup>33</sup> Even in the small shift, from speaking “*as a woman*” to speaking *as* “an African-American woman,” Monáe highlights the way in which any attempt to speak *as* an identity fails to encompass the multiplicity of identity. This is similarly evident when Monáe addresses different identity groups a few moments later,

I want to say to the LGBTQ community my fellow brothers and sisters, to immigrants my fellow brothers and sisters, to women, continue to embrace the things that make you unique, even if it makes others uncomfortable. You are enough and whenever you feel in doubt, whenever you want to give up, you must always remember to choose freedom over fear.

This statement at once circumscribes particular population groups—the LGBTQ community, immigrants, women—and stresses an ideology of the “unique” individual that necessarily exceeds such groupings. For members of a group by definition repress or subjugate uniqueness in favor of shared traits that make collectivity possible.

After critiquing the abuse of power and making a claim for its visibility, Monáe continues to assert, “Women will be hidden no more. We will not remain hidden figures. We have names. We’re complete human beings, and they cannot

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<sup>33</sup> *DemocracyNow!*, accessed 23 February 2017. This and all citations from the speech that follow are my own transcriptions from the audio-video file. As such, all punctuation is my own.

police us. So get off our areolas. Get off our vaginas. Again, we birthed this nation, and we can unbirth a nation if we choose.” The first statements of Monáe’s critique of women’s invisibility strikingly appear indistinguishable from the advertising rhetoric one might encounter for her recently released film, *Hidden Figures* (2017). This indistinction between ostensibly political language and commercial language reveals the imbrication of the market and the supposed resistance to the abuses endemic to that market. More remarked upon, however, has been the biological reduction and essentialism here and emblematic of the Women’s March as a whole. This focus on woman as biological identity has been perceived by trans activists as limiting the “women” of the Women’s March.<sup>34</sup> Monáe appeals to broad and diverse interest groups throughout her speech, yet this moment highlights the limits of those appeals. Monáe’s focus on areolas and vaginas re-articulates a biological conception of woman. Even though she uses “birth” figuratively in the following sentences, this metaphor nonetheless grounds itself in the literal biological identity just mentioned.

Monáe’s speech therefore reinforces the limitation in any resistance movement that depends on identity or interest groups.<sup>35</sup> A movement grounded on any form of essentialism faces an *a priori* limitation. What Lee Edelman refers to

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, “Transgender Activists Upset Over ‘White Cis Women March’” from *The Washington Free Beacon* and “Transgender Community Says Women’s March Made Them Feel Isolated” from the *The Washington Times*, both accessed 23 February 2017.

<sup>35</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2001) for a critique of essentialized approaches to identity, as well as for a theory of resistance to the “inequalities and challenging relations of subordination” (153).

as the “fascism of the baby’s face” in *No Future* here takes the figure or “face” “of an ever expanding horizon of democratic inclusivity.”<sup>36</sup> For example, one can expand LGBT to LGBTQIA, yet there will always remain an excluded population—in terms both of those left out of the chain of identities and of those nominally included by yet left out of the included identities.<sup>37</sup> This “horizon of democratic inclusivity” has as its *telos* the belief in an ever-more inclusive community. This *telos* obscures the impossibility of this project of inclusion. Monáe’s rhetoric of inclusion cannot overcome its dependence on some form of violent exclusion. What Theodor Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory* has relevance here: “The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form.”<sup>38</sup> The violence enacted against different parts of the population by the Trump administration resembles the violence that has been and continues to be enacted on a smaller scale by the “materials” of the people of the United States. Trump’s inauguration represents the institutionalization—and further normalization—of white supremacist violence and of oligarchic domination. Yet the Women’s March, which resists this violence, itself is complicit in another enactment of violence. The violence

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<sup>36</sup> *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 151.

<sup>37</sup> For an example of the expanded acronym, see the “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual Resource Center” webpage, which is part of the University of California at Davis. Others use an asterisk to designate the open-ended nature of the acronym. This asterisk figures the horizon of inclusivity but also recognizes the impossibility of the letters to stand in for all necessary categories.

<sup>38</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 50.

enacted against the people by the state mirrors the violence enacted by the people themselves.

These two articulations of violence are reciprocal but asymmetrical. For in this comparison, I am by no means claiming that the Women’s March ends up being the same as the Trump administration—such a claim would be demonstrably misleading and false. Instead, I hope to illustrate the extent of the problem of trying to resist exclusion, to resist the reduction or erasure of parts in an imagined whole, without reproducing or generating another kind of exclusion. Rancière insists, for this reason, on the democratic miscount:

As Plato noted, democracy has no *arche*, no measure. The singularity of the act of the *demos*—a *cratein* instead of an *archein*—is dependent on an originary disorder or miscount: the *demos*, or people, is at the same time the name of a community and the name for its division, for the handling of a wrong. And beyond any particular wrong, the “politics of the people” wrongs policy [the police], because the people is always more or less than itself. It is the power of the *one more*, the power of *anyone*, which confuses the right ordering of policy [the police].<sup>39</sup>

Any order that proclaims to include all parts without remainder or supplement is a police order. In contrast, politics maintains the void and supplement that is the miscount; “Politics arises from a count of community ‘parts,’ which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount.”<sup>40</sup> As Rancière demonstrates, “There is politics—not just domination—because there is a wrong count of the parts of the

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<sup>39</sup> “Politics, Identification, Subjectivization,” 64. What gets translated as “policy” here goes by the name of “police” in Rancière’s other texts.

<sup>40</sup> *Disagreement*, 6.

whole.”<sup>41</sup> In any construction of “the people,” “the people are always more or less than the people.”<sup>42</sup>

One of the signs at the Washington Women’s March seemed to articulate Rancière’s insight by attempting a way out of the problem of relying on a part/whole substitution, that is to say, on synecdoche. Yet this sign, which read, “We are Against Nothing / We are For Equality,” did so by denying the void or supplement that Rancière considers essential for the democratic miscount. Taken on its own, the positive claim “for equality” appears to distinguish itself from any reactionary position. By insisting on equality, one is not against anything in particular; rather, one is against all hierarchies and orders that depend on and proliferate inequality. The apparent positivity of this claim, then, quickly transforms into a negativity more forceful than that of the reactionary because it avoids the liberalism inherent in reactionary positions that make a demand based on identity or interest groups.<sup>43</sup> The political community named by this “we” is not grounded on any particular identity or interest group. Instead, this political community emerges according to the axiom of equality that disturbs the inequality preserved through the police order of the state. As Samuel Chambers suggests, “Politics is not the announcement or claim of identities (LGBT or any other) by pre-given parties. Politics is the declaration of wrongs, the staging of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 10. In this section of *Disagreement*, Rancière claims Plato recognized this miscount and because of this recognition tried to erase politics as such.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> In *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Samuel Chambers notes, “The entire liberal approach starts with the idea that there is a given and known subject of discrimination or oppression” (161). For Rancière, in contrast, this subject cannot be known or constituted before the political act.

disagreements that serve to constitute the very parties of politics.”<sup>44</sup> Politics “can never be *based* on identity”; instead, identity—and specifically the political subject—appears through the declaration of wrong. This is why Monée’s speech falls back on a police logic. Monée attempts to include a multiplicity of identities, yet “democratic politics can never be reduced to a politics of inclusion.”<sup>45</sup> The generic declaration of equality announced on the sign, by staging the present inequality, appears more consistent with politics as understood by Rancière. Yet the sign’s “against nothing” undercuts the declaration “for equality.” To be “against nothing” is to be against the negativity on which equality and democratic politics depend. As Rancière argues, equality is only possible on the grounds of the void or supplement, that is, of the nothing of the miscount. In a more insidious form than Monée’s speech, the sign’s “against nothing” and “for equality” implies a similar “politics of inclusion” by trying to erase the nothing that insists on the impossibility of inclusion.

For Rancière, “The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. [...] Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds.”<sup>46</sup> The political community therefore redefines the common on which community tends to be constructed: “A political community is not the realization of a common essence or the essence of the common. It is the sharing of what is not given as being in-common: between

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<sup>44</sup> Chambers, 163.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>46</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 137.

the visible and the invisible, the near and the far, the present and the absent.”<sup>47</sup> A political community that insists on equality “is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself.”<sup>48</sup> Rancière’s political community thus follows a definite logic: a community of equals could not maintain a position of equality if it deferred to a shared interest or identity.<sup>49</sup> It is precisely the sharing of what cannot be shared that constructs a relation of equality.

The consensus envisioned by Trump and by many of the statements of the Women’s March, though radically different, share an assumption that “the people” referred to by the other leaves some part of the population out. The Women’s March attempts to counteract this exclusion by appealing to “an ever expanding horizon of democratic inclusivity.”<sup>50</sup> In contrast, a political community constructed according to the axiom of equality recognizes the fault of this totalizing project. According to Rancière, “A political ‘people’ is never the same thing as the sum of a population. It is always a form of supplementary symbolization in relation to any counting of the population and its parts.”<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>48</sup> Rancière, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,” *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 115.

<sup>49</sup> Kristeva’s discussion in *Hatred and Forgiveness* of the exclusionary status of people with disabilities in France articulates what seems an *a priori* exclusion in Rancière’s notion of equality, for Rancière privileges the “speaking being” specifically (*Disagreement* 23). Yet “speaking being” names a more specific category than the human in general. It should therefore go without saying that for Rancière the “community” of the *demos* also excludes non-human animals.

<sup>50</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 151.

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 115. See Katia Genel’s introductory essay on Rancière in *Recognition or Disagreement*, in which she writes, “For [Rancière], democracy refers neither to the form of a representative government,

Women’s March attempts to incorporate—and thus erase—this supplement. Similarly, local articulations within the Women’s March, including the sign that read “We are Against Nothing / We are For Equality,” announce a project of incorporation and inclusion in their antagonism toward the “nothing” that figures the supplement as irreducible. To be “for equality,” in a sense consistent with Rancière’s insight into the democratic miscount, one must also be “for nothing.”

During a discussion with Axel Honneth, Rancière stresses his opposition to any form of liberalism—and its focus on identity and interest group politics—by dismissing the individual from his thought: “I would say that precisely you don’t have, on the one side, the individual and, on the other side, the community.”<sup>52</sup> Instead, for Rancière, “politics is about the construction of collective subjects.”<sup>53</sup> These “collective subjects are not subjects defined by an identity”; rather, “they are defined by the kind of reconfiguration of the given world that they can create.”<sup>54</sup> For this reconfiguration, this re-distribution of the sensible, Rancière proposes what he terms “the method of equality,” an emancipatory project that has nothing to do with the emancipation conceptualized by liberalism. “The method of equality,” according to Rancière, “is at work everywhere at any time. It is true that it promises no definite future. But new

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nor to the liberal capitalist society; it is originally a scandal to the hierarchical underpinning of society, namely, the government of the multitude, of those who don’t have any title or competence” (24).

<sup>52</sup> *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, eds. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Derarnty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 125.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

horizons are not defined by the planning of the future. On the contrary, it is from the division at work in the present, from the inventions of the method of equality, that unpredictable futures can emerge.”<sup>55</sup> In conversation with Lauren Berlant, Edelman suggests that “politics might be redescribed outside its insistent teleological imperatives and future-oriented acts. It might be seen, that is, as the insistence of a structural antagonism that undoes the totalization of meaning to which it seems to aspire.”<sup>56</sup> Rancière’s conception of politics—against the police—seems to be precisely such a re-description.<sup>57</sup>

Trump’s appointees, many embodying the Wall Street figure against whom Trump railed during the primaries, reveal that Trump has explicitly abandoned the politics he seemed to call for in his campaign. This process makes visible how politics and the police can operate in relation to each other. Though frequently without substance, Trump ran a campaign that appealed to dissensus, as seen in his attacks on the political establishment (i.e., the police order) and his critiques of Hillary Clinton’s proximity to Wall Street investors. Trump’s appointees and actions since his inauguration, however, reveal his alignment with establishment principles, that is, with the police order. His appeals to dissensus during the campaign often seemed disingenuous to his opponents; nonetheless, this strategy reveals the way in which the police order often relies on inaugural

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>56</sup> *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 70.

<sup>57</sup> Another precedent for Rancière might be found in Walter Benjamin, who frequently critiqued teleological models that determined, *a priori*, the future. See, for example, “The Destructive Character,” “Fate and Character,” and “On the Concept of History.”

political acts, or at least the illusory promise of such acts.<sup>58</sup> In his critical engagement with Rancière, Slavoj Žižek argues that the “positive Order” of the police “is nothing but the positivization of the radical negativity” of the political act.<sup>59</sup> Žižek’s turn to Jacques Derrida at the close of his discussion of Rancière gestures to Žižek’s aim of showing how Rancière’s police/politics distinction deconstructs itself. This seems similar to what Rancière himself acknowledges in “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics”: the consensus of the police “defines a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that evacuates the political core constituting it, namely dissensus.”<sup>60</sup> Rancière insists, however, that politics interrupts the police order from within the police order. As such, politics always appears as an “impure” articulation.<sup>61</sup>

In the following section, I will return to this line of thought, but for now, I want to stress that the reoccurrence of the substitution of part for whole—by Trump, the Women’s March, and by representatives who act or make decisions on behalf of some part of the population—demonstrates the constitutive problem of democracy; namely, the impossibility of realizing the people who rule. To *realize* a figure or group to rule, to institute a governing body in other words, requires a

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<sup>58</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 2000), 234.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. See Žižek’s discussion for a Hegelian-Lacanian rereading of Rancière’s political thought (232-239).

<sup>60</sup> *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 115.

<sup>61</sup> For this reason, Samuel Chambers argues against Todd May and Slavoj Žižek. According to Chambers, Rancière’s politics cannot be reduced to a pure politics such as anarchy (for May), nor can it be translated to a dialectic (Žižek). See *The Lessons of Rancière* (34, 62, 67-68).

sovereign force and a sovereign act.<sup>62</sup> The aporia here is also well-marked by Trump's inauguration speech. What Trump exemplifies is the fascist logic inherent in the oxymoronically named consensus democracy, as well as in representative democracy, or the rhetoric of U.S. democracy more generally. *Against Form* reserves the name politics, and specifically democratic politics, for those acts and figural gestures that resist the order of the police and of formal organization more generally. This dissertation aims, then, to shift the terms of the discussion, to disentangle democratic politics from consensus democracy. The democratic can only refer to an interruption of the police order, rather than to another order of consensus.

While Trump and the Women's March exemplify the current issues of engaging with democratic politics, the word democracy itself announces a series of difficulties in its attempt to join the *demos* with *kratos* (*-cracy*). As already suggested, the first part of the syntagm, *demos*, names the "people" or "community." Yet nothing inherent in *demos* defines what it supposedly names; that is, *demos* offers no principle for deciding who counts as part of this community. Though the people or community of the *demos* is often interpreted as an inclusive term, in practice it has always been exclusionary. Democracy's Greek origins, for example, point toward the non-democratic core of democracy when practiced as a form of government, and the suppression of democratic elements in the founding of the United States stemmed from fears related to the

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<sup>62</sup> See Derrida's "Declarations of Independence."

impossibility of according power to the people.<sup>63</sup> Who counts toward, or as part of, the *demos* is thus the first problem inherent in democracy. In other words, the *demos* announces a problem of how to relate parts to a whole, or whether there even can be a whole. This could also be put in terms of a problem of inclusion and exclusion. Rancière reveals the greater extent of this problem, however, by showing the impossibility of ever realizing a whole that acts as a sum of all parts and by insisting on “democracy’s miscount” as “the fundamental miscount of politics.”<sup>64</sup>

A second problem appears with the *kratos*, which Nicole Loraux translates as “victory” or “superiority.”<sup>65</sup> For Loraux, then, democracy means literally the victory of the people, and becomes a kind of popular sovereignty. There is an implicit return to the first problem here, however. The “people” who emerge victorious become substituted for the people in general, which again eliminates the supplementary logic of the people. Furthermore, if the people are victorious, they presumably are victorious over a previous form of government, such as monarchy, oligarchy, or tyranny, yet this implies the exclusion of the previous regime from the new conception of “people.” Such popular sovereignty relies, in

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<sup>63</sup> See Wendy Brown, “We are All Democrats Now,” *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 51 for a discussion of Athenian democracy. See the *Federalist* and *Anti-Federalist* papers for debates on the democratic elements in the United States Constitution.

<sup>64</sup> *Disagreement*, 10. Earlier, Rancière notes, “Politics arises from a count of community ‘parts,’ which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount” (6).

<sup>65</sup> Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache with Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 249-250.

other words, on a replacement of one inequality with another.<sup>66</sup> For Jean-Luc Nancy, in contrast to Loraux, “-crazy” “refers to force and violent imposition, unlike the root *-archy*, which relates to power that is grounded, legitimated by some principle.”<sup>67</sup> This etymology has striking consequences in relation to Rancière, who often uses the phrase, “democratic anarchy.”<sup>68</sup> This conjunction highlights the difference between ungrounded democratic rule and grounded anarchic rule. While anarchy operates as a pure politics, democratic anarchy implies an impure politics, one in keeping with Rancière’s project.<sup>69</sup> If sovereignty depends on an appeal to legitimacy, then democracy in Rancière’s (and Nancy’s) conception is an illegitimate power that distinguishes itself from other forms of rule precisely because of its illegitimacy.

As an “ungrounded” rule, democracy is at once illegitimate in its relation to the multitude grouped under the *demos* and illegitimate from an internal perspective. In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida opposes different orders

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<sup>66</sup> Plato’s conception of democracy in *The Republic* accords with this view. Here, Socrates confirms Adeimantus’s assertion, “democracy comes about when the poor are victorious, killing some of their opponents and expelling others, and giving the rest an equal share in ruling under the constitution, and for the most part assigning people to positions of rule by lot” (557a).

<sup>67</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite and Infinite Democracy,” *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 95. Here Rancière describes the opposition between Plato’s “republican symphony” and “democratic anarchy.”

<sup>69</sup> See Chambers for a discussion of anarchy as pure politics (34, 62, 67-68). Against the ethical turn, Rancière insists on maintaining the impurity of politics and aesthetics, which entails a rejection of the “fantasy” of their “purity” (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents* 132). This fantasy of a pure politics erases the possibility of dissensus, or disagreement, essential for (democratic) politics. Pure politics ends up reproducing the totality desired by the police order.

of sovereign power in his reading of the United Nations and the Security Council to point out one of the contradictions of democracy:

As always, these two principles, democracy and sovereignty, are at the same time, but also by turns, inseparable and in contradiction with one another. For democracy to be effective, for it to give rise to a system of law that can carry the day, which is to say, for it to give rise to an effective power, the *cracy* of the *demos*—of the world *demos* in this case—is required. What is required is thus a sovereignty, a force that is stronger than all the other forces in the world. But if the constitution of this force is, in principle, supposed to represent and protect this world democracy, it in fact betrays and threatens it from the very outset, in an autoimmune fashion, and in a way that is, as I said above, just as silent as it is unavowable.<sup>70</sup>

The power designated by *cracy* in democracy cannot constitute the sovereign power it requires, since *cracy* does not presume sovereign authority or foundation, as is the case in monarchy or anarchy. Rancière's focus on democracy as a disruption of consensus, as a staging that confronts the police order with that which it says cannot exist, attempts to avoid the problem described by Derrida in the institution of democracy. Unlike Derrida, then, Rancière has no interest in aligning democracy with institutions in any sense. As Derrida suggests, an institution of democracy through a necessary sovereign power betrays the democracy in whose name it appears. For Rancière, in contrast, the democratic can only refer to the interruptive act of staging a dissensus; this democratic force can never be transformed into an instituted democracy.

Rancière's privilege of the democratic stems in part from the "illegitimacy" named by the *cracy* of democracy, for democracy—and politics

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<sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 100.

more generally—breaks with the *arche* required of any form of rule. As Rancière claims, “Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhe*. It is the commencement without commencement, a form of rule (*commandement*) that does not command.”<sup>71</sup> By abandoning the *arche*, democracy proposes a radical equality: “the equality of anyone at all with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of *arkhe*, the sheer contingency of any social order.”<sup>72</sup> Sovereign power, such as that articulated in a dictatorship, appeals to the necessity, rather than contingency, of the order of things. In other words, the police logic of sovereignty depends on a stable *arche* for its production of inequality. The illegitimacy of *cracy* acknowledges the impossibility of a sustained “rule” of the “people,” since both this rule and the people would lose all traits of the democratic if they were in fact coherent and stable. This democratic rule would, in other words, simply become a police order.

In popular discourses of democracy, this logic of the police becomes evident, especially when restated as “rule of the people, by the people, for the people.” The “people” of this democracy are both the active subjects of rule and the passive objects of rule. A corollary might be found in Lacan’s famous distinction between the enunciating subject and the subject of the statement. Unlike Agamben, who stresses the division between different orders of “people” in the repetition, Lacan stresses the division in any conception of “the people”

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<sup>71</sup> “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus*, 39.

<sup>72</sup> *Disagreement*, 15.

itself. In “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” Lacan writes, “the strictly linguistic definition of *I* as signifier, where it is nothing but the shifter or indicative that, qua grammatical subject of the statement, designates the subject insofar as he is currently speaking.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, this *I* of the statement “designates the enunciating subject, but does not signify him. This is obvious from the fact that there may be no signifier of the enunciating subject in the statement.”<sup>74</sup> Lacan argues that such a distinction avoids “absurdities” of formal logic or “even an antinomy of reason” in statements such as “I am lying.”<sup>75</sup> What the distinction emphasizes is a difficulty in conceptualizing the subject, which is radically indeterminate and unlocatable. Such a conception of the divided subject finds a homology and legitimization in the modern form of so-called representative democracy. In the Republican United States, for example, people are represented through their elected political officials, which not only separates the people who rule from the people ruled but also makes the distance between them impossible to overcome.

Because the *demos* can never adequately realize itself, can never erase the democratic miscount, the people named to rule will never encapsulate the multitude of people actually ruled. Instead, there will always be a remainder of those excluded from the ruling *demos*, those who are “part of those who have no

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 677/800.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 138-139.

part.”<sup>76</sup> In what follows, I will argue that rather than include and affirm, democracy divides and negates. This divisive and negating force stems from democracy’s existence as an oxymoronic syntagm that names the rule of the *demos*, a rule that when instituted can never master the multitude of people grouped as the *demos*. The impossibility of coincidence between the rule of the people and the people ruled, between the form of representation and the represented content, marks democracy as a self-annihilating, or impure, term. Democracy is not a form of organization for all, that is, a form without an excessive remainder; instead, democracy denies the possibility of conceiving a form without an excess, a miscount. Democratic politics produces a dissensus, a disagreement that interrupts the police order of consensus, which attempts to suppress the excessive supplement from its count.

It is for this reason that I will characterize democracy as an impulse in this dissertation rather than as a formal organization. By impulse, however, I do not intend to refer to an impulse toward something, a Derridean “democracy-to-come.”<sup>77</sup> Derrida of course does not posit a realizable democracy in the future; indeed, “democracy-to-come” highlights democracy’s structural impossibility. Nevertheless, his phrase depends on an empty *telos*. Rancière’s notion of the democratic allows for a thinking of democracy that requires neither *arche* nor *telos*.<sup>78</sup> In *Against Form* the democratic both names and produces a force, one that

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<sup>76</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> See *Specters of Marx*, *The Politics of Friendship*, and *Rogues* for Derrida’s elaborations of “democracy-to-come.”

<sup>78</sup> I also find Rancière’s privilege of the aesthetic more generative for this project on (and against) forms of representation. In “The Aesthetic Dimension:

persistently negates the ordering logic of the police. In this I hope to distinguish my conceptualization of democracy from utopian or generally positive notions of the term. An ideal of a world community, or even of a coherent and unified American community, is not the “object” of democracy as I understand it. In part because such a unity presupposes a sharing that exceeds all rupturing differences. It is my contention that such inclusive logic always excludes those differences that render such inclusion impossible and unthinkable.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to these efforts, my understanding of the negative democratic impulse might be aligned with Lacan’s description of the drives in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. When speaking of the oral drive as theorized by Freud, Lacan states, “*As far as the object in the drive is concerned, let it be clear that it is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference.*”<sup>80</sup> Lacan then offers an untranslatable “formula” to describe the oral drive and its object, the breast: “*la pulsion en fait le tour.*”<sup>81</sup> The editor notes that the double meaning emerges from the translation of the formula as both “the drive moves around the object” and “the drive tricks the object.” Another way of putting this might be that the drive itself involves a trick or play, in the sense that “the drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly

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Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge,” Rancière describes his difference from Derrida in terms of a difference between aesthetics and ethics.

<sup>79</sup> Drawing on the work of Alain Badiou and Lee Edelman, Madhavi Menon has recently theorized an alternative to the inclusion posited by community in *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 168.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds.”<sup>82</sup> The drive, then, “enacts” a “repetition” in its insistence, a repetition that goes nowhere but that generates the movement of the Symbolic order.<sup>83</sup>

The democratic therefore names that which exceeds any form of government since it does not strive to realize a democracy. The democratic that is the subject of *Against Form* depends on the disordering force inherent in the democratic impulse, and is inimical to any positive notion of democracy dependent on ordering principles. Following Rancière, I oppose any form of democracy that relies on consensus. One of the aims of *Against Form* is in fact to highlight this persistent misnaming of democracy, or, alternatively, this other democracy that when named erases the democracy it disavows. The persistent call and response chants at the Women’s March protests—“Tell me what democracy looks like” / “This is what democracy looks like”—use the referential “this” to point toward what is called democracy, albeit in a simplified form. “This” in one sense refers to the people—the *demos*—responding to the call; yet in another sense, the vagueness of “this” points to the impossibility of defining democracy, of answering the ostensibly simple call. Importantly, the people answering the call continually shift; this dynamism emphasizes the democratic miscount that cannot be overcome. If “this” is read as the articulation of a political collective, then the

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<sup>82</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

response insists on the speech of what Rancière describes as the “part of those who have no part.”<sup>84</sup> This call and response aims to challenge the consensus appealed to in Trump’s inauguration speech. Trump is in many ways a symptom of a greater problem of our contemporary moment, one that attempts to deny the void and the supplement insisted on by the “part of those who have no part.”<sup>85</sup> The “against nothing” of the sign at the Women’s March performs a similar denial, which suggests its call for equality takes place within a realm of consensus. For as Alain Badiou has astutely remarked, “Today the word ‘democracy’ is the principal organiser of consensus. It is a word that supposedly unites the collapse of the socialist States, the putative well-being enjoyed in our countries and the humanitarian crusades of the West.”<sup>86</sup> As Rancière insists, and contrary to this claim, the uniqueness of his project lies in its “setting democracy in opposition to consensus.”<sup>87</sup> For Rancière, democracy maintains the void, the

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<sup>84</sup> “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus*, 41.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>86</sup> “A Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of Democracy,” *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 78. Badiou offers one of the most sophisticated, as well as most recent, critiques of democracy, or what he calls “democratic materialism” (*Logics of Worlds* 1-3). Although a discussion of Badiou’s work exceeds this dissertation, I would like to suggest that Badiou’s claims about democracy in *Metapolitics* stem from a reading—and what I consider a deceptive reading—of V.I. Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, which allows Badiou to align democracy with the State (and thus with consensus). This alignment is not possible for Rancière without betraying democracy. The two thinkers are often rather proximate, yet Badiou’s privilege of communism and Rancière’s privilege of democracy suggest otherwise. See Badiou’s essays in *Metapolitics* on Rancière for his sense of their relationship, “Rancière and the Community of Equals” and “Rancière and Apolitics,” and Rancière’s engagement with Badiou in *Dissensus*, “The Use of Distinctions,” as well as his reading in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, “Alain Badiou’s Inaesthetics: the Torsions of Modernism.”

<sup>87</sup> “The Use of Distinctions,” *Dissensus*, 221.

supplement, that constitutes dissensus. Like queerness for Edelman, then, democratic dissensus for Rancière articulates “the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void.”<sup>88</sup>

An insistence on the void in politics mirrors its insistence in the literary. In *Mute Speech*, for example, Rancière describes the “mute-loquacious letter” as democratic: *demos* “is both mute and talkative,” such that “[d]emocracy is properly speaking the regime of writing, the regime in which the law is given by the wanderings of the orphaned letter, in which it occupies the place of living discourse, the place of the community’s living soul.”<sup>89</sup> As a literary project, *Against Form* draws on Rancière for his thinking of aesthetics and politics as constitutively intertwined. If aesthetics or politics are taken as autonomous, then a project interested in their relation is faced with the impossible task of either bridging the insurmountable gap between the two or putting the two in dialectical relation. Against Walter Benjamin’s reading—that politics can be aestheticized (in fascism) and that art can be politicized (in communism)—Rancière insists that politics is always already aesthetic, just as the aesthetic is always already

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<sup>88</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 22. My quotation excises the more explicitly psychoanalytic language that Rancière objects to in his work: “the figural burden of queerness, the burden that queerness is phobically produced to represent, is that of the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically, with *jouissance*) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolization.” In the following section, I aim to show how Rancière’s resistance to discussions of the psyche shapes and limits his thought of politics.

<sup>89</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 95.

political.<sup>90</sup> Art (and the aesthetic regime more generally), for Rancière, names the configuration “of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience.”<sup>91</sup> Art is political for Rancière “because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.”<sup>92</sup> Art reframes “material and symbolic space” and in this way is political.<sup>93</sup> Distancing himself from predecessors such as Michel Foucault, Rancière claims that politics “is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience.”<sup>94</sup> Because aesthetics and politics both depend on the distribution of the sensible, there is always an aesthetics of politics and a politics of aesthetics. Rancière therefore offers a way out of the problems that emerge when aesthetics and politics are taken as autonomous regimes.

### **Democratic Equality, or, Figural Excess**

The previous section detailed a conception of democratic politics developed from Rancière’s thought; here I would like to think again Rancière’s articulation of, and dependence on, equality as an axiomatic formulation. As an axiom, Rancière’s notion of equality appears as an *a priori* in his thought;

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<sup>90</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (1935-1938), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 122. Rancière addresses a confusion between his work and Benjamin’s work in “Mechanical Arts and the Promotion of the Anonymous,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

<sup>91</sup> *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 23.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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

Rancière needs equality to function as an *a priori* to maintain the distinction between politics (the irruption of equality) and the police (the production of inequality). Rather than accept at face value this *a priori* equality, I propose a critique of equality by turning to a recent work by Rancière. In *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Rancière offers a rare, prolonged engagement with American texts and contexts, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Charlie Chaplin, and James Agee and Walker Evans. The chapter on Emerson and Whitman functions as a foundational discussion of Rancière's later concerns, and concerns for his work more generally, on equality. As Joseph Tanke summarizes,

An early chapter on Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet" sets the stage for a number of scenes where art creates a common framework premised upon the mute signification of everyday things and the equality of persons. Rancière views Emerson's model of poetry as inheriting the spiritualization of daily life carried out by German Romanticism. Emerson furthers the idea that poetry is not simply a specialized form of language, but the vital expression of a community's life. On this model, poetry is a process of rendering visible a spiritual richness that would otherwise be lost. Examining the legacy of this idea in Whitman's "A Song for Occupations," one of the more celebrated poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Rancière explains that "the infinite multiplication of activities, things and vulgar names is [...] the accomplishment of a spiritual task of redemption."<sup>95</sup>

Rancière's discussion therefore takes part in a common reading of Whitman's poetry through the poetic theory of Emerson, a reading of course encouraged by the two figures themselves.<sup>96</sup> Partly at stake in the chapter is the translation of

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<sup>95</sup> "Everyday Gods: On Jacques Rancière's 'Aisthesis,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 July 2013, Web, 14 January 2017.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, the 21 July 1855 letter Emerson sent to Whitman upon receiving the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (*Complete Poetry* 1326). In

German Romanticism from Europe to the United States. Bracketing the discussion of poetry's "spiritual" expression, I would like to consider Rancière's reading of Whitman to see whether the equality Rancière locates in Whitman's poem does in fact appear as he claims. In what follows, I will argue that Rancière imposes the empty universal, or axiom, of equality on Whitman's poem by suppressing from his reading those elements in Whitman that contradict this imposition.

Rancière turns, as Tanke states, to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* following his discussion of Emerson's poetic theory.<sup>97</sup> In a passage that imitates the lengthy catalogues and lists of Whitman's poetry, Rancière notes the "extravagant succession of prosaic activities and tools, this gallery of insignificant, vulgar or horrible genre scenes, offered up as a poetic work" and cites examples from what will become, in later editions, "Song of Myself": "the farmer contemplating his oats, the lunatic carried to the asylum, the printer with gaunt jaws turning his quid of tobacco" and so on.<sup>98</sup> Following this lengthy catalogue, Rancière turns to an even more extravagant example, the poem that in later editions will be titled "A Song for Occupations." According to Rancière, "[n]o one had attained the pure enumeration presented" by this poem.<sup>99</sup>

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Whitman's letter to Emerson in August 1856, Whitman repeatedly refers to Emerson as "Master," which, though a convention, reveals his indebtedness to Emerson (1326-37).

<sup>97</sup> Rancière focuses on the first edition in his reading, as will become obvious, though he frequently refers to later editions and their changes.

<sup>98</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 66-67.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

At this point, Rancière's interest in Whitman's catalogues seems to focus on the pure enumeration in Whitman that resembles the "ever expanding horizon of democratic inclusivity" criticized earlier.<sup>100</sup> Yet enumeration as such is only a way to realize what Rancière characterizes as the poetry's true value of abolishing hierarchies. This becomes apparent when Rancière acknowledges that Whitman includes in his catalogues "vulgar objects and activities," such as the slave auction. Precisely through this inclusion, Whitman's poetry applies "the spiritualist principle articulated by Emerson: the symbolic use of nature abolishes distinctions of low and high, honest and vile."<sup>101</sup> In a brief citation and paraphrase, Rancière highlights a particular passage from *Leaves of Grass* that will later be "I Sing the Body Electric":

A man's body at auction,  
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the  
sale,)  
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,  
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,  
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one  
animal or plant,  
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 151.

<sup>101</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 68. Rancière sees Emerson and Whitman engaged in "the vast redemption of the empirical world proclaimed by German idealism the redemption of a sensible world where spirit recognizes the exterior form of a divine thought that it knows from now on as its own thought" (69). Some readers are rightly skeptical of Rancière's reading of Whitman in this regard. Theo Davis, for example, remarks on Rancière's discussion of Whitman in *Aisthesis*, as follows: "This isn't a perverse way to read Whitman, but I do think it is mistaken" (*Ornamental Aesthetics* 174). In her own counter-reading of Whitman, Davis suggests, "Behind Whitman's presence there is a looming sense that life is not about living out the principle of equality but about contingent behavior" (174).

<sup>102</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 255. I have quoted the entire section alluded to by Rancière in his discussion (*Aisthesis* 67-68).

In Rancière's reading, the poetic speaker intervenes because the auctioneer "only knows half his business. He does not know the value of what he exhibits because his very trade obliges him to ignore this supplementary value that each being and each thing possesses."<sup>103</sup> The poet's intervention reveals, in other words, the supplementary value of the black body that the auction renders, or attempts to render, invisible. For Rancière, Whitman's catalogues reveal in all objects and activities "the value of equality that they get from all being microcosms of the whole, susceptible of being attached to the interminable chain of beings, to the inexhaustible life of the whole."<sup>104</sup> Here, then, is one of the clearest articulations of a Romantic thinking of the reflective relationship between parts and whole.<sup>105</sup>

Yet the passage in Whitman possesses a rather strange ambiguity centered on the verb, "help," that introduces the poet's intervention at the slave auction. If we read this passage in a literal sense with Rancière, the poet's lines after the break, in which he stresses the excessive or supplementary value of the black body at auction, radically challenge the reduction of the body that takes place at auction. This challenge stresses the equality of anyone and everyone, rather than the inequality propagated by the auctioneer. If we read this passage differently, if

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<sup>103</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 67.

<sup>104</sup> Rancière, 68.

<sup>105</sup> Rancière offers his most extended treatment of this relation in *Mute Speech*. See Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* for a critique of Romanticism's dependence on reflection inspired, in large part, by the work of Gilles Deleuze. Wasser argues that the Romantic thinking of the part and the whole, or of the fragment and form, depends on a contradiction: "To assume that a work is capable of reflecting on itself, commenting on itself, and representing itself by means of its own figures is already to take the work to be coherent and self-sufficient" (9).

instead of their literal meaning we focus on their figurative meaning, the lines after the break seem indistinguishable from a sales pitch, as was the case in Monáe's speech at the Women's March. That is, rather than stress the supplementary value of the human body, the poet "helps" the auctioneer get a better price for his auction "object" by selling the audience on that body's value. By praising the excessiveness of the body at auction, the auctioneer will be able to demand an even higher price. Rather than equality, this instead promotes an even greater inequality in the market's exploitative acts. In this second reading, far from becoming an emancipatory voice, the poetic speaker becomes more complicit in the racial exploitation of the capitalist system. Rancière's claim for equality in the poem thus depends on avoiding the indistinction between literal and figurative implications in the content of the poem.

Whitman may of course be consciously ventriloquizing the language of the market in this passage to make his critique of the market's economic reduction. Whitman's opening characterization of the body as "[a] *man's* body" uses the language of possession and ownership to challenge the exchange of the body, in which the black body comes to be owned by the white subject. In other words, the market can exchange black bodies because it excludes these bodies from the realm of the human. Whitman's introduction of a man who possesses his own body makes visible the operation of dehumanization that must take place for that body to be transformed into a commodity object that can be exchanged. Yet Whitman's critique of the slave system, and his attempt to transcend it, takes place through the very Cartesian division of mind (man) and body on which the

logic of possession and its dehumanization depend. The equality of anyone and everyone is incompatible with any mind/body dualism, in which one term inevitably gets privileged over the other in a hierarchy, as well as with the logic of possession this division generates. Rancière's reading elides the question of possession already evident in Whitman's opening characterization, perhaps because the status of the possessed body calls equality into question.

Rancière's reading of equality, grounded on a part-whole articulation, also depends on a more general privilege of the whole, or form, over the parts, or content, of the poem. In his turn to the "surface" qualities of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Rancière stresses his specifically formal, that is, axiomatic, assumption of equality. Rancière remarks, for instance, on the absence of Whitman's name on the first edition: "the name on the cover page is replaced by a full-length portrait."<sup>106</sup> In contrast, "the collection bears its author's name only as a name uttered by the breath of the poem."<sup>107</sup> To stress the significance of these choices, Rancière cites an early commentary on the poem, by Charles Eliot Norton: "This [decision by Whitman], no doubt, is upon the principle that the name is merely accidental; while the portrait affords an idea of the essential being from whom these utterances proceed."<sup>108</sup> While this claim depends on a privilege of the inscription of a portrait over the inscription of the proper name, Rancière seems to accept the distinction made between two forms of art, and of writing, based on his own reading that follows the Norton citation:

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<sup>106</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 71.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Norton qtd. in Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 71.

Following the same logic, the collection is named *Leaves of Grass*. The title not only affirms the poetic thesis that governs it: all things are equal because the most infinitesimal contains the universe: “I believe a leaf of *grass* is no less than the *journey work* of the *stars*.” It incarnates this egalitarian procession in its very layout: the pages of a book must be considered like the detached leaves of any tress whatsoever, emanations of universal anonymous life.<sup>109</sup>

While numerous examples from *Leaves of Grass* complicate this egalitarian thesis, including the auction scene Rancière discusses before turning to the form of *Leaves of Grass*, Rancière’s privilege of the external, prefatory, or formal properties of *Leaves of Grass* emerges as perhaps the most striking facet of his claim here. Rancière can only make a claim for the equality of Whitman’s poem by grounding that claim on selective passages (as well as selective readings of those passages) and on the prefatory matter that both is and is not “part” of the text. Rancière depends, in other words, on the organizing yet supplemental part that is no part to make his claim. If this is meant to perform his political project, in which the part of those who have no part suddenly stage a confrontation with the police order, then a problem emerges. Isolating the supplementary aspects of *Leaves of Grass*, such as its formal presentation, depends on an exclusion. Rather than purely logical and *a priori*, equality only appears as an axiom through repression. There is, in other words, a certain irrationality to Rancière’s ostensibly rational positing of equality.

Rancière insists repeatedly in his work that one cannot produce equality if one begins with inequality, for inequality will simply reproduce itself. This justifies, in logical terms, the need for equality as an *a priori*. Politics, for

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<sup>109</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 71.

Rancière, begins with the declaration of a wrong—that is, of an inequality, the inexistence of a “common stage”—and in the act of this declaration, a political subject appears.<sup>110</sup> This declaration assumes equality to pre-exist the present inequality, yet it also forces a conflict, in the present, between equality and inequality. As such, equality logically exists prior to its assertion but can only appear and be realized through its assertion. As Rancière’s reading of Whitman suggests, however, this notion of equality depends on a repression. Rancière, who privileges the “wandering letter,” relies on a figure of equality at the same time as he restricts the movements of this equality, so as to contain and direct the fiction of emancipation it generates. To have an equality of anyone and everyone that suspends, if only momentarily, the police order, Rancière needs this equality to be “pure.”<sup>111</sup> Rancière suppresses the second reading of Whitman’s passage that I offered earlier in order to maintain a “purity” to Whitman’s emancipatory project that reconfigures those moments of apparent inequality—such as the auction scene—in order to reinforce this project. What Rancière suppresses, then, is another kind of excess of equality, the other side of equality that is not simply inequality. For if one simply shows how equality and inequality deconstruct themselves (as the Whitman reading above could be taken to suggest), one compromises Rancière’s axiomatic expression. In what follows, I will suggest, in a slightly different way, that equality presents a figural excess. My readings will

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<sup>110</sup> *Disagreement*, 26. See Chambers for a discussion of the retroactive temporality of the political subject (17).

<sup>111</sup> Žižek refers to the political act in Rancière as both suspension and subversion of the police (*Ticklish Subject* 187).

attempt to show how the excess Rancière tries to shape in a particular way exceeds these efforts. Rather than simply rely on an equality/inequality opposition, I will argue that the figural excess of equality represents the psychic movements Rancière repeatedly disavows in his work.

I will do this by turning Rancière's own reading of Plato against him. According to Rancière, Plato needs to narrate a story of inequality in *The Republic* so as to produce a belief in inequality, which in turn transforms inequality into a reality.<sup>112</sup> In Rancière's reading, "[t]he ordering of social 'occupations' works in the mode of this *as if*. Inequality works to the extent that one 'believes' it, that one goes on using one's arms, eyes, and brains according to the distribution of the positions. This is what consensus means. And this is the way domination works."<sup>113</sup> Yet the narrative of emancipation Rancière locates in Whitman seems to operate in the same way, though he reads it as the inverse. Equality becomes a reality to the extent one believes it in Whitman. This suggests an "equality" in the two positions of equality and inequality, yet Rancière needs equality to be the primary position and inequality to be secondary or derivative. Despite claiming to avoid an ideological trap, Rancière seems to produce one.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Rancière, "The Method of Equality," *Recognition or Disagreement*, 134-7.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>114</sup> Rancière distinguishes his notion of the distribution of the sensible from ideology by claiming, "the distribution of the sensible is not a matter of illusion or knowledge," as is the case for ideology. Instead, the distribution of the sensible "is a matter of consensus or dissensus" ("Method" 136). While this puts simply a complex claim, the idea seems to be that Rancière's aesthetic project avoids ideology, since ideology, as "a matter of illusion or knowledge," appears secondary to aesthesis. Ideology seems to designate for Rancière a way of being, an *ethos* or ethics.

Rancière's position in his recent essay, "The Method of Equality," references and extends his work in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to claim "that there is no path from inequality to equality. There is either a path from equality to equality or a path from inequality to inequality."<sup>115</sup> Rancière therefore insists that one must *decide* on equality. There is no "path from ignorance to knowledge," for example; rather, there "is a path from an existing knowledge to further knowledge."<sup>116</sup> "The method of equality," Rancière continues, "supposes that you can start from any point and that there are multiple paths that can be constructed to get to another point and still another one that is not predictable."<sup>117</sup> Rancière's theory of equality emerges out of his famous break from Louis Althusser, his former teacher, a break that appears most elaborated in Rancière's early work, *Althusser's Lesson* (1974). Here, Rancière claims that Althusser's privilege of the intellectuals over their pupils depends upon and maintains a relation of inequality. Rancière's resistance to Althusser might be read as an Oedipal act in which Rancière overthrows his own father, so to speak, in an attempt to generate a new thought that does not end up reproducing the inequality he resists.

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<sup>115</sup> "Method," 139. In *Disagreement*, Rancière offers another explanation of the way in which inequality is only possible on the assumption of equality (48-50). When describing a situation in which an "inferior" relates to the "superior," Rancière claims, "the inferior has understood the superior's order because the inferior takes part in the same community of speaking beings and so is, in this sense, their equal. In short, we can deduce that the inequality of social ranks works only because of the very equality of speaking beings" (49). Rancière turns to the example of the Aventine to claim that this scene "creat[es] a stage" where the conflict over the equality or inequality of speaking beings "can be played out" (51). Here Rancière supports his claim for equality as an *a priori*.

<sup>116</sup> "Method," 139.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Rancière's engagement with Whitman, however, suggests an odd consequence of this "method of equality." The principle of equality that Rancière reads in Whitman interrupts the order of things in a way that guarantees Rancière's reading of *Leaves of Grass* as an emancipatory work. In other words, the equality Rancière reads in Whitman also, and at the same time, allows Rancière to read Whitman in this way. In practice, then, equality works tautologically. Though equality has the appearance of generating a negative act, an interruption of consensus, equality depends on an abjection of its constitutive negativity. This abjection, or primary repression, allows Rancière to avoid the second potential reading of the auction scene, a reading that opposes his emancipatory interpretation. Rather than put the emancipatory reading against this second, negating reading—in a staging of dissensus—this second reading reveals how Rancière's emancipatory project itself operates by means of consensus, albeit by way of a consensus different from that of the police order. The equality of all things that Rancière reads in *Leaves of Grass*, the substitutability of anyone and everyone as speaking beings, depends on a disavowal of what compromises this apparently neutral program.

Despite all of Rancière's focus on negativity—apparent in his well-known terms and phrases, including dissensus, disagreement, and democratic anarchy—his investment in the presupposition of equality is an investment in the positive project of politics against the logic of the police. He is careful to clarify, for instance, that "political action is not simply the negative interruption of the police domination. It is a positive practice that concretely tips over the balance of

equality and inequality. It inscribes effects of equality in our laws and our practices. And those inscriptions, in turn, allow new political conflicts and actions.”<sup>118</sup> As the phrasing suggests, no interruption of dissensus can be complete—for if it were, it would be a utopian erasure of all inequality.<sup>119</sup> On the one hand, Rancière’s interest in the re-distribution of the sensible resembles the “horizon of democratic inclusivity” against which his project seems aimed.<sup>120</sup> On the other hand, his acknowledgement that the police order re-organizes itself following a political interruption is a way to maintain the force of politics without embedding it in the logic of consensus. Yet Rancière’s privilege of the positive aspect in his thought places the disruptive force of democratic dissensus at an uneasy distance. The negativity of dissensus must be positivized in the service of an affirmation: the affirmation of equality. To maintain the precarious axiom of equality, Rancière relies, in other words, on a no less precarious repression of the negative. I will suggest that Rancière betrays the democratic drive, and in what follows I will attend to the destructive force of democracy as such, a force that can only be co-opted for an emancipatory project by means of such a betrayal. That is, to hold onto dissensus, Rancière represses its constitutive force. Just as any form betrays its figures, Rancière’s axiom of equality betrays the figural

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<sup>118</sup> *Recognition or Disagreement*, 125.

<sup>119</sup> According to Samuel Chamber, this is the claim made by Todd May in *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008): “in his defense of anarchism as a pure politics (one that would eliminate police once and for all) May not only misreads Rancière on police but ends up positing an approach to politics that proves less than fully democratic (in Rancière’s sense). ‘The politics of the police’ helps us to grasp the inadequacies of a utopian model of pure politics” (*The Lessons of Rancière* 34).

<sup>120</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 151.

excess of equality that defines it. For equality can never be known in advance, since it depends on the excess of figuration, of the “wandering letter.”

As the ungrounded and thus never positively present surplus, figuration introduces an excess that interrupts the order of the literal, of the representative mode constituted by hierarchy and harmony. What appears, or what is represented, as a result of figuration will never align with the equalizing excess that constitutes the act of appearing. There will always be, in other words, a gap or miscount of figuration. Both Trump and the Women’s March emphasize this point, as both come into being by harnessing, or appearing to harness, an excessive, dissensual force. The same can be seen in the aesthetic regime, with Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. “Works of literature,” Rancière states, “constantly betray the purity of rupture.”<sup>121</sup> This is because (modern) artworks depend upon the contradictory conjunction of two worlds: an absolutely contingent world constituted by “the empirical succession of individual facts” and a hierarchically ordered world constituted by “the construction of a causal arrangement of events.”<sup>122</sup> The ordered world, organized by plot or synecdoche, betrays the metonymic wandering along the signifying chain, in which signifiers appear in contingent relations within an infinite series.

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<sup>121</sup> “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 151.

<sup>122</sup> Rancière, “The Thread of the Novel,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 47.2 (Summer 2014), 197. In this essay, Rancière focuses on the novel form specifically, but the conjunction between contingency and necessity applies to other forms of art as well. See, for example, *Mute Speech*.

Rancière's engagement with Jean-François Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* establishes more clearly the stakes in Rancière's insistence on the positive aspect of his project against a destructive and self-perpetuating negativity. Through a reading of both Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller that exceeds the scope of this discussion, Rancière claims that Schiller reveals the politics of Kant's aesthetic project. Before turning to Schiller, Rancière notes a structure in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that is crucial both for Kant and for Lyotard's reading of Kant:

Aesthetic judgment refers to a form that is not a conceptual form imposing its unity on the diversity of sensation. The beautiful is beautiful inasmuch as it is neither an object of knowledge, subordinating sensation to the law of the understanding, nor an object of desire, subordinating reason to the anarchy of sensations. This *neither...nor...*, the unavailability of this form for the faculties of both understanding and desire, enabled the subject, through the free play of those faculties, to experience a new form of autonomy.<sup>123</sup>

According to Rancière, aesthetic experience "suspends the power relations which usually structure the experience of the knowing, acting and desiring subject."<sup>124</sup>

The aesthetic encounter, in other words, introduces a "sensuous exception."<sup>125</sup> For Rancière, this is true of both the beautiful and the sublime, for in both cases we encounter dissensus, "i.e. the rupture of a certain agreement between thought and the sensible."<sup>126</sup> The subject is, for instance, both attracted to and repulsed by the

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<sup>123</sup> *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 91. For a recent discussion of form in Kant, as well as a critical engagement with so-called "new formalism," see Robert S. Lehman's "Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgment."

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

experience of the beautiful.<sup>127</sup> Aesthetic judgment, for Kant, famously involves judging an object without concept. While such a judgment is subjective, it nonetheless has “universal validity.”<sup>128</sup> For this to be possible, Kant posits a “common sense” that is “distinct from the common understanding that is sometimes also called common sense (*sensus communis*); for the latter judges not by feeling but always by concepts.”<sup>129</sup> This invented common sense refers to “the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers.”<sup>130</sup> Rancière claims that, for Schiller, Kant’s aesthetic common sense is a “dissensual common sense.”<sup>131</sup> Here, then, Rancière reveals the “political signification” Schiller places on the Kantian aesthetic.<sup>132</sup>

A dissensual common sense names a common sense opposed to the ordered and regulated *sensus communis*. Contrasting this “dissensual common sense of aesthetic experience” with the “consensus” of the French Revolution, Rancière notes how the latter ends up reproducing the “order of domination” it sought to overthrow.<sup>133</sup> The dissensus of the aesthetic, in “[t]he suspension of power, the *neither...nor...* specific to the aesthetic state, by contrast, announces a wholly new revolution [...] a revolution that is no mere displacement of powers,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>128</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §20.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 98. Rancière continues, “[Dissensual common sense] does not remain content with bringing distant classes together. It challenges the distribution of the sensible that enforces their distance” (98).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

but a neutralization of the very forms by which power is exercised.”<sup>134</sup> This neutralization “defines a novel mode of experience that bears within it a new form of ‘sensible’ universality and equality.”<sup>135</sup> Rancière thus carefully articulates the way in which the negativity of dissensus generates an affirmative position.<sup>136</sup>

What Rancière wants to avoid in his insistence on a positive method becomes clearer when he returns to Lyotard after this detour through Kant and Schiller (and Adorno). “Lyotard’s counter-reading of Kant,” Rancière argues, “strives [...] to efface the original link between aesthetic suspension and the promise of emancipation.”<sup>137</sup> For Lyotard, then,

Aesthetic experience becomes that of the enslaved human mind, the mind enslaved to the sensory, but also, and above all, enslaved, on account of this sensory dependency, to the law of the Other. The shock of the sensuous exception that in Kant was a sign of freedom and in Schiller a promise of emancipation, in Lyotard signifies exactly the opposite, namely a sign of dependency. It marks the fact that there is nothing to be done except obey the immemorial law of alienation. [...] This enables the meaning of aesthetic dissensus to be reformulated as either a disaster, or else a different disaster: either the ‘disaster’ of the sublime, which is the ‘sacrificial’ pronouncement of the ethical dependency with respect to the immemorial law of the Other; or the disaster that is born of the forgetting of that disaster, the disaster of the promise of emancipation that can only lead either to the overt barbarism of Nazi and Soviet camps, or to the soft totalitarianism of the world of commercial culture and communication.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> It is partly for this reason that Todd May has been able to mobilize Rancière’s work to think a positive conception of anarchism. See “Jacques Rancière and the Ethics of Equality,” *SubStance* 36.2 (Issue 113, 2007), 22. May ends his discussion by thinking about a notion of “solidarity” founded on a principle of equality (32-35).

<sup>137</sup> *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 104.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

This turn to “[e]ither obedience to the law of the Other that does us violence, or indulgence in the law of the *self* that leads us into an enslavement by commercial culture” reveals the way in which, for Rancière, ethics “accomplishes a joint suppression of both aesthetics and politics.”<sup>139</sup> The negativity of disaster overwhelms such that no positive project—such as the promise of emancipation—can remain. This excessive negativity prevents aesthetic suspension from generating any emancipatory project.

Rancière’s rejection of a non-reproductive negativity, of a negativity that brings with it the threat of annihilation rather than the potential for emancipation, comes at a cost. For Rancière can only perform such a rejection by circumscribing in advance what the void of the democratic miscount, the supplement of the democratic figure, can generate. In this *a priori* limitation, Rancière betrays his own stated fidelity to the “wanderings of the orphaned letter.” The axiom of equality becomes, in other words, a principle that leads to a fantasmatic construction. Even if this fantasy confronts and challenges those fantasies of the police order dependent on inequality, it nonetheless requires a willful blindness to its own inconsistencies and repressions. As Edelman writes in *No Future*, subjects become subjects through division. While this seems to work as a homology to Rancière’s claim that a political community is a divided community, Edelman’s discussion of the subject’s relation to politics—the subject’s participation in the collective political subject—makes a crucial point that challenges the easy homology:

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 105.

Politics names the social enactment of the subject's attempt to establish the conditions for this impossible consolidation by identifying with something *outside* itself in order to enter the presence, deferred perpetually, *of* itself. Politics, that is, names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history.<sup>140</sup>

Although Edelman's conception of politics in *No Future* differs from Rancière's conception of politics, this claim nevertheless speaks to the way in which Rancière's collective political subject, as well as his emancipatory project, operates as a way of avoiding the self-division inherent in any individual that takes part in the dissensual community. Rancière's reading of *Leaves of Grass* as emancipatory depends on avoiding the movements of the poetry in its figures that exceed the axiom of equality. Even as it presumes to account for and depend on the excess of the wandering letter, Rancière's axiom of equality suppresses the excess that potentially threatens its emancipatory project. Rancière suppresses the absolute contingency of figuration—the errancy of the “wandering letter”—that does not guarantee his reading of equality in Whitman. Rancière recognizes the impossibility of a pure politics, which would naively promise the totalizing appearance of the equality of anyone and everyone, yet he nevertheless wants to maintain “the purity of rupture.”<sup>141</sup> Unlike “[w]orks of literature,” which “constantly betray” this “purity of rupture” by turning away from the contingency it introduces in favor of necessity, Rancière wants to remain faithful to the disruptive force of contingency, of an ungrounded figure. Ironically, however, by

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<sup>140</sup> *No Future*, 8.

<sup>141</sup> Rancière, “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” 151.

transforming and directing the excess of equality into a pure form of rupture, Rancière undercuts the excessive “wandering letter,” the metonymic figure that moves endlessly along the signifying chain. Rancière tries to maintain equality both in terms of synecdoche and metonymy, that is, in terms of necessity and contingency. The problem appears when he tries to maintain this conjunction *and* insist on the purity of equality, which must by his own terms be understood as impure. Put differently, Rancière relies on a particular formulation of equality “to stitch up the inconsistency of [his] own ideological system.”<sup>142</sup>

In “Living with Negativity,” Edelman stresses our own “self-division” when discussing the encounter with another, which is always already an encounter with the otherness of ourselves. As Edelman states, “The question of encounter compels us to ask how the negativity of the subject’s nonsovereignty, and so the division that makes us, simultaneously, the (conscious) subjects of our statements and the (unconscious) subjects of their enunciation, can still yield forms of relation sustaining both intimate and political bonds.”<sup>143</sup> The nonsovereignty of the subject suggests that the equality of speaking beings exists insofar as every subject is divided. At the same time, however, the subject’s nonsovereignty and psychic movements emphasize that the substitutability of anyone and everyone cannot work as easily as Rancière suggests, for this substitution violently ignores the differences between subjects. Rancière therefore relies on a formal conception

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<sup>142</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 49. I am repurposing this quotation from Žižek’s discussion of anti-Semitism in Germany of the 1930s, in which he reveals how ideology relies on a figure to evade its own contradictions.

<sup>143</sup> Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 69.

of the subject that avoids engaging with the constitutive content of the subject, such as its psychic economy. Edelman “demands that we think more closely the join between the psychic and the social.”<sup>144</sup> But in his rejection of the psychic, Rancière delimits the scope of his project to a purely formal politics: “A political subject is an invention; an invention has no self.”<sup>145</sup> The nonsovereignty of the political community as conceptualized by Rancière resembles the nonsovereignty of the subject in a psychoanalytic approach, yet the divided subject introduces a constitutive asymmetry that the divided community elides—a necessary elision for the divided community to work. In the readings in chapter three, I aim to show the ways in which these two registers of nonsovereignty interact and conflict.

What this discussion of the negative suggests, coupled with my previous engagement with Rancière’s reading of Whitman and equality, is that Rancière’s notion of equality appears inadequate to the negative and interruptive force of equality. Put differently, Rancière substitutes part of equality—its axiomatic expression—for the whole of equality, rejecting the psychic aspects of equality. Rancière avoids engaging with the libidinal economy that undergirds the political regime and prioritizes the nonsovereignty of the community without accounting for the nonsovereignty of the individuals who constitute the political subjects of that community. At the same time, Rancière disavows the absolute division between the enunciating subject and the subject of the statement. The “act of enunciation,” Rancière claims, “creates the subject that it names.”<sup>146</sup> The

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> *Recognition or Disagreement*, 122.

<sup>146</sup> *Recognition or Disagreement?*, 92-93.

enunciating subjects “construct this [political] subject [...] by breaking away from their given identity in the existing system of positions.”<sup>147</sup> Rancière thus sublates the enunciating subjects in order to preserve the subject of the statement, the enunciated subject; that is, Rancière disavows “the division that makes us, simultaneously, the (conscious) subjects of our statements and the (unconscious) subjects of their enunciation.”<sup>148</sup> Rancière’s notion of equality appears, then, as synecdoche, but as synecdoche of a special variety. Rather than substituting a part for the whole, Rancière substitutes one property or kind of equality for the whole range of properties encompassed by equality. Rancière’s limited, axiomatic expression of equality gets substituted for equality as such. In doing so, Rancière engages in the very ordering logic his project resists; he suppresses the figural excess of equality to “purify” it into a formal equality. In what follows, especially in chapters three and four, in which I turn to the “psycho-affective dimensions” of democratic equality,<sup>149</sup> I will privilege the excess of equality, as well as the excess of both the subject and the community. In doing so, I will attempt to maintain Rancière’s focus on dissensus and equality, but contra Rancière, I will follow the negativity he often leaves behind.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>148</sup> Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 69. This passage comes from Edelman’s response.

<sup>149</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 26. Coulthard develops a theory of the psycho-affective through a provocative rereading of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. As I will discuss in chapter three, the very relation between the individual subject and the political subject is at stake in the psycho-affective dimension, which accounts for the nonsovereignty of the subject.

## Chapter Summaries

In chapter one, “The Politics of Genre and the Historicity of the Negative Democratic Impulse,” I turn to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s critical prefaces and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to consider the ways in which generic and other conventions shape representations of democracy in the nineteenth century. In this way, my first chapter shows how genre supplements and engages the form-figure dyad. My readings here extend Bonnie Honig’s provocative gesture in *Democracy and the Foreigner*, in which she recognizes the generic conventions of democracy, as well as how one’s generic expectations of democracy shape one’s reading of it. Both Hawthorne and Jacobs locate in literature an emancipatory potential, and they attempt to figure a democratic aesthetics against regulative forms of art and of politics (police). Hawthorne, for example, conceptualizes the romance as a lawless genre, yet at the same time he subjects romance to laws, both of art and of reading. By maintaining this contradictory negotiation, Hawthorne sustains the possibility for a *jouissance* that would disturb the police order of “the Novel” and of the police. Rather than reinvent a genre, Jacobs strategically negotiates pre-established conventions of sentimental literature and slave narratives, but she explicitly denies the sympathy required by sentimental novels at various points in her narration. *Incidents* as a narrative can only uneasily recover from these disruptions. My reading argues that the play between the expectations of convention and the interruptions of an anti-hierarchical force—the democratic equality of Jacobs’s text—generates the democratic impulse against the anti-democratic representative order. This chapter

closes with a note on the historical method of *Against Form* as a whole to emphasize the limitations of thinking in terms of historical and literary periodization.

Chapter two, “The Negative Democratic Impulse and the Axiom of Equality,” begins with Louis Zukofsky’s epic modernist poem, “A”, in order to expand on the anti-hierarchical democratic impulse in the twentieth-century. As a second-generation modernist, Zukofsky’s self-consciousness and anxieties about his place in the tradition of modern poetry make visible the particularly modernist concern for the order of form against the threat of disorder presented by the contemporary world. I argue this desire for order restricts Zukofsky’s anti-hierarchical gestures—notably, his poetics of parataxis—such that “A” privileges a form that orders its various and seemingly disparate parts. Against this imposition of order, my chapter then turns to Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* for critiques of the (modernist) desire for order. Both Pynchon and Morrison invite excess into their narratives, which renders impossible any totalizing formal order. This chapter therefore argues that democratic equality in its most radical figuration only appears with the resistance to the Enlightenment tradition that privileges rationality and order, a tradition exemplified in many ways by modernist texts.

My third chapter, “Anxious Literature: Scenes of Democratic Violence,” continues this discussion of the play between totalizing form and the dynamic figures that get reconfigured and betrayed by this totality. Here, I focus on questions of violence. The imposition of form—of a literary form or of a form of

representation in politics—violently forces its figures to conform to and negotiate organizing logics. Robin Coste Lewis’s “Plantation” makes this explicit, as the speaker must negotiate destructive racial, gender, and sexual norms. Yet this chapter then turns to a counter-violence, the violence enacted against this imposition of form, by reading two other contemporary poets, Ocean Vuong and Safiya Sinclair. This chapter extends Priscilla Wald’s work on anxiety and American identity, which always depends on reconfiguring the “we” in the Constitution’s “We the people.” Following Jacques Lacan’s rereading of Sigmund Freud, I conceptualize anxiety as proximity and as appearance, rather than as loss. Sinclair, for example, refuses to shape and define in normative terms the voided subject and instead articulates the violence done to those excluded from any representative act. The appearance of this voided subject (the part that has no part) insists on an equality that produces a shattering sense of anxiety in the order of things, as something appears that, according to this order, should not exist.

In my final chapter, “Against Representation, or, Utopia, After All,” I return to problems discussed throughout these chapters to insist on the force of democratic equality as non-representational. Any representative act, any constituent moment that produces a form of representation, necessarily betrays some part of those figures and people that it aims to represent (assuming it has inclusion as its goal rather than a deliberate exclusion). Only by holding onto the negativity of figurality can the force of democratic equality be maintained. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler insists that democracy depends on the non-representational remainder, for without this

remainder, representation would be total and unassailable. If, for example, voting exhausted representation and the people voting aligned exactly with those voted into power, then there would be no space for political disagreement. In other words, there would be no space or possibility for resistance. Through a reading of contemporary electoral politics and identity politics, this chapter shows the seductions of representation, in which representation promises to form a symmetry with what grounds it, with what it supposedly represents. I then turn to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, which foregrounds the gap between systems of representation, to argue that the operation of democratic equality names the appearance of the force generated by the non-representational remainder, that is, the nothing that representational logics would like us to forget. Cha's text generates a critique of the systems of representation that continue to structure identity politics and utopian impulses of the police order. Against this utopian promise, I draw on Cha's figure of *refractio*, of fracture and diffusion, to propose a utopia constituted by the death drive in opposition to the utopian promise of the police order. This negative utopia thus figures the negative democratic impulse rather than consensus democracy.

## Chapter 1:

### The Politics of Genre and the Historicity of the Negative Democratic Impulse

As open sets endlessly dissolved by their openness, [genres] are virtual in this nontechnical sense, resembling the database in being an unscripted effect of their membership and in being only a fraction of what they could be at any given moment. Genres have solid names, ontologized names. What these names designate, though, is not taxonomic classes of equal solidity but fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries that are still being produced.

Wai Chee Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge"  
(2007), 1379.

On one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought. So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill the void? So much of our political vocabulary/imaginary/desires have been implicitly integrationist even when we imagine our claims are more radical.

Saidiya Hartman, "The Position of the Unthought" (2003),  
184-5.

This chapter considers how genre shapes and limits democratic expressions in literature in order to anticipate the implicit question of genre raised by the engagements with form and figure in later chapters. As the opening epigraph from Wai Chee Dimock suggests, genre—as an “effect” of “membership”—names in literature a function analogous to the collective political subject.<sup>150</sup> The collective political subject emerges out of the enunciating subjects who form its constitutive grounds, and these subjects are themselves defined as subjects through their enunciation. Genres, like political communities, are always untimely and constitutively divided. For there are no “closed genres,” as Dimock argues. That is, no genre can be totalized or completed. Despite its openness, Stephen Owen declares genre to be “the primary category of sorting.”<sup>151</sup> As such, genre names a privileged mode of organizing and constructing a particular distribution of the sensible, one that links the sensible figures to a form; operating like the Kantian schematism, genres enable intelligibility by mediating between the Real materiality of figuration and the Symbolic intellection of form.<sup>152</sup> As such, genre becomes a productive site of contestation between the unintelligible interruption

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<sup>150</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, “Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge,” in *Remapping Genre*, special issue, *PMLA* 122.5 (Oct. 2007), 1379.

<sup>151</sup> Stephen Owen, “Genres in Motion,” in *Remapping Genre*, special issue, *PMLA* 122.5 (Oct. 2007), 1389. Owen describes the historical and cultural contingencies of genre, as well as genre’s drive toward order and its antagonist of difference.

<sup>152</sup> Of the transcendental schema, Kant writes, “Now it is clear that there must be a third thing, which must stand in homogeneity with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other, and makes possible the application of the former to the latter. This mediating representation must be pure (without anything empirical) and yet intellectual on the one hand and sensible on the other. Such a representation is the transcendental schema” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A138/B177).

of democratic anarchy and the intelligibility of consensus democracy (police). The readings that follow attend to democracy's paradoxes through generic concerns and in the process explain the relation between democracy and genre—perhaps the third term that complements the form-figure dyad elsewhere in this project.

This chapter also aims to justify the historical and critical method of *Against Form* by grounding the timeline of this dissertation project as a whole. What I call the negative democratic impulse in the literature and politics of the United States might be located in any period of American literature following the inauguration of the United States as a sovereign nation-state. Yet this impulse of course appears differently in any period and in any text. In the next chapter and the chapters that follow, I show how democracy's structural antagonism manifests itself differently in works associated with modernism and its wake. In this chapter, however, I consider how nineteenth-century texts anticipate later approaches to democracy in the U.S. by focusing on two exemplary responses to the problems of democratic aesthetics in the U.S. in the nineteenth century: Nathaniel Hawthorne's critical prefaces and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I briefly engage Hawthorne and Jacobs to show how they articulate democracy's structural antagonism between democratic dissensus and consensus democracy. Both writers think through this antagonism in the register of genre. Hawthorne famously conceptualizes the romance against the novel and "(re)invents" the genre of the romance as a hybridization of the "actual" and the "imaginary." Jacobs's generic innovation lies in her conjunction of the slave

narrative with the sentimental novel at the same time she disrupts the laws of both genres at various moments in her text. At stake in both projects is the production of dissensus—between regimes of visibility, between genres—that in turn aims to produce equality. Hawthorne and Jacobs attempt, in other words, to conceptualize literature as the site of emancipation.

In *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Bonnie Honig draws our attention to the role of genre in our reading and understanding of “texts of democratic theory,” as well as of democratic practices more generally.<sup>153</sup> Within gothic conventions, for example, the foreigner—be it immigrant or migrant—appears as an external threat to the internal consistency of a political body, such as the nation-state. In contrast, utopian conventions of a sentimental romance might frame the foreigner in the more welcoming terms of the democratic promise described in the introduction to this dissertation. While Honig’s specific interest lies in the “*reading* practices of political theorists,” this chapter generalizes the notion of democracy and genre to consider genre as a set of conventions that establish what can be thought about democracy.<sup>154</sup> Fredric Jameson’s notion of genre as that which provides a “mediatory function” offers a productive understanding of generic concerns in this chapter; genre mediates a reader’s engagement with formal and figurative characteristics of texts by offering a set of conventions and “rules” of reading.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 108.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>155</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 92. Despite this resemblance, Jameson’s methodological approach to literature is vastly different from my own.

“Genres are essentially literary *institutions*,” Jameson argues, “or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.”<sup>156</sup> In the readings that follow, Hawthorne and Jacobs both engage this quality of genre—as a contract establishing or reinforcing the proper—in highly ambivalent ways. By subverting or interrupting the laws of genres, both authors recognize the democratic potential in fiction. At the same time, both authors fail—or are unable—to follow through with their interruptive gestures. As Paul de Man says of pedagogy—“it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true”—the “failure” of Hawthorne and Jacobs to achieve the emancipation of democratic politics remains more faithful to the negative democratic impulse than would be possible in any attempt to substantialize that impulse.<sup>157</sup>

### **Romancing Fantasy: Hawthorne and the Law of Genre**

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s repeated insistence on romance in his prefaces has been the subject of an extensive range of critical attention.<sup>158</sup> Here, however, I am

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>158</sup> For some representative examples, see Richard Chase’s *The American Novel and its Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957); Michael Davitt Bell’s *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Richard H. Brodhead’s *The School of Hawthorne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jonathan Auerbach’s *The Romance of Failure: First-Person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Elissa Greenwald’s *Realism and the Romance: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and American Fiction* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Emily Miller Budick’s *Fiction and Historical Consciousness: The American Romance Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *Nineteenth-Century American Romance: Genre and the Construction of Democratic Culture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996); and

interested in a rather specific concern of the romance genre, namely, its dependence on law to regulate its particular mode of representation. The romance, like any other genre, allows a particular response to the world. As Priscilla Wald suggests, aesthetics and politics ought to be understood as “conjunctive relations,” for “[m]eter, genre, epistemology, and law are related ways of knowing the world, of structuring what it is possible to think and do.”<sup>159</sup> Or, to return to Jameson and the specificity of the romance genre, “Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place.”<sup>160</sup> Romance aims, in the language of Jacques Rancière, to express a democratic aesthetic in its break from conventions of what Hawthorne refers to, generally, as the “Novel.”<sup>161</sup> At the same moment Hawthorne declares romance to be a disruption, he also announces its own laws. Hawthorne’s attempt to produce a genre—the romance—that includes its own surplus resembles Whitman’s impersonal yet totalitarian “I” (both I and not-I) and anticipates Louis Zukofsky’s poetic project to produce a totalizing form, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Yet romance proclaims to account for the surplus—its own miscount—at the same time it admits to the failure of this and leaves itself open to re-invention by and through

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Lloyd Pratt’s *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>159</sup> Priscilla Wald, “Conjunctive Relations,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1.1 (Spring 2013), 17.

<sup>160</sup> Jameson, 91.

<sup>161</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 1.

supplementarity. Romance thus finds itself entangled with a police logic (consensus) and that logic's antagonistic political drive (dissensus).

Nowhere is this more evident than in "The Custom-House," the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne's construction of the romance appears in the midst of his reflections on the political situation at the custom-house.<sup>162</sup> Hawthorne notes, for example, that "[t]he bosom of reform [...] swept him out of office."<sup>163</sup> Hawthorne contrasts this politically-motivated expulsion (by Whigs) with his initial appointment (by Democrats) by disavowing his own political orientation: "The greater part of my officers were Whigs. It was well for their venerable brotherhood, that the new Surveyor was not a politician, and, though a faithful Democrat in principle, neither received nor held his office with any reference to political services."<sup>164</sup> Hawthorne congratulates himself for not being "an active politician," since such activity implies, for Hawthorne, an antagonistic relation counter to the spirit of fraternity.<sup>165</sup> This oscillation—"not a politician" yet "a faithful Democrat in principle"—anticipates the oscillations of romance. But this discussion of politics—as exclusionary and agonistic in an overly restrictive sense—also seems striking for the way in which it describes politics as a police logic, while romance will describe an interruption of such

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<sup>162</sup> See Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12.4 (Summer 1986), 631-653. Bercovitch notes that the main narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* operates within an implicit political ideology and produces dissensus over the status of the literary and historical. The same can be said of "The Custom-House."

<sup>163</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Library of America, 2011), 11.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

regulative norms. Hawthorne's association of politics with power, specifically "the power of inflicting harm," similarly designates mainstream politics as a police order of power and regulation.<sup>166</sup>

My reading of "The Custom-House" thus differs in its emphasis from that of Lauren Berlant's sustained engagement with it (and with Hawthorne more generally) in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. Rather than politics-as-dissensus and politics-as-consensus (police), Berlant foregrounds the double problematic of nationalism and citizenship in her reading of "The Custom-House." For Berlant, Hawthorne's prefatory discussion of his "forced discharge from the federal Custom-House" opens the text "on a hybrid note of personal/national violence and follows through its myriad aftershocks."<sup>167</sup> Hawthorne exemplifies how a citizen-subject must negotiate what Berlant refers to as the "National Symbolic," that is, "the order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the 'law' in which the accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history."<sup>168</sup> While Berlant's interest lies in Hawthorne's "struggle to create a new mode of national identity," my reading foregrounds the political antagonism to the police order in Hawthorne's prefaces. Nationalist discourses name one field in which this antagonism plays itself out.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>167</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3. Given the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, it should be no surprise when Hawthorne introduces into his conception of Romance more explicit nationalist paradigms in the preface to *The Marble Faun*.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 20.

After his discussion of the romance in relation to the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, to which I will soon turn, Hawthorne continues his political distinction in even more explicit terms. Following his dismissal from his position as surveyor, Hawthorne's "figurative self" becomes "a politically dead man," while the "real human being" maintains an optimistic stance.<sup>169</sup> Using the metaphor of the guillotine, he then refers to his tale of Hester Prynne (along with the intended additional stories that were not included) "as the POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR."<sup>170</sup> "The life of the Custom-House," he writes, "lies like a dream behind" him; indeed, the reflections of this introduction were difficult to call forth since the life Hawthorne describes has "cease[d] to be a reality."<sup>171</sup> Hawthorne playfully merges a gothic image—his decapitated self—with what is in many ways an autobiographical introduction, an introduction whose status hovers uneasily between fiction and reality. According to Berlant, Hawthorne uses these figurative images to construct himself "as a literary figure," rather than "as a mortal author" or politician subject to the annihilation of finitude.<sup>172</sup> As "a 'literary figure,' Hawthorne no longer produces literature, but is a production of it, outside of the cycle of life, decay, and death."<sup>173</sup> To extend this claim and shift the focus from temporality to representation, I suggest Hawthorne's introduction in fact posits the fictional construction of reality itself. Given that his life as surveyor seems to him "like a

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<sup>169</sup> Hawthorne, *Scarlet*, 41-42.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>172</sup> Berlant, 185.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

dream,” the romance genre appears to exceed the bounds of the ensuing tale. From the outset, Hawthorne enacts the indistinction between fact and fiction that will constitute the romance (and, arguably, language and the literary) as such. Romance also, from the outset, responds to a violent political injunction (of the Whigs), one that understands the world through stark divisions and antagonisms. The romance, in contrast, delights in muddying such divisions. As such, romance seems to gesture toward an emancipatory politics.<sup>174</sup>

Between the politically-motivated reflections on the custom-house, Hawthorne offers a greater elaboration of his conception of the romance itself that details the emancipatory potential of the genre. He recalls his discovery of the records of his predecessor, Surveyor Pue. These records contain “a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair” with the scarlet letter and Hester Prynne.<sup>175</sup> This “reasonably complete explanation” provides the basis for the story that follows, and Hawthorne insists “that the main facts of that story are authorized and authenticated by the document of Mr. Surveyor Pue.”<sup>176</sup> “The original papers,” Hawthorne continues, “together with the scarlet letter itself,—a most curious relic,—are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them.”<sup>177</sup> This insistence on the historical “authority” and “authenticity” of the

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<sup>174</sup> Though as Berlant’s reading and my own readings that follow suggest, any emancipatory potential in the text remains necessarily bound by the Nationalist Symbolic, or what I call the police order.

<sup>175</sup> Hawthorne, *Scarlet*, 32.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

story registers, perhaps, an anxiety over the contents of the story itself. Hawthorne does little to assuage this perception when he continues to offer an even more detailed elaboration on the relation between the historical/legal documents and his own tale:

I must not be understood as affirming, that, in the *dressing up of the tale*, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the *limits* of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license *as if* the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the *authenticity of the outline*.<sup>178</sup>

The “reasonably complete” version of events in the Surveyor’s hand has now provided Hawthorne merely the “outline” of his own version. In other words, if one does take Hawthorne up on his offer to view the original materials, he has protected himself against charges that his tale fails to correspond with the historical records. That is, Hawthorne protects his tale, in advance, from rigorous expectations or tests of verisimilitude, which becomes necessary due to romance’s engagement with both a mimetic and an “antimimetic mode of representation.”<sup>179</sup>

Hawthorne needs to qualify his conversion of the records into a romance precisely because the operation of conversion into a romance entails a fundamental change. Hawthorne draws on the metaphors of moonlight and firelight to describe the way in which details take on the qualities of romance, as details “so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

<sup>179</sup> Emily Miller Budick, *Engendering Romance: Women Writers and the Hawthorne Tradition 1850-1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 4.

seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect.”<sup>180</sup> The “territory” of the romance becomes the space “between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.”<sup>181</sup> Romance de-substantializes materials and intellectualizes them.<sup>182</sup> The firelight and moonlight work in conjunction in “The Custom-House” to suggest a cumulative effect of shadows, which eliminates any possibility of reading romance as a one-to-one displacement of reality.

While *The Scarlet Letter* contains Hawthorne’s most elaborate introductory note, each of his subsequent three romances—*The House of Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860)—similarly emphasizes the problem of relation, or of verisimilitude, but each also frequently stresses this problem more explicitly in terms of a law. In his preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, for example, Hawthorne notes a central paradox of the romance:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation. If he think fit,

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Hawthorne includes in *The Blithedale Romance* an ironic use of firelight when Silas Foster notes the fleeting nature of the blaze, which the narrator, Miles Coverdale, suggests speaks ambiguously to the literal fire and to the utopian community’s “moral illumination” (55).

also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution.<sup>183</sup>

Here romance finds itself in the contradictory situation of being subject to the laws of art and at the same time professing a certain lawlessness.<sup>184</sup> As Carrie Hyde argues, this passage on the distinction between Romance and the novel argues for “different expectations about representational fidelity (possibility versus probability).”<sup>185</sup> Yet Hawthorne also implies two contradictory orientations inherent in this lawlessness. On the one hand, the romance is lawless in that it claims “a certain latitude,” such that it can exceed or go beyond the rigid confines of the law. On the other hand, the romance seems lawless due to a different excess, that of its sovereign mastery over other forms of fiction. The romance is lawless because, as the sovereign genre, it makes its own laws. Rather than a genre of literature, then, romance becomes the principle of literature as such.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 1.

<sup>184</sup> Evan Carton emphasizes the paradoxical use of these legal metaphors in *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 10-11.

<sup>185</sup> Carrie Hyde, *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 125. Hyde continues to describe how this distinction between the romance and the novel “encode[s] two distinct orders of governance. Romance is liberated from the constraints of referentiality, subject only to the intrinsic laws that pertain to ‘work[s] of art’” (125).

<sup>186</sup> Northrop Frye makes a similar claim when he describes romance as the principle of literature as such in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 30-31. Edgar A. Dryden develops Frye’s claim in *The Form of American Romance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988), xi.

According to Hyde, Hawthorne's definitions exemplify the insufficiency of romance as a generic classification: "Hawthorne's several definitions of 'romance' may leave much to be desired if we treat them as formulations of a distinct genre."<sup>187</sup> "Yet," she continues, "they are incredibly prescient when understood as meditative reflections on the variable political implications that the romantic trope of literary autonomy took on in the turbulent era of citizenship's formative conceptualization."<sup>188</sup> For Hyde, then, romance names not "a genre with recognizable attributes," but "a *theory* of fiction that seeks to isolate its distinguishing feature: its departure from the descriptive regime of the indicative."<sup>189</sup> Later in his preface, Hawthorne insists that the romance resists the "inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism" that aims to bring "his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment."<sup>190</sup> Such criticism, in other words, aims to ossify the romance. For romance to maintain its imaginative freedom, it must maintain a negative relation to "the realities of the moment" and must insist on its lawlessness.

Because romance mixes its materials through an imaginative process, Hawthorne's notion of romance breaks the opening injunction of Jacques

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<sup>187</sup> Hyde, 128.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Though Hyde's reading focuses on Hawthorne in relation to citizenship, her comment on the romance as a figurative way to think through the relation between politics and aesthetics resembles my interests in the political logic of Hawthorne's aesthetic project.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>190</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 3. Counter to Berlant's reading of Hawthorne, Hyde argues, "When we speak of literature as national—or local, regional, hemispheric, or global—we engage in the type of literalistic contextualization that the authorial invocation of 'romance' is meant to forestall. [...] The illocality of romance is fundamental to it" (126).

Derrida's "The Law of Genre": "Genres are not to be mixed."<sup>191</sup> The romance has "a certain latitude," which suggests a mobility counter to rigid generic laws. "And indeed," Edgar A. Dryden argues, "American romance illustrates in a remarkable way the principle of contamination that for Derrida marks the idea of genre. For even the individual texts generically identified" by Hawthorne as romances "seem at the same time to resist confining generic categories and to violate their formal purity by the blurring and crossing of borderlines."<sup>192</sup> Derrida notes the imbrication of genre and law from the outset: "as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity."<sup>193</sup> If the law of genre is to hold, Derrida claims, "There *should be* a trait upon which one could rely in order to decide that a given textual event, a given 'work,' corresponds to a given class (genre, type, mode, form, etc.). And there *should be* a code enabling one to decide questions of class-membership on the basis of this trait."<sup>194</sup> Of course, Derrida goes on to show, in part by following a "supplementary" trait that disturbs genre's lines of demarcation, that no such trait exists in any stable form.

In "Genres as Fields of Knowledge," Wai Chee Dimock remarks on Derrida's critique to emphasize the aporia he locates in genre: "Such border policing [of genre] is an exercise in futility, [Derrida] says, for the law of genre is an impossible law; it contains within itself 'a principle of contamination,' so

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<sup>191</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, in *On Narrative*, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn 1980), 55.

<sup>192</sup> Dryden, ix-x.

<sup>193</sup> Derrida, 57.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, emphasis mine.

much so that the law is honored only in its breach.”<sup>195</sup> For Dimock, “genres are a vexed attempt to deal with material that might or might not fit into that catalog.”<sup>196</sup> Following Derrida and Dimock, the paradox of romance’s lawfulness and lawlessness in Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of Seven Gables* suggests two opposed readings: *either* romance acknowledges the supplementary logic that always exceeds that which would attempt to contain it *or* romance attempts to include the supplement within its own definition. In other words, romance either acknowledges its own contamination or attempts to make that contamination its constitutive principle. This produces a crucial interpretative question of whether romance in fact maintains a democratic gesture in its insistence on the supplement, on the generic miscount. If instead romance attempts to include its own supplementarity, then it becomes another fantasy of totality. Put differently, romance names either “a non-generic genre”—an “antigeneric principle of the equality of all represented subjects”—or a sovereign genre of absolute mastery and totality.<sup>197</sup>

The paradox of romance as a genre meets a second-order paradox given that Hawthorne’s prefaces function as contractual agreements between author and reader. In his reading of *The House of Seven Gables*, a novel “obsessed with law,” Christopher Castiglia argues that “the preface itself takes on a contractual tone, establishing the terms that, if readers agree to them, will enable the romance to be

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<sup>195</sup> Dimock, 1377.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 1378.

<sup>197</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 51, 50.

understood and enjoyed.”<sup>198</sup> That is, the preface offers the reader “rules” of reading a genre that, by Hawthorne’s definition, resists the typical rules of the (realist or sentimental) novel. His appeal to the reader that asks for *The House of Seven Gables* to “be read strictly as a Romance”—since the narrative has “a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex”—thus asks for a reading of the text *as a romance*.<sup>199</sup> The generic conventions of romance for Hawthorne, then, are not only dictated by its subject matter but also by its laws and conventions of reading. For this reason, Rancière’s notion of genre as “defined by the subject represented” must be considered alongside Derrida’s notion of genre as defined by its laws.<sup>200</sup>

Yet the subject of romance—between the actual and the imaginary—remains opaque. Henry James, in his preface to *The American*, emphasizes the difficulty, if not impossibility, of tracing “the dividing-line between the real and the romantic,” which troubles the binaries Hawthorne espouses (actual/imaginary, real/romantic).<sup>201</sup> This division exists in tension with James’s claim that “[t]he only *general* attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all

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<sup>198</sup> Christopher Castiglia, “The Marvelous Queer Interiors of *The House of Seven Gables*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Richard H. Millington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 186. Castiglia continues to note Hawthorne’s more general interest in figures outside of the law (187).

<sup>199</sup> Hawthorne, *House*, 3.

<sup>200</sup> Rancière, 45. As Bonnie Honig’s aforementioned example of the foreigner suggests, the represented subject in itself cannot satisfactorily explain the generic principles, since the foreigner as subject can be read in terms of different genres (e.g., gothic and romance).

<sup>201</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 37.

its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it.”<sup>202</sup> Romance therefore can be characterized both by a division of content and by an experience liberated from such regulative principles. Romance seems, paradoxically, to side with both the police and politics. Indeed, romance seems to make its political articulation—expressing an “antigeneric principle”—by reaffirming a police logic—the laws of art and of reading. Richard Brodhead claims that Hawthorne’s “adherence to an idea of the novel as a strictly mimetic form makes him overlook its essentially fictive nature. Further, his presentation of novel and romance as antitheses implies too clear-cut a division of prose fiction into two distinct camps.”<sup>203</sup> Brodhead then notes that Hawthorne’s “own works exemplify neither genre in a pure form.”<sup>204</sup> Yet Hawthorne seems to be much more playful in his prefaces than Brodhead allows. Rather than merely divide romance from the novel, the imaginary from the actual, Hawthorne repeatedly stresses the mixing of materials and perspectives. That is, Hawthorne establishes and proliferates divisions only to transgress them. The liberatory potential of the romance appears *because of* (rather than *in spite of*) the construction of laws. If Hawthorne desires romance to possess an emancipatory principle, this desire depends on a relation to the laws of art that bound romance. As Jacques Lacan says, “desire is the flip side

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>203</sup> Richard H. Brodhead, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 41.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

of the law.”<sup>205</sup> Subjects are always driven, therefore, to transgress the law, and for Lacan, “without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*.”<sup>206</sup> Hawthorne’s ambiguous definitions of romance emerge, then, out of necessity, for without positing some law, romance cannot maintain the desire for a liberatory experience. Put differently, the reader’s pleasure in generic conventions frequently emerges from the subversion of those conventions. Romance thus sustains a desire for lawlessness and the possibility of transgression (and thus, of *jouissance*) by asserting itself through the language of law.

Hawthorne continues and complicates this theme of the romance as subversion in *The Blithedale Romance*, one of his most challenging texts—in part because of the unreliable, first-person narrator, Miles Coverdale.<sup>207</sup> Hawthorne admits that readers may find in Blithedale “a faint and not very faithful shadowing of Brook Farm,” and he continues to describe the fungible division between fiction and reality: “The Author does not wish to deny, that he had this Community in his mind, and that [...] he has occasionally availed himself of his actual reminiscences, in the hope of giving a more lifelike tint to the fancy-sketch in the following pages.”<sup>208</sup> Hawthorne remains imprecise on what from his

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<sup>205</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Kant with Sade,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 665 [787]. See also Lacan’s *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* for a discussion of desire and the law, especially for the ways in which desire transgresses the law.

<sup>206</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 177.

<sup>207</sup> See Carton for a more thorough engagement with Coverdale’s narration.

<sup>208</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, ed. William E. Cain (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 37.

“reminiscences” can be taken to correspond with reality, for he claims that “his present concern with the Socialist Community is merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives.”<sup>209</sup> Hawthorne’s time at Brook Farm was, he claims, “the most romantic episode of his own life—essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact—and thus offering an available foothold between fiction and reality.”<sup>210</sup> In this concise formulation, “essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact,” Hawthorne approaches an axiomatic articulation of the principles and qualities of romance. The claim of essence (“essentially a day-dream”) shifts to a claim of purity (“entirely fictitious”), so even in its most condensed articulation, romance cannot offer any stable self-presentation. Romance seems, in opposition to the condensation of this formulation, to be on the side of excess, on imaginative proliferation. Hawthorne also disturbs this spatial “foothold” between fact and dream when he notes the characters “are entirely fictitious,” which many of Hawthorne’s readers take to be disingenuous.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 38. For a reading of how this “theater” analogy structures the text itself, see Jennifer Greiman, “The Spectacle of Reform: Theater and Prison in Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance*,” *Democracy’s Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum American Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 157-191.

<sup>210</sup> Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 38.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. For a reading of *Blithedale*’s complicated relation to real events and figures, see Jonathan A. Cook’s “‘One of the Most Gifted Women of the Age’: Zenobia, Margaret Fuller, and de Staël’s *Corinne* in *The Blithedale Romance*,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 28 (Oct. 2004), 35-72.

This tension produced by the attempt to disentangle the dream from fact repeatedly appears in the romantic representation of reality, which does not work in any clearly definable way. At the end of his preface to *The Marble Faun*, for instance, Hawthorne apologizes for “stealing” works of art for the purpose of his story. Hawthorne thus introduces an indistinction, for the reader cannot be certain whether this theft refers to something literal or figurative.<sup>212</sup> He then “restore[s]” the works of art:

He now wishes to restore the above-mentioned beautiful pieces of sculpture to their proper owners, with many thanks, and the avowal of his sincere admiration. What he has said of them in the romance does not partake of the fiction in which they are imbedded, but expresses his genuine opinion, which, he has little doubt, will be found in accordance with that of the Public. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that, while stealing their designs, the Author has not taken a similar liberty with the personal characters of either of these gifted sculptors, his own man of marble being entirely imaginary.<sup>213</sup>

If at the end of *The House of Seven Gables* Hawthorne demands a reading of the text as a romance, here, as in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, the demand becomes more fluid. Hawthorne asks for some parts of the tale to be read as “genuine” while others should be read in terms of romance’s “imaginary” register. As in the other prefaces, Hawthorne makes contrary demands. He asserts regulative, generic principles of the text and its readers at the same time he attests to the liberatory principles of romance. Every preface, as a contract with the reader, breaks its own terms because romance’s liberatory drive cannot adhere to

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<sup>212</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), vii.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

its regulative requirements. Hawthorne's engagement with romance thus produces an indefinite tension between politics and police, one that leaves the status of the romance undecidable and maintains the pleasure of transgression.

### **Forms of Address: Jacobs, Apostrophe, and Generic Antagonisms**

This undecidability emphasizes that politics functions as the structural antagonist to the police, and this antagonism, by definition, cannot come to an end. Just as a text will always exceed its generic conventions and limits, the political force of the miscuit will always exceed the consensus of the police order. To follow the emancipatory force of literature, Harriet Jacobs, similar to Hawthorne and Derrida, betrays the injunction not to mix genres, but she also articulates a negation from within this space of mixed genres that disturbs the logics—and laws—of her text. These logics stem from one of Jacobs's innovations in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: the combination of the slave narrative genre with the conventions of sentimental fiction.<sup>214</sup> Like romance, both generic strategies designate a certain relationship between the fictional representation and the “real” referential content of that representation.

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<sup>214</sup> See Frances Smith Foster, “Resisting *Incidents*,” *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57-75. Foster notes that Jacobs borrowed from a range of conventional forms, including “the novel of seduction, the criminal confessional, the American jeremiad,” and “the slave narrative” (65). See also Valerie Smith, “‘Loopholes of Retreat’: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 212-226. Smith emphasizes that conventions of sentimental literature and of slave narratives offer Jacobs a mode of speech and limit what can be said. Smith uses the literal and figurative images of enclosure within the text as a way of reading this negotiation, in which enclosures provide Jacobs both “prisons and exits” (215).

Jane Tompkins characterizes the American sentimental novels of the nineteenth-century as texts “that make continual and obvious appeals to the reader’s emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality.”<sup>215</sup> Tompkins considers the sentimental novel as “an act of persuasion aimed at defining social reality.”<sup>216</sup> Sentimental fiction also emphasizes the entanglement of gender and genre, for sentimentality frequently gets figured as feminine and as an address to women. Tompkins, for example, declares the sentimental novel’s “chief characteristic” to be “that it is written by, for, and about women.”<sup>217</sup>

These characterizations clearly enable a certain understanding of Jacobs’s *Incidents* as a text written following the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), addressed to women, and meant to intervene in the socio-political debates on race in the U.S.<sup>218</sup> Yet Jacobs also resists sentimentalism when it undermines the singularity of her personal experiences under slavery. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin suggests a rationale for this resistance: “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of

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<sup>215</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 125.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>218</sup> For a reading of Jacobs’s socio-political aims, see Michael Bennett, “Aesthetic Democracy: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs Represent the End(s) of Slavery,” *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement and Antebellum American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 118-148.

secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”<sup>219</sup> Bracketing the implication that there can be “honest” fiction, or the implication that some forms of fiction articulate positions more honestly than other forms, I want to emphasize the way in which sentimentality requires, by definition, a very particular form of emotional appeal that often seems “inhuman.” Counter to the liberal humanist project embedded in sentimental literature (as well as the slave narrative genre), sentimentality often relies on an artificiality that appears to reveal the fictional nature of the “human” that orients liberal humanist thought.<sup>220</sup> To be read in line with a sentimental tradition, that is, Jacobs—a black woman, a former slave, and thus figured as “inhuman” by the dominant ideologies of her time—must shape her representations a particular way, for she has to “humanize” herself through the “inhuman” form of sentimentality. As a genre shaped by its appeal to the reader, sentimental literature explicitly constitutes itself through apostrophe—an address to the reader that interrupts the narrative action. This address assumes, on some level, the possibility of a dialogue between two (human) subjects. Apostrophe also functions as the implicit organizing trope of nineteenth-century slave narratives, which purport to address a readership to explain the inhumanities of slavery and, at the same time, to construct and defend the slave’s own humanity.<sup>221</sup> As a figure that constructs proximity and announces distance, and as

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<sup>219</sup> James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 12.

<sup>220</sup> As Kevin Ohi writes, “‘humanism’ gives us to see the perpetual fading away of the human” (*Dead Letters Sent: Queer Literary Transmission* 177).

<sup>221</sup> These narratives typically require “authorizing” prefaces by prominent abolitionists to “legitimize” their appeals to a white audience.

a figure that attempts to produce consensus even as it stages dissensus, apostrophe will be central in the reading that follows.

In addition to the preface by Jacobs and introduction by Lydia Maria Child, *Incidents* manifests its imbrication with sentimentalism in Jacobs's frequent appeals to her reader.<sup>222</sup> These appeals typically have the effect of addressing a readership and/or engaging with that readership's emotion and sympathy. This engagement serves the double function of persuading the reader of the abolitionist cause (and thus of the inhumanity and perversions of slavery) and of persuading the reader of the slave's participation in the ontological category of the human. In her preface, Jacobs begins with a gesture that ostensibly includes any reader through its general, and universalizing, appeal: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction."<sup>223</sup> Jacobs similarly closes her narrative by reaffirming a general, potentially all-inclusive, audience: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage" (201). This final appeal depends, for its effect, on the reader's familiarity with sentimental conventions, in which the plot ends with marriage. Like Hawthorne's prefaces, these two appeals show Jacobs negotiating two orders; Jacobs navigates both the "reality" of her slave narrative and the persuasive artifice of its sentimental conventions.

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<sup>222</sup> Following critical conventions, I will refer to the main character of *Incidents*, Linda Brent, as Jacobs, but the fictional version of Jacobs should not be conflated in any simple way with Jacobs herself.

<sup>223</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

Such appeals to a general reader recur throughout the text, though at times Jacobs appeals to a more restricted group of her general readership, as when she specifically appeals to sympathy in mothers: “O, what torture to a mother’s heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him [her son, Benjamin]!” (123). This appeal to motherhood and motherly emotion gestures to the fluidity of Jacobs’s appeals, for she continually alters the perceived audience of her text depending on the circumstances being narrated, which perhaps parallels the fact that her narrative, true to its title, presents episodic *incidents* in her life. Yet even in this fluidity, the text manifests a tension, or at least an unstable relation, between an immediately-transparent and communicable address to a generalized audience and an opaque address to a restricted audience. As Carla Kaplan argues, Jacobs represents the reader “as a failed listener [...] which makes any dialogue [...] clearly impossible.”<sup>224</sup> This tension between communicability and incommunicability thus shadows every address, no matter how ostensibly direct and transparent that address appears.

As Saidiya Hartman argues in *Scenes of Subjection*, many of these appeals have as their aim “the seduction of the reader.”<sup>225</sup> Hartman’s reading focuses on chapter X, “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life.” In this chapter, Jacobs refuses Dr. Flint’s sexual advances and “chooses” Mr. Sands as her lover, an act characterized by Jacobs as “something akin to freedom” (55). Jared Sexton notes

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<sup>224</sup> Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>225</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107.

the way Flint's actions represent "the unfulfilled quest for the *hegemony* of the slaveholder, the evolution of his power beyond the naked use of coercion to a more encompassing winning of consent."<sup>226</sup> Consent proves to be one of the central concerns of this chapter, as it underwrites the chapter's attempt to conceptualize "something akin to freedom." According to Hartman, Jacobs manages to "transform the reader's incredulity and resistance into identification and empathy."<sup>227</sup> The excessive number of appeals to the reader in this section perhaps highlights this effort. Jacobs begins by acknowledging the difficulty of this episode in her life: "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could" (53). The explicitly sexual subject matter of the chapter—describing the psycho-sexual violence of slavery and the way it "had made [Jacobs] prematurely knowing" (54)—reveals the paradox in which Jacobs is "simultaneously silenced by the dictates of the Cult of True Womanhood (as well as the literary conventions of the sentimental novel form she's using) and compelled to speak out because of moral obligation."<sup>228</sup> Jacobs's next appeal in the chapter makes explicit her awareness of this problem, as she

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<sup>226</sup> Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 126. This comment emerges out of Sexton's critique of readers who privilege Flint's struggles during *Incidents*. This privilege reproduces and subordinates his psycho-sexual and racial violence against Jacobs.

<sup>227</sup> Hartman, 107.

<sup>228</sup> Joanne M. Braxton and Sharon Zuber, "Silences in Harriet 'Linda Brent' Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, eds. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 151. For Braxton and Zuber, "*Incidents* is, in fact, both in its content and in its form, a complex series of negotiations between speech and silence" (146).

addresses the “happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood,” and appeals to them not to “judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely” (54). By differentiating herself from her audience, Jacobs emphasizes an unbridgeable gap in experiences. Yet her later appeal, “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader” (55), assumes the possibility of a community—or at least of communication—despite her difference.

In her reading of “A Perilous Passage,” Hartman brilliantly shows the way in which Jacobs asserts the slave to be defined by the negation of the will at the same time she asserts that her escape from Flint’s designs derives from an act of her will.<sup>229</sup> In other words, Jacobs “inadvertently reinforces the idea that if determined enough, one can escape violation, thereby implicitly suggesting that submission is to some degree an act of compliance and that utmost resistance establishes the meaning of nonconsent. [...] Thus rather than illustrating the utter negation of consent and the triumph of violence, the event of rape would be taken as the very emblem of willful submission.”<sup>230</sup> For Hartman, Jacobs’s literary negotiation of conventionally understood concepts such as consent produces this paradox of the text. Hartman thus extends Hortense Spillers’ claim that “under a system of enslavement, [...] the customary lexis of sexuality, including ‘reproduction,’ ‘motherhood,’ ‘pleasure,’ and ‘desire’ are thrown into unrelieved crisis.”<sup>231</sup> Jacobs’s narrative attempts to communicate to the interests of readers of

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<sup>229</sup> Hartman, 110.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>231</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in “Culture and Counteremory: The American Connection,” special issue, *diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987), 76.

sentimental novels—largely middle-class white women<sup>232</sup>—yet to communicate to this audience Jacobs must bridge an infinite gap between slave mother and white mothers, whose subjection in a patriarchal society works in very different ways. Kaplan describes these negotiations of the text in terms of a contractual relation between Jacobs and her readers; Jacobs “seeks to create a new black narrative position, one founded in a rejection of both the attestory position of slave narrators and the seductive one typical of white women’s romances. This position aims to avoid being drawn into narrative contracts which can neither grant her freedom nor change her status.”<sup>233</sup> Kaplan’s notion of Jacobs’s aim—“to create a new black narrative position”—supports Hartman’s suggestion that Jacobs engages a discourse of the willful subject.

Yet Jacobs’s new form of “contract” cannot be honored by the text, just as (though for drastically different reasons) Hawthorne’s contracts with his readers cannot find stable articulations. *Incidents’* concern over communicability and its limit often appears during the text’s appeals to the reader’s feeling when such appeals require an impossible reach toward the reader. Chapter XXVIII, “Aunt Nancy,” offers a paradigmatic example of the way in which Jacobs draws attention to—and critiques—the hypocritical sentimental tendency to construct what Hartman calls “empathic identification” where it should be impossible.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Tompkins, 141.

<sup>233</sup> Kaplan, 51.

<sup>234</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “The Position of the Unthought: An Interview by Frank Wilderson, III,” *Qui Parle* 13.2 (Dec. 2003), 184.

Following her Aunt Nancy's death, for example, Jacobs offers a scathing portrayal of Mrs. Flint's false sentimentalism:

Mrs. Flint had rendered her poor foster-sister childless, apparently without any compunctions; and with cruel selfishness had ruined her health by years of incessant, unrequited toil, and broken rest. But now she became very sentimental. I suppose she thought it would be a beautiful illustration of the attachment existing between slaveholder and slave, if the body of her old worn-out servant was buried at her feet. She sent for the clergyman and asked if he had any objection to burying aunt Nancy in the doctor's family burial-place. (146)

The doctor, however, states that Aunt Nancy's family might have an opinion with regard to her burial place (146). With this, Jacobs focuses on the superficiality and self-interest governing Mrs. Flint's ostensibly noble offering: "It had never occurred to Mrs. Flint that slaves could have any feelings" (146). In this passage, Jacobs calls attention to the performativity of sentiment—anticipating, perhaps, Baldwin's critique—and suggests, self-referentially, that sentiments are themselves not free but authorized and possessed. Jacobs's critique of Mrs. Flint's excessively false sentiment also speaks to the potential limits or shortcomings of sentimental fiction.

Perhaps more radical is the way in which Jacobs questions the very use of sentimentalism—even if meant altruistically. That is, Jacobs goes beyond a critique of insidiously performed sentiment to question the very deployment of sentiment in general. In a striking move after she is reunited with her son, Benny, Jacobs appeals to the reader but almost immediately disavows the reader's response to such an appeal: "O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother" (173). By excluding readers so directly,

Jacobs effectively short-circuits the reader's sentimental reaction, for she redirects the affective response from one of sympathetic collusion to one of startled awareness of exclusion. This negation intensifies the impossibility of dialogue and exchange more implicit elsewhere in the text. Such an exclusionary move highlights that an appeal to a reader tends to essentialize readers into categories and to generalize feeling, such as in an appeal to motherhood that assumes all mothers feel the same way by virtue of their being mothers. Jacobs's appeal to the "slave mother" still implies some essentialism in its delimitation of a group of readers, yet the force of her disavowal—"O reader, can you imagine my joy? *No, you cannot*" (173, my emphasis)—introduces an awareness of feeling's subjective particularity that opposes the generalizing tendency of typical reader appeals.

Of course, the qualification that follows Jacobs's disavowal—"unless you have been a slave mother"—undercuts the force of her negation of readerly sympathy by positing a more specific readership of "slave mother[s]" within her more general readership. Yet a recuperative reading of this moment suggests not a return to the conventions of sentimentalism; instead, Jacobs's qualifying "unless you have been a slave mother" softens a blow without removing it. The initial force of "No, you cannot" remains, even if in an abated capacity. It is at this moment of negation that Jacobs asserts her authority over her own narrative, avowing the absolute singularity of her experiences. This movement again returns to Hartman's reading of the will as both negated and affirmed in Jacobs's text.

Jacobs states in her preface, "I have not written *my experiences* in order to attract attention to myself [...]. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of

the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, *suffering what I suffered*, and most of them far worse” (1, my emphasis). Here, at the opening to her narrative, we see Jacobs’s movement from recording *her* experiences to the aim of appealing to, and arousing, the widest audience possible. In other words, Jacobs implies her own sense of self and agency (“my experiences”) only to divest herself of that agency. Given the stated aim in her preface, Jacobs’s qualifying “unless you have been a slave mother” may be an effort to deemphasize Jacobs’s expression of a singular, subjective experience in favor of reasserting her desire to include and arouse her readers to action. Jacobs also constitutes the category of “slave mother” denied by figures like Mrs. Flint, who does not consider black women to be included in her conception of the human. Jacobs’s experiences, according to the preface, are not presented for the sake of expressing Jacobs’s own suffering but are a means to accomplish socio-political change.

In addition to this socio-political imperative, Jacobs aims to (re)educate her readers by subverting their generic expectations. While sentimentalism clearly offers Jacobs a useful means to generalize her singular experiences in an effort to affect and incite her readers, moments such as her disavowal of the reader’s participation and sympathy, her adamant “No, you cannot,” speak to the fact that the genres in which Jacobs participates do not—cannot—erase the force of her enunciation, an enunciation that is ungraspable in its presentation of a singular, constitutively divided, subjective experience. Since the generalization required by sentimental literature potentially “trivializes the complexity of [Jacobs’s]

situation,” Jacobs’s greater accomplishment lies in the way her “no” subverts these conventions and speaks to the text’s aesthetic education of its readers.<sup>235</sup> Paul de Man notes that “the exchange between form and sensory experience” functions as the principle of aesthetic education as conceptualized by Friedrich Schiller.<sup>236</sup> At stake in this synthesis is the status of the human, which is also a primary concern in Jacobs’s text, especially given the tension in its generic presentation of her experiences. According to de Man,

The plea for the possibility and the necessity of this synthesis is made in the name of an empirical concept, which is that of humanity, of the human, which is used then as a principle of closure. The human, the needs of the human, the necessities of the human are absolute and are not open to critical attack. Because the category of the human is absolute, and because the human would be divided, or would be reduced to nothing if this encounter between the two drives that make it up is not allowed to take place, for that reason a synthesis has to be found. It is dictated, it is forced upon us, by the concept of the human itself.<sup>237</sup>

Jacobs’s “no” refuses synthesis, refuses the “humanizing” gesture insofar as that gesture requires the black subject to figure itself according to the norms dictated by white subjectivity. With her negation, Jacobs “underscores the inability of her form adequately to capture her experience.”<sup>238</sup> Yet even as Jacobs refuses this particular iteration of aesthetic ideology that joins form and experience, her “no” can also be understood in the aesthetic ideology of I.A. Richards, who sees the

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<sup>235</sup> Smith, 219.

<sup>236</sup> Paul de Man, “Kant and Schiller,” *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 149. See also Lee Edelman’s “Learning Nothing: *Bad Education*” for a reading of Schiller’s aesthetic ideology through de Man that shows how queerness introduces “a critical gap within the logic of the aesthetic itself” (130).

<sup>237</sup> De Man, 150.

<sup>238</sup> Smith, 222.

value of literature in its ability to provide the “means of ordering our minds.”<sup>239</sup> Jacobs’s “no” can be understood both as a disordering and reordering of reader expectations; that is, this “no” figures a disruptive *jouissance* that must be disavowed in the name of meaning. Just as politics inevitably founds a new police order, Jacobs’s interruption within her text, her production of dissensus, must be amalgamated to a new conception of the reader and of the human as such. I argue, however, that any new conception of the human from Jacobs’s text requires a substantialization of the negativity of the “no” that disturbs so abruptly the text’s aim to communicate to its reader. This substantialization necessarily betrays the force of the negation.

A critique of the human lies at the center of Hartman’s work as well, and in her interview with Frank Wilderson, III, Hartman reiterates the work in *Scenes of Subjection* in her critique of “empathic identification” to get at the paradoxical negotiations required because of normative categories:

Because it just seems that every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration, regardless of whether it was a leftist narrative of political agency—the slave stepping into someone else’s shoes and then becoming a political agent—or whether it was about being able to unveil the slave’s humanity by actually finding oneself in that position.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1930), 349. Richards focuses specifically in this passage on reading poetry, but his claims can be generalized to other literary practices and forms.

<sup>240</sup> Hartman, “The Position of the Unthought,” 184.

For Hartman, “trying to fit into the other’s shoes becomes the very possibility of narration.”<sup>241</sup> This insight guides Hartman’s brief rereading of *Incidents* in the interview:

In the chapter “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life,” the question for Jacobs is how she can tell her story in a way that’s going to solicit her white readership when she has to efface her very condition in order to make that story intelligible to them. I look at this moment as a kind of a vortex in Jacobs’ narrative, where in order to fashion herself as a desiring subject, she has to deny the very violence, which elsewhere she said defines her position as a slave: her status as a thing and the negation of her will.<sup>242</sup>

Jacobs’s “no,” I argue, offers a moment in the text when Jacobs does not engage in this disavowal of the violence of subjection required by the sentimental conventions. In this moment, Jacobs refuses “to fit into the other’s shoes.” Yet at the same time, Jacobs’s “no” asserts a will that slavery expressly denies her. In this way, her negation aligns with a guiding principle of slave narratives to assert the singularity of experience as a slave. For Hartman (and Wilderson), “negation is the captive’s central possibility for action,” which leads to “the paradox of agency” for these subjects-as-objects, and as Hartman argues, “very few political narratives [...] can account for that.”<sup>243</sup> In other words, Jacobs’s “no” can be understood analogously to the notions of will and consent in Hartman’s reading of “A Perilous Passage.” Given Rancière’s framework, however, Jacobs’s “no” also articulates the political interruption of the text’s police logics (of sentimental and slave narrative conventions that demand sympathy and intelligibility). It

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-7.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

acknowledges the unaccountability of her experiences. At the same time, this political interruption can be reorganized within liberal humanism's alignment of freedom with the will. Jacobs's "no" can be read as an expression of a self speaking from the position of the voided subject. There is, in other words, a risk of substantializing the void in an "integrationist" framework that regulates its force of dissensus.<sup>244</sup> Even given this reorganization, the text can only uneasily recover from this negative moment. Jacobs thus reveals in an exemplary way the structural antagonism of democratic aesthetics, which emerge through a moment of dissensus that must be left behind or appropriated in the name of consensus, of the meaning-making principles of narrative and intelligibility.

#### **A Note on Historical Method**

In his introduction to Rancière's *Mute Speech*, Gabriel Rockhill discusses the idiosyncratic historical project of Rancière's text. According to Rockhill, "one of the fundamental theses of" *Mute Speech* is the claim that "history is not composed of dramatic breaks, and the rhetoric of discursive blocks and cataclysmic events should be jettisoned in favor of a more refined mapping of the diverse strata and tensions of history."<sup>245</sup> During his interview with Abraham Geil, Rancière

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 184-185.

<sup>245</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass—The Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2. Rockhill here sets *Mute Speech* against Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*. This claim about Foucault's historical understanding has by now become a cliché, one that does a certain disservice to Foucault's thought, especially in his lectures. See, for example, Foucault's "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

describes his own critical practice in comparable terms of repetition and displacement:

[W]e are always taking up and taking up again from the presentation of things that already exists, but what is important is the possibility of making little shifts. My practice of repetition is precisely a practice of displacement. Let's say you have one sentence, which you can phrase in different ways, and from the initial phrasing to the provisional last phrasing you provoke a kind of displacement in the way in which people can read it and understand it. So I think all my practice has been a matter of locating myself in the language of others and, in a way, paraphrasing it. But paraphrasing it up to the point where suddenly something new, something other, something else appears in those phrases. This does not mean making the true meaning emerge but that the very way of thinking of the relation between words and what they tell may have shifted. So basically I've always (well, perhaps not always, but for a long time) been against all ideas of a new beginning, starting from scratch, et cetera. No, I think we always start from some definite knots of the visibility and intelligibility of things. You start from there and try very slowly in the same moment to make an entirely different sense of the same sentences, arguments, and narratives.<sup>246</sup>

Although Rancière—consistent with his disavowals of psychoanalysis elsewhere—excludes unintelligibility by affirming “definite knots of the visibility and intelligibility of things,” he emphasizes small-scale movements and operations that undermine the notion of grand-scale epistemic breaks. While my introduction makes the claim that the unintelligibility of the psycho-affective must supplement Rancière's thinking, Rancière's repositioning of events as that which appear through small-scale interruptions remains crucial. In Rockhill's reading, “Rather than thinking history in terms of a sense of cataclysmic breaks or a

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<sup>246</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Writing, Repetition, Displacement: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” interview by Abraham Geil, in *Jacques Rancière and the Novel*, ed. Timothy Bewes, special issue, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 47.2 (Summer 2014), 305.

continuous trajectory, [Rancière] maps out the competing relationships between artistic regimes: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of arts, and the aesthetic regime of art.”<sup>247</sup> In the “modern” era—for Rancière, this names the era that begins in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century with the inauguration of aesthetic philosophy and the “invention” of “literature” in the sense we understand it today—all three of these regimes “continue to be operative.”<sup>248</sup> *Mute Speech* then takes as its task the tracing of different approaches to the contradictions of literature between representative and aesthetic/expressive regimes, which structure literature in the modern sense of that term. In each chapter of the book, Rancière shows how the repetition and reappearance of these contradictions structure literary history. Rather than divisions—between, for example, romanticism and modernism—*Mute Speech* reads literary history as a series of repetitions and displacements.<sup>249</sup>

Rancière “has described his project in terms of ‘an archeology [that is] more open to the event than Foucault’s archeology, but without the messianism found in Benjamin.’”<sup>250</sup> In the readings of the following chapters, the authors and texts replay the struggle between consensus and dissensus, inheriting the legacy of writers such as Hawthorne and Jacobs. In each instance, the “event” names the

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<sup>247</sup> Rockhill, 7.

<sup>248</sup> Rockhill, 7.

<sup>249</sup> Toward the close of *Mute Speech*, for example, Paul Valéry is shown to reproduce Hegel’s response to the contradiction between representation and expression by drawing a division and thus closing off the possibilities of art. Rancière’s literary historical narrative is thus neither continuous nor progressive (169-170).

<sup>250</sup> Rockhill, 7; Rancière qtd. in Rockhill, 7.

political interruption, but this interruption brings no messianic promise. That is, there can be no “achievement” of democracy, for such an achievement would necessarily require a consensus that betrays the very democratic principles of dissensus and anarchy that constitute it.

With the reconfiguration of ancient democratic principles in the constitution of the United States, the founders inaugurated a specific set of irresolvable paradoxes or problems that persist to this day. As discussed in the introduction, democracy names the problem of conceptualizing “the people,” or “the common,” as well as the “rule” of, by, and for the *demos*. Implicit in these terminological problems are problems of equality—not just as an axiom or form but as an expression—and of representation. One of the most famous lines from Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” makes these problems explicit: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>251</sup> Governments, for Jefferson (following John Locke, among others), are instituted “to secure these rights.”<sup>252</sup> Of course, as should be all too apparent, governments serve the opposite purpose (though in very different ways for different parts of the population): to police, or restrict, rights.<sup>253</sup> That these rights also applied, in

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<sup>251</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Representative Selections* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 3.

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

<sup>253</sup> For a discussion of responses to the exclusionary principles of the “official stories” of the U.S. government’s nationalist paradigm, see Priscilla Wald,

Jefferson's time, to a select few in the nascent country was not a contradiction from the perspective of a white, heteropatriarchal and land-holding elite, for whom "men" worked self-referentially. Yet the repetition and re-appropriation of these lines for many resistance movements stresses the way in which the enunciation always exceeds and differs from the enunciating subject.<sup>254</sup> Such repetitions strive to produce dissensual disagreements to reveal the inequality inherent in Jefferson's articulation of equality. *Against Form* refers to earlier moments in U.S. history throughout the chapters to stress the historicity of democracy's internal struggle between consensus and democratic anarchy.

History—and historicism—is itself a generic structure which works within and through the Symbolic order of language. *Against Form* assumes history to name a narrative process by which history as such—the unintelligible Real—is rendered intelligible by the Symbolic order of language and representation more generally. That is, history's textual or linguistic materiality produces sense out of history's Real materiality. This Symbolic register in which historicist work operates tends to produce "narrative as the constant movement of and toward intelligibility."<sup>255</sup> Hawthorne and Jacobs both participate in such a historical narrative of democratic thought in the U.S. and disturb the continuity and

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*Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>254</sup> For some prominent examples of this redeployment, see Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 298, and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 169-170.

<sup>255</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 152.

intelligibility such a narrative assumes. Hawthorne and Jacobs figure two interruptive moments that participate in and reorient the figuration of democratic politics, thereby challenging consensus democracy's sense-making project in the name of the sense-less force of equality. In the following chapters, I turn to additional moments of interruption that disturb the Symbolic narratives of history, which presume meaningful and determinist causality rather than meaningless contingency. Though I will address texts associated with modernism and postmodernism, among other literary movements and periods, I avoid the use of such terms as restrictive periodizing concepts. While such periodization certainly serves practical aims, it also obscures the repetitive logic of historical movements and logical contradictions, in which "we are always taking up and taking up again from the presentation of things that already exists."<sup>256</sup> Periodizing concepts risk insisting on breaks where no such divisions can be—or ought to be—maintained.<sup>257</sup>

The negative democratic impulse therefore figures an ironic disturbance in the order of things. As Kevin Newmark argues, following Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, irony names "that which always befalls on occasion—in other words, that which can happen only without its having been anticipated, predicted,

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<sup>256</sup> Rancière, "Writing, Repetition, Displacement," 305. Gabriel Rockhill develops Rancière's critique of periodization and of modernism in particular in "Modernism as a Misnomer: Godard's Archeology of the Image," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy/Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* 18.2 (2010), 107-129.

<sup>257</sup> Fredric Jameson's work perhaps serves as the paradigm for negotiating this model of historical thought. For example, see *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

or calculated in advance of its own random occurrence and effects.”<sup>258</sup> “Irony, on occasion and by accident,” Newmark continues, “is historical because it interrupts the reign of a formal causality that would otherwise be machinelike in its imperviousness to anything other than its own predetermined and crushing movement.”<sup>259</sup> *Against Form* tracks several of these “accidents,” these “occasions,” in which the democratic irruption of equality disfigures—at the same time it figures—the normative historical narrative of consensus democracy in the United States, a narrative that too often assumes an “integrationist” frame, a horizon of inclusivity as its impossible *telos*.

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<sup>258</sup> Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 2:

### The Negative Democratic Impulse and the Axiom of Equality

The paradox – and a fearful paradox it is – is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past – one's history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963, 81.

The stories of the people or their “history” had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence. If the people had not retold the stories, or if the stories had somehow been lost, then the people were lost; the ancestors' spirits were summoned by the stories. This man Marx had understood that the stories or “histories” are sacred; that within “history” reside relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice.

No matter what you or anyone else did, Marx said, history would catch up with you; it was inevitable, it was relentless. The turning, the changing, were inevitable.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 1991, 315-316.

“To rule forever,” continues the Chinaman, later, “it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call...Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em,— 'tis the first stroke.— All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation.”

Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 1997, 615.

## An Other Democracy

In this chapter, I return to the axiom of equality before turning, in the final two chapters, to the psycho-affective dimensions of equality, as articulated in the introduction. The negative democratic impulse names in more explicit terms—and against various positive notions—what I take to be the fundamental logic of democracy: the unwieldy excess of the *demos* that articulates the constitutive division of the “community” it names and the ungrounded, illegitimate rule of the *cracy*. This chapter considers a constellation of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century writers, all of whom articulate some aspect of the negative democratic impulse. In the introduction, the negative democratic impulse was described as democracy’s death drive, but it could also be understood, via analogy, according to what Walter Benjamin calls the “destructive character.”<sup>260</sup> According to Benjamin, “The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away.”<sup>261</sup> The destructive character does not “make room” for something else: “The destructive character does his work; the only work he avoids is creative.”<sup>262</sup> The destructive character names a destructive drive that perpetually annihilates all before it.

Benjamin’s ensuing claim that the destructive character’s “need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred” suggests something crucial as well.<sup>263</sup> Interpretations of the negative or of the destructive often reduce these

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<sup>260</sup> Benjamin, “The Destructive Character,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927-1934 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 541-542.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

terms to their pejorative: negative or destructive as “bad.” This reveals a fundamental misunderstanding. The destructive character for Benjamin is beyond good and evil, since such moral or ethical value positions are constructed and imposed from an external, transcendental position. The destructive character opens the future at the same time it opens the past. As Benjamin states, “The destructive character sees nothing permanent.”<sup>264</sup> The negative democratic impulse resembles the destructive character because it directly opposes any instituted form of government and transcendental regulatory operations with the pretense to order and to maintain that order. Against the positive and productive conceptions of democracy and of the democratic, the negative democratic impulse resists form and formalization. For a positive conception of the *demos*, no matter how inclusive, will always depend on a logic of exclusion. The negative democratic impulse continually challenges any delineation of the *demos* that includes some but not others. In other words, this impulse equalizes in its destructive force.<sup>265</sup> The negative democratic impulse opens the democratic, but not for any predetermined utopian future.

The three main texts in this chapter show the imbrication of the negative democratic impulse and history as they challenge the concept of history through archaeologies and genealogies of the early United States, calling into question its origin, which is particularly important for discourses on U.S. democracy. As Cynthia Chase argues, for example, the judicial system in the U.S. must

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>265</sup> As discussed in the introduction, this egalitarianism is not simply numerical or formal, as Rancière describes, but also qualitative.

repeatedly return to the Constitution and to the “Founding Fathers.”<sup>266</sup> Valerie Babb argues for a continuum, or repetition, of such obsession with origins in the U.S., as she articulates in her discussion of early American documents, “Part of the goal of early writing was to envision a community where none naturally occurred. Origins narratives were one means of unifying polyglot Europeans of different ethnicities into a single white ‘race’ whose ‘divine destiny’ included land acquisition through Native American removal and economic development based on African enslavement.”<sup>267</sup> The fabrication of an originary authority takes place to regulate the contemporary existence of the society it supposedly inaugurated. Questioning the privileged status of the origin emerges as a common theme in works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), for example, describes this restrictive logic of the origin metaphorically as the coincidence between birth and death. The novel begins with Hedvig Volkbein giving birth to a son, Felix, and then dying: “she named him Felix, thrust him from her, and died.”<sup>268</sup> Felix’s supposedly aristocratic lineage also depends on a fabrication that is taken for truth over the course of time; his status as baron relies on “a coat of arms that he had no right to and a list of progenitors [...] who had

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<sup>266</sup> Cynthia Chase, “Deconstruction as the Possibility of Justice: The Critical Function of the Concept of Democracy,” *Cardozo Law Review* 11, issue 5-6 (1990), 1719-1722. This statement perhaps needs revision now, given that the Trump administration persistently disregards the Constitution in the endless stream of illegal executive orders.

<sup>267</sup> Babb, Valerie, “‘E Pluribus Unum?’ The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison’s ‘A Mercy,’” *MELUS* 36.2, Spec. issue: Toni Morrison: New Directions (Summer 2011), 150.

<sup>268</sup> Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), 3.

never existed.”<sup>269</sup> *Nightwood* thus dramatizes both the force and illusory nature of the origin.

Beginning with Louis Zukofsky, and then continuing to the work of Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison, this chapter will discuss the articulation of the negative democratic impulse in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. Any project such as this ends up proposing or creating a tradition or canon, but the aim here is to emphasize a constellation of ideas that develop across the century through a variety of voices. Zukofsky, for example, engages with one of the fundamental paradoxes of democracy, which could be described as the tension between an excessive content and a regulating form, between the democratic “wanderings of the orphaned letter” and the restriction of such movement under an ordering principle.<sup>270</sup> Zukofsky’s reputation as a formalist perhaps obscures his thinking of the negative democratic impulse, yet his redeployment of form and formalism in his theory of “objectification” cannot erase the excessive force of the negative that produces the need for “objectification.” Zukofsky inherits Walt Whitman’s desire in “Song of Myself” to “contain multitudes,” while at the same time disavowing the “I” as form of containment.<sup>271</sup> In its place Zukofsky develops a theory that privileges the products of thought over any single producer of thought. Despite Zukofsky’s formalism, this theory allows for a potential privileging of the content of a statement over the enunciating subject, though ultimately he re-instantiates

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>270</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 95.

<sup>271</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 87.

the subject as the form of the poem. Nevertheless, Zukofsky points to the value of the excessive statement—what Jacques Rancière refers to as “mute and loquacious speech”—over the speaker.<sup>272</sup> This challenge makes possible a thinking of the community named by the *demos* not bound by the restriction of the “I.” Zukofsky, as I will argue, ultimately fails to extend his critique of the subject to critiques of the larger structures of which the subject forms as a part. As a result, his epic poem, “A” (1928-1974), trembles between the contradictory impulses of a democratic excess and an institution of regulating order.

While Zukofsky empties the subject yet fails to follow through with this gesture for larger organizational logics, Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison include critiques of the subject, but they also challenge the very privilege of rationality and order on which system, form, and structure depend; while Zukofsky stages the contradictory impulses of the negative democratic and the positive institution of democracy, Pynchon and Morrison produce works whose formal projects strive for coincidence with their excessive content. For Pynchon in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), form’s presumption to totality and regulation is ultimately empty. Pynchon repeatedly stresses the ungrounded nature of such ruling logics and in doing so exposes the problems of the *cracy* of democracy. If Pynchon empties totality and challenges the sovereignty of its rule, Morrison, in *A Mercy* (2008), offers an example of the negative democratic operation. Morrison’s text emphasizes a radical openness that resists the restriction imposed by any

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<sup>272</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 97.

effort of organization. Pynchon and Morrison argue that democracy-as-form necessarily betrays its constitutive figural excess.

These authors collectively represent part of a genealogy in American literature that allows for the thinking of the negative democratic impulse. The shift from Zukofsky, who fails to follow through with his negative democratic gesture, to Pynchon and Morrison suggests perhaps a progressive movement governed by the logic of the line. Yet democracy entails a series of problems, and each author in this chapter—and in this dissertation—confronts some aspects of these problems in a particular configuration.<sup>273</sup> This draws attention to a problem of narrative and of history. Each text in this chapter takes as part of its subject the movement of history, and each text resists an understanding of history according to the logic of the line or of a Hegelian teleological circle. Positive conceptions of democracy and the institution of democratic rule depend on narratives of self-definition that posit an origin and end, and in order to resist such conceptions of democracy—conceptions that disavow the democratic—this chapter will reveal the ungrounded nature of such claims.

### **The Politics of “A”: The Indeterminate *Demos* and the Closure of Formalism**

Louis Zukofsky’s “A” resembles in many ways the sprawling epic poems of his contemporaries, notably Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, yet perhaps even more so than these other epics, “A” presents a particularly difficult problem of characterization.

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<sup>273</sup> In this way, the chapter resonates with the historical dimension of Rancière’s project in *Mute Speech*, wherein each author—Flaubert, Mallarmé, Proust, Valéry—responds differently to the contradiction of literature instead of representing part of a simple chronology.

One reason for this difficulty is the translation of autobiographical experience into the text of the poem itself. Zukofsky frequently referred to “A” as a “poem of a life,” and he envisioned his project as a direct response to the poetry—especially the *Cantos* of Pound—written by those poets slightly, but significantly, older than him.<sup>274</sup> Zukofsky’s early letters to Pound on “A” reveal his awareness of his belatedness to a poetic tradition inaugurated by the older poet:

The only things that might possibly save me would be the objective evaluation of my own experience, an indigenous emotion controlling a versification which would (possibly) be my own and a natural ability (or perverseness) for wrenching English so that (again, *possibly*) it might attain a diction of distinction not you, or Eliot, or Bill [William Carlos Williams], or anyone before me.”<sup>275</sup>

As Barry Ahearn notes in his introduction to “A”, “The author of ‘A’ would thus be as much the subject of the poem as anything else.”<sup>276</sup> The twenty-four sections of “A” reflect the periods in which they were written, as well as the events of Zukofsky’s life during those periods. They also cover a range of styles, from traditional sonnets to free verse, as well as a range of forms beyond poetry, including a drama (“A”-21) and a musical score (“A”-24). The earlier sections—“A”-1 (1928) through “A”-9 (First half) (1938-1940)—reflect Zukofsky’s more youthful experiences and interest in the work of Henry Adams, as well as his political activism and engagement with the work of Karl Marx. “A”-9 (Second half) (1948-1950), begun after a lengthy gap in time, shifts to a more personal, less overtly political tone, by foregrounding the work of Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics*

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<sup>274</sup> Scroggins, 3.

<sup>275</sup> Zukofsky, qtd. in Barry Ahearn’s introduction to “A”, ix.

<sup>276</sup> Ahearn, Introduction to “A”, ix.

and Zukofsky's own family life. "A" ends with a more explicit incorporation of Zukofsky's family, as "A"-24 presents a masque with music adapted and paired with Zukofsky's texts as arranged by Celia, Zukofsky's wife. Like Pound's *Cantos*, Zukofsky's "A" incorporates an overwhelming number and variety of allusions and materials, yet unlike the *Cantos*, "A" is marked more heavily by the personal, autobiographical elements, as well as by Zukofsky's particular poetic methodology.

In a 26 March 1953 letter to Lorine Niedecker, Zukofsky describes his method in "A": "Point is, tho, I start from a sitoation – the performance at Carnegie & lead to a world back – forward."<sup>277</sup> This statement gestures to a theory of poetics and of history that depends not on a continuist, teleological model, but on the subjective and contingent decision of a starting point.<sup>278</sup> This is evident from the outset of "A"-1, in which the Good Friday performance on 5 April 1928 of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at Carnegie Hall— "A / Round of fiddles playing Bach"—parallels in the poem the Good Friday performance conducted by Bach on 15 April 1729 in Leipzig.<sup>279</sup> The poem thus emphasizes historical recurrences. The opening "A / Round" puns on the notion of the

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<sup>277</sup> Zukofsky, qtd. in Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>278</sup> An avid reader of Emerson, Whitman, Karl Marx, and Henry Adams, Zukofsky follows a tradition of thinking history in terms of subjective qualities rather than as an objective science.

<sup>279</sup> Louis Zukofsky, "A"-1, "A" (New York: New Directions, 2011), 1-5. Hereafter cited in the text. The date of the original performance has since changed. Scholars now believe the piece was performed two years earlier, in 1727. See Robin A. Leaver, "St Matthew Passion," *Oxford Composer Companions: J. S. Bach*, ed. Malcolm Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), 430.

iteration of a single round as well as the reiteration and circularity implied by “around.” From this performance at Carnegie Hall, the entirety of “A” could be said to be generated. Zukofsky speaks to this in his foreword to “A” 1-12: “Bach is a theme all thru it, the music first heard in 1928 affecting the recurrences or changes as may be of the story or history.”<sup>280</sup> The historical recurrence of the two performances leads to other recurrences that metastasize throughout the epic poem. Zukofsky’s claim to begin with a “sitooation” and then move forward and backward from that point entails a comparative approach, since the implication then emerges that any given situation is not complete in itself but must be supplemented by other events. The situation, therefore, is merely a relatively arbitrary point of beginning.

This opening segment of “A” also announces one of Zukofsky’s favored methods of construction throughout the epic: parataxis.<sup>281</sup> Through parataxis, Zukofsky juxtaposes simple sentences and phrases, but he also integrates a more generalized use of parataxis in the poem by placing scenes side by side.

Zukofsky’s opening description of the audience of the debut of Bach’s *St.*

*Matthew Passion* uses parataxis to disrupt meaning: “Dead century, where are your motley / Country people in Leipzig, / Easter, / Matronly flounces, starched, heaving, / Cheeks of the patrons of Leipzig” (“A”-1, 1). “Easter” designates the

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<sup>280</sup> Zukofsky, Foreword to “A” 1-12, *Prepositions +*, 228.

<sup>281</sup> Parataxis literally means “a placing side by side” (OED). In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams characterizes a “paratactic style” as “one in which the members within a sentence, or else a sequence of complete sentences, are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the noncommittal connective ‘and’” (384).

time of year, but it also complicates the logic of the lines by operating as an ambiguous hinge between the lines that precede and follow it. The piling on of adjectives—“starched, heaving”—also produces an ambiguous meaning, given that these terms might be modifying either “Matronly flounces” or “Cheeks of the patrons of Leipzig.” Zukofsky’s compressed style therefore produces various difficulties in reading. This example of parataxis also takes place during an example of more generalized parataxis in the poem’s opening section. In “A”-1, phrases from the *St. Matthew Passion* break up the description of its contemporary performance at Carnegie Hall, which then shifts to a description of the audience—“Black full dress of the audience”—and of Bach’s contemporary scene—“Dead century, where are your motley / Country people in Leipzig” (“A”-1, 1). Zukofsky’s extended use of parataxis signals one of the poem’s most consistently democratic gestures.<sup>282</sup> While metaphor, a rhetorical figure, follows a logic of production or generation,<sup>283</sup> parataxis, a grammatical figure, disturbs and levels the conventional hierarchies of syntax to re-order the logical structure of syntax. In Rancièrian terms, parataxis disrupts the distribution of the sensible, prompting a redistribution of the sensible, which alters what can be perceived and known. Parataxis, in this destructive gesture, gestures toward the production of equality, yet this is a negative production: by erasing or suspending certain

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<sup>282</sup> Jennison generalizes Zukofsky’s parataxis to a principle of what she refers to as his anti-capitalist poetics. See *The Zukofsky Era*, 3-5.

<sup>283</sup> I am simplifying the logic of metaphor here. For Paul de Man, in “Semiology and Rhetoric,” which opens *Allegories of Reading*, metaphor in Proust depends on the grammatical figure of metonymy. For Jacques Derrida, in “White Mythology,” metaphor depends on an initial catachresis.

ordering principles of syntax, parataxis opens a space in language with an egalitarian destruction.<sup>284</sup>

A methodology of parataxis that juxtaposes scenes privileges the position of the subject, but for Zukofsky the subject does not exist outside of its relations in, and construction by, history. Zukofsky's thinking of the subject depends in part on his reading of Marx. In *The Zukofsky Era*, Ruth Jennison signals the importance of Marx's notion of the concrete for Zukofsky and argues that "Marx inverts the usual understanding of concreteness; it is not a physical property of the object, but the way that we perceive that object's many, 'diverse' social histories."<sup>285</sup> For Marx, "The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse."<sup>286</sup> Such a thinking removes the privileged status of the subject, since the subject becomes a concrete object among other concrete objects. While Jennison argues for a reading of Zukofsky's poetic statements in the "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* along the lines of Marx's comparative methodology, others, such as Mark Scroggins, supplement Marx with Henry Adams. Zukofsky extracts from Adams the notion of a "contemporary 'multiplicity'" that emerges in the wake of "the 'unity' of the mind in a

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<sup>284</sup> Another negative figure would be irony, which will be foregrounded in chapter three's discussion of the poetry of Ocean Vuong. De Man shows the necessity of irony for generative production, but he also stresses irony as an essentially negative figure, especially in "The Concept of Irony." Both parataxis and irony are interruptive figures.

<sup>285</sup> Jennison, 32. See also Marx's *Grundrisse*, 100-101.

<sup>286</sup> *Grundrisse*, 101. Here Marx also critiques the Hegelian attempt to move from the abstract to the concrete.

‘theological’ age.”<sup>287</sup> Adams’s formulation, contra Marx, reveals an anxiety about the status of the subject in the face of a disseminating multiplicity. Following this inheritance of Marx’s and Adams’s challenge to the subject, Zukofsky confronts the problem of conceptualizing a formal unity in his poetic theory. The emergence of Zukofsky’s theory of “objectification” emphasizes his articulation of the subject not as autonomous but as a multiplicity of relations.

Zukofsky’s development of “objectification” emerges as an amalgamation of voices, ideas, and circumstances; that is, as a contingent fact of history. The contingent history of “Objectivist” poetics therefore reflects the proposed content of the theory itself. In October 1930, Zukofsky received a letter from Harriet Monroe—who had been persuaded to contact Zukofsky by Ezra Pound—with an offer to edit an issue of *Poetry* early in 1931, and this opportunity inaugurated Zukofsky’s formulation of “Objectivist” poetics.<sup>288</sup> Monroe’s primary condition for Zukofsky was that he introduce himself and his fellow poets as a “new group,” a new “ism,” of which Pound led Monroe to believe Zukofsky was a part.<sup>289</sup> Of course, no such group existed.<sup>290</sup> The “Objectivist” phenomenon offers an odd example of the poetic group in that Zukofsky formulated “Objectivist” poetics seemingly without any contribution from those poets published in the

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<sup>287</sup> Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), 41.

<sup>288</sup> Scroggins, 103-4.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>290</sup> In their correspondence, Pound recognizes the limits of poetic groups or movements—“always 60% of group duds”—yet he suggests the marketing potential and literary value of the group outweighs its limits and shortcomings (*Pound/Zukofsky* 14).

“Objectivist” issue of *Poetry*.<sup>291</sup> In a brief letter to Albert and Mildred Lewin on 4 February 1931, for example, Charles Reznikoff amusingly remarks, “There is a learned article about my verse in *Poetry* for this month from which I learn that I am ‘an objectivist’” (156).<sup>292</sup> Similarly, George Oppen reflects on Zukofsky’s formulation in a 15 February 1961 letter to Mary Ellen Solt, “But it should be clear that the theory of objectivism—and there was one—was Zukofsky’s.”<sup>293</sup> Zukofsky’s “Objectivist” poetics did not announce an actual, coherent poetic group or movement; rather, the “group,” if such a designation is justified, only formed in the years following *Poetry*’s “Objectivist” issue.<sup>294</sup> While the letters of Reznikoff and Oppen suggest a pure origin for “Objectivist” poetry in Zukofsky, the contingency of Zukofsky’s role in producing the special issue of *Poetry* undercuts their *a posteriori* claims. *Poetry*’s “Objectivist” issue gestures toward a cohesive poetic movement, of which the movement’s ostensible members—such as Reznikoff and Oppen—seem to have no knowledge before seeing the issue of *Poetry*. The theory of “Objectivist” poetry therefore imposes a tendentious

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<sup>291</sup> Scroggins, 103-19.

<sup>292</sup> Reznikoff, Charles, *The Selected Letters of Charles Reznikoff 1917-1976*, ed. Milton Hindus (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 156.

<sup>293</sup> Oppen, George, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 46.

<sup>294</sup> Scroggins, 120-135. Such a formation following the “Objectivist” issue was largely utilitarian in nature, as Oppen continues in the 15 February 1961 letter: “For the rest it was a matter of a group of writers who in varying degrees—in sharply varying degrees—approved each other’s work. My own interest in the group was probably greatest. I was interested in getting my own work out, I was eager to contribute to Williams’ influence on poetry, I considered and consider Reznikoff the most important of living poets, and I considered it important to get Zukofsky out. It’s unfortunate that we failed to accomplish that. Like the others I attached no particular value to the idea of a group, much less a school” (Oppen 46-47).

classification that regulates those poets collected within this nominal group. This historical narrative of Zukofsky's construction of a poetic group or community stresses the forced and restrictive cohesion necessary to institute a *demos*.

At the same time, however, Zukofsky disavows his own construction, for his two prose statements, "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931" and "Sincerity and Objectification," strategically avoid a direct proclamation of a poetic group.<sup>295</sup> The issue of *Poetry* simply implies a grouping of the included poets given Zukofsky's critical statements that follow the poetry section (268-285). After listing "works absolutely necessary to students of poetry" by modernist poets, in addition to "the contributors to this number," Zukofsky writes, "These poets seem to the present editor to have written *in accordance with the principles heading this note*" ("Program" 268, my emphasis). Zukofsky thus does not actually outline a cohesive poetic group. Rather, Zukofsky stresses a technical adherence to certain principles related to an "objective," the definition of which opens "Program": "An objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars" (268). While the "1931" of the title marks a particular historical moment, "Objectivist" principles themselves seem to possess trans-

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<sup>295</sup> As Tim Woods states, Zukofsky voices "resistance to a formal 'school'": "There are 'Objectivist' poets, but 'objectivism' as 'a philosophical etiquette' was not intended" (20-21).

historical potential, for a literary work from any period can arguably be called “Objectivist” as long as it adheres to Zukofsky’s principles.<sup>296</sup>

“Sincerity and Objectification” presents Zukofsky’s poetic theory in a more elaborate statement, but it also encounters the tension between an excessive content and an excessively regulating form. The “sincerity” of the title seems to be an experience of content before the conscious imposition of a higher-order form: “In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form.”<sup>297</sup> Zukofsky goes on to address “objectification” as a “rested totality” that depends upon a certain “arrangement” of “minor units of sincerity”: “its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure.”<sup>298</sup> When Zukofsky writes of “objectification” in two examples of poetry, he claims the qualities of the poetry “all resolve into a structure [...] to which the mind does not wish to add; nor does it, any more than when it contemplates a definite object by itself.”<sup>299</sup> In the first part of the statement, the components of the poem “resolve into a structure,” yet the poem becomes not simply a resolved structure but also, through the analogy of the second statement after the semi-colon, an object. Zukofsky’s discussion then continues this analogy: “The mind may conceivably prefer one object to another [...]. But this is

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<sup>296</sup> Of course, Zukofsky’s examples of “works absolutely necessary” are high-modernist texts written between 1920 and 1930 (“Program” 268).

<sup>297</sup> “Sincerity and Objectification,” 273.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-276.

a matter of preference rather than the invalidation of the object not preferred.”<sup>300</sup>

That poetry achieves object status is essential; for Zukofsky, all poems achieving objectification are equally valid, as only subjective preference in readers determines the value of the object. Zukofsky’s theory therefore insists on the equality of all poems *included* in this group of object-achieving structures.<sup>301</sup>

But Zukofsky’s “rested totality,” which hierarchically structures minor units of sincerity, seemingly contradicts the democratic potential of poetic language. There remains an uneasy tension with the minor units that must be resolved into its structure. Zukofsky acknowledges “each word in itself is an arrangement” but continues, “the facts carried by one word are, in view of the preponderance of facts carried by combinations of words, not sufficiently explicit to warrant a realization of rested totality such as might be designated an art form” (274). Although the word cannot achieve the “rested totality” of the poem, it still possesses an autonomy that has led critics to read in “Objectivist” poetics a leftist politics and “desire for inclusiveness.”<sup>302</sup> Zukofsky’s privilege of “the” in “Poem

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>301</sup> The elitism of this theory differs from the elitism found in, for example, T.S. Eliot’s theories of poetics and tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot’s notion of a “consciousness of the past,” an idealist conception, stands in stark opposition to Zukofsky’s materialist poetics (40). There’s also a difference in conceptions of the subject. While Eliot’s “extinction of personality” seems to posit an eradication of the autonomous self, he later suggests precisely the opposite in a rhetorical move typical of his prose voice: “But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (43). The poet must be an autonomous subject in order to renounce that autonomy, which acknowledges a dependence on the individual unlike that found in Zukofsky. For Zukofsky, there is no subject who needs to be overcome; instead, the subject is constructed from relations to the world and is relatively unexceptional.

<sup>302</sup> Stanley, 13.

beginning ‘The’” and ‘a’ in ‘A’ produces an egalitarian gesture underlying the logic of objectification, in which even the articles of language possess structural autonomy in relation to other minor units under a total unity of form. Zukofsky famously critiques contemporaries for elevating “myth,” and states, “instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that the little words mean nothing among so many other words.”<sup>303</sup> Such a discussion can perhaps too easily be assimilated into an allegory for the poor and powerless being elevated to the place and status previously denied them. Of course, the resolving force of objectification seems to short-circuit the triumphant conclusion to this allegory. Objectification functions, to use Rancière’s terminology, like the police. Objectification’s democratic allegory depends, paradoxically, on a disavowal of the democratic element: the egalitarianism of the letter that disturbs all hierarchical, regulatory organizations. As will be seen with Morrison’s *A Mercy*, democracy in this allegory depends on an abjection of the democratic. Democracy can exist only by overcoming, or leaving behind, what it is. The sense of democracy produced by this allegory is thus antithetical to the democratic force of its silenced and regulated “minor units.”

Zukofsky’s poetic contribution to *Poetry*, “‘A’ Seventh Movement: ‘There are different techniques,’” stages these tensions underlying objectification.

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<sup>303</sup> Zukofsky, “Poetry/For My Son When He Can Read,” *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays*, 10. T.S. Eliot and James Joyce seem two likely targets for this critique.

Zukofsky writes to Pound in a 9 November 1930 letter, “The only sonnets to appear in issue will be seven of mine making up seventh movement of ‘A’” (72). This concise statement speaks to “A”-7’s degree of objectification—if perhaps simplistically—in that Zukofsky suggests his poem might be thought of as the “arrangement, into one apprehended unit” of minor units of structure, those minor units being in this case seven sonnets, which Barry Ahearn specifies as Shakespearean sonnets and which are in turn comprised of smaller units.<sup>304</sup> “A”-7 therefore depends on, and arranges, minor structures into a higher-order structure, a “rested totality.” Objectification’s apprehension of smaller structures combining into a single unit works in “A”-7 beyond the poem’s amalgamation of sonnets. It can be seen in even briefer moments, such as the following: “two legs stand A, four together M” (242). The text linguistically and visually—in the doubling of the grapheme “A” to make “M”—enacts the way in which two appearances of “A” become “M.” The fifth sonnet repeats this line as part of the extensive repetition at work throughout the poem (244). As a reference to the speaker’s perception of sawhorses on a street construction site, the shift from “A” to “M” also marks the shift that corresponds to the viewing angle of the object, which stresses the importance of the subjective position in that subject’s perception.<sup>305</sup> Such repeated phrases and motifs accumulate throughout “A”-7 to gesture toward

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<sup>304</sup> Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 274; Ahearn, Barry, “The Resurrectionist: “A” 1-7”, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 61.

<sup>305</sup> This motif will reappear in *Mason & Dixon*’s description of the parallax and in *A Mercy*’s repetition from different perspectives of the scene that gives the book its title.

a larger cohering significance.<sup>306</sup> Repetition in “A”-7 thus gestures to the poem’s logic of uniting smaller, and potentially disparate, units within a totality of form.

Yet the example of “A”-7 also reveals the underlying violence of Zukofsky’s dependence on a “rested totality.” Rather than stand for themselves, the poem’s smaller units are appropriated in the name of objectification. Objectification is constituted, in other words, by wresting poetry’s “minor units of sincerity” from their particular, or singular, positions. The “rested totality” that produces objectification therefore depends on a principle—a poetic law—that demands the arrest of the particular units of a poem into a whole. In this way, objectification generates, out of particulars, a sense of the whole. The ostensibly tranquil “rest” perhaps aims to make palatable the violence and force required to produce such a totality.

In this way Zukofsky both articulates a negative democratic impulse—the egalitarian privilege of articles and smaller units that reconceptualizes what counts as a recognizable unit, as well as the paratactic disruption to hierarchy—and forecloses that articulation—striving, ultimately, for the totality of a regulative form. Though “A”-7 is preceded by “A”-6, the longest of the first seven sections and one that attempts to respond to the Depression-era United States, “A”-8 begins one of the lengthiest, and most ambitious, sections of the epic to this point. Zukofsky’s ambitions in “A”-8’s manifest in his formal

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<sup>306</sup> In Ahearn’s reading, for example, the poem’s repeated play “on man/manes (‘manes’ being a horse’s neckhair and/or a Latin name for the spirits of the dead)” speaks to the way in which “A”-7 thematizes resurrection (38-71). Ahearn argues more generally that Zukofsky chose words as “building blocks” for the larger structure: “Words determine the landscape of the movement” (63).

intentions; according to a letter to Niedecker, “A”-8 “shd. give sumpn like the effect of a ‘mirror’ fugue—i.e. each of a pair <of fugues> being the exact inversion of the other, as if it were seen in a mirror.”<sup>307</sup> This is paradigmatic of “A” as a whole, for Zukofsky frequently strives for complex formal poetic or musical structures in the work.

Despite the desired closure of its formalism, however, “A” still bears witness to a profoundly democratic gesture, such as its often explicit acknowledgment of the indeterminacy of the *demos*. “A”-8, for example, appropriates portions of a passage from Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* to state succinctly one problem of the *demos* as a problem of who counts: “You must allow by ‘individual’ is meant / Middle-class owner, not nine-tenths of the people” (50). Zukofsky’s citation acknowledges the way in which the “individual,” who becomes numbered among the “people” who “count,” politically and socially, as a member of the *demos* is always defined in exclusionary terms. In this simple and brief allusion to the miscount, Zukofsky marks one of the fundamental problems with the conception of the individual in U.S. ideologies: despite its rhetoric of egalitarianism, U.S. discourse in fact repeatedly proposes an exclusionary model of the individual, one grounded on inequality.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Zukofsky qtd. in Scroggins, 176. Scroggins, as well as other critics, have questioned the degree to which “A”-8 succeeds in achieving such a structure.

<sup>308</sup> Jennison and other readers who focus on the political dimensions of Zukofsky’s work often privilege the earlier sections of “A.” Critics generally tend to impose a divide in “A”, often marked by the two halves of “A”-9, in which the allusions to Marx and political action shift to Spinoza, ethics, and the more obviously personal. I would argue that a characterization of Zukofsky as a

While “A” will continually reinstitute a poetic formalism, this gesture of expanding the restrictive logic of the instituted *demos* leads to a series of profound challenges to the positive concept of democracy, as in the critical genealogy of colonial America and the formation of the United States during “A”-8 that exposes the absence of any absolute, sovereign foundation. In this poem, Zukofsky ultimately opens the singular nature of the rule presumed by colloquial democratic ideology to a multiplicity that exceeds any *arche*. Following a lengthy opening, in which Zukofsky incorporates a broad range of source material from Marx, Stalin, and Adams, “A”-8 begins a historicizing narrative that takes as its subject the progress of the U.S. from its colonial past to the present. This narrative is only a narrative in a loose sense, however, as Zukofsky’s method of parataxis extends to the fragments he deploys in this section. The history opens with 1648 and the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the capitalist world-system through the designation of those peoples as wage-earners, which announces this history as economically inflected: “1648. New York in Dutch times / Wages of Indians ordered to be paid / *Without* disputing their accounts” (70). The reference to “Dutch times” also draws attention to the U.S.’s colonial past before it formed as a nation and re-narrated its contingent beginnings as a stable history. The next episode, dated 1655, refers to the attempt by “the governor of New Netherlands, Peter Stuyvesant” “to prevent Jews from

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political poet—a designation he himself adamantly disavowed for complex reasons—relying on the first eight and a half sections from the late 1920s to 1940 fails to comprehend the democratic politics of “A,” such as its resistance to the closure of exclusionary logics more broadly, not simply in overt political statements read allegorically.

settling in the colony in 1655, although he was overruled by the directors of the Dutch West Indies Company” (70; *Z-site*). In contrast to Pound’s *Cantos*, such as Canto 35 (1934), which repeatedly vilifies the Jewish population as the dominating force of world economics and the cause of contemporary problems, Zukofsky’s history in “A”-8 is a history of exclusion and prejudice faced by minority ethnic groups. In this particular episode, the racist proposal of exclusion is overturned by the Dutch West Indies Company. This, combined with the first episode, argues that the early history of what becomes the U.S. is witness to developing practices of exclusion that, in the 1655 case, are only held in check by external forces. Because these are also the forces of capitalism and colonialism, however, they restrict the exclusion of indigenous populations from the economy only to incorporate these populations into the exclusion that characterizes the alienated subject of capitalist and colonial exploitation.

“A”-8’s history becomes more idiosyncratic, as it leaps to 1755—announced in the next stanza by “Circa 100 years later”—and offers details about the living costs and conditions in a New York City Tavern. Zukofsky worked in the 1930s for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and his research on American historical and cultural information shapes “A”-8 with moments such as this and its list of figures.<sup>309</sup> The “Rules of this Tavern” include the basic regulations and costs of a stay, information that Zukofsky likely encountered while working on early documents on New York City for the WPA (*Z-site*):

4 pence a night for bed  
6 pence for supper

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<sup>309</sup> Scroggins, 162.

No more than 5 to sleep in one bed  
No boots to be worn in the bed  
Organ grinders to sleep in the wash house  
No dogs allowed upstairs  
No beer allowed in the kitchen  
No razor grinders or tinkers taken in. (70-1)

Such a codified list emphasizes the increasing expansion and ordering of capitalist exploitation. The stanza following the break shifts to a more abstract description:

“Put away your green paper accordion: / The minuet ’s all night from our windows” (71).<sup>310</sup> It is unclear whether this is an intervention of the present on the historical narrative or an introduction to the next major event involving George Washington and the 1776 Battle of Harlem Heights—“The Hollow Way of General Washington’s time.” The poem follows this allusion to Washington with a reference to an early labor organization—“Committee of Mechanics”—and to Shays’s Rebellion of 1786-7—“Tom Jefferson defender of the Shaysites” (71).

The indeterminacy contributes to a disturbance in a simple linear model of historical narrative. Yet the unsettling nature of the narrative perspective also serves to reinforce the way in which capitalism, with its modes of exploitation, and the destructive operations of society unsettle and restrict human existence.

“A”-8 offers one of the most sustained critiques of the history and founding narrative of the United States in “A,” but its perhaps greatest critique

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<sup>310</sup> Lee Edelman has suggested that Zukofsky may be invoking Peter Minuit here. Minuit’s role in the “purchase” of Manhattan from the Lenape fits into the compressed history of capitalism’s emergence in this section of the poem, as well as the inequalities produced by exchange-value. Rodgers and Hart’s “Give it Back to the Indians,” from *Too Many Girls* (1939), references Minuit’s exploitation. Though the song appeared two years after the completion of “A”-8, the historical narrative it draws on would have been common knowledge to Zukofsky.

appears through omission of the traditional founding moments, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, or the ratification of the Constitution. Instead, the history of the U.S.—infused with transnational sources, notably the thought of Marx—emerges as a history without proper beginning. There is no stable origin point for the U.S. in the juxtaposed scenes from its history, a lack emphasized in the paratactic organization of these scenes. “A”-8 offers a seemingly arbitrary beginning in which capitalism is brought to colonial America and in which practices of exclusion and violence are the norm. This history also appears arbitrary because the radical parataxis of the poem resists an idealized foundation, giving the sense of moments called up by chance.

On a formal level, these passages from “A”-8 present a problem of poetic voice. Zukofsky cites and integrates a variety of source material and quoted passages—not always signaled by quotations and often appearing as compressed forms of the original—without a change in register. Rather than a human voice, there is a sense in which the poem, “A” itself, speaks to the reader, in an anthropomorphic logic. “A”, unlike Zukofsky, or any subject understood as singular, can be a voice of a multitude, a polyphonic speaking apparatus, by allowing a space for multiple sources to speak. Such a practice, which would seem to benefit from the equality of parataxis, has a limit. For the citations often appear in an explicitly mediated way. “A”-12, for example, quotes from Spinoza’s *Ethics* extensively but radically compresses the quotations. One lengthy and dense passage from the *Ethics* becomes, simply,

The mind then imagines  
Without any distinction,

under one attribute –

A universal –  
*Man*, not  
 The small differences,  
 And predicates concerning an infinite number  
 of individuals. (“*A*”-12, 202-203)<sup>311</sup>

The ventriloquism of Spinoza produces a voice that speaks for a universal designation of “*Man*,” under which can be grouped “an infinite number / of individuals.” The edited citation also omits Spinoza’s inclusion of animals in relation to universal categories, an omission that reinforces an anthropocentrism in “*A*” that restricts the community of the *demos* to humans. A thinking of the *demos* as the more restricted “people” continues as “*A*”-12 extracts passages from a toast made by Stalin: “I drink to the health / Of the people / Considered cogs / In the wheels / Of the great State apparatus / But without whom all of us – / Marshals and army commanders / Are not worth a tinker’s dam (1945)” (“*A*”-12, 203-204).<sup>312</sup> There is a certain vicious irony here, given that Stalin at once

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<sup>311</sup> See Spinoza, *Ethics*, II. P40 (versions of Zukofsky’s lines appear in bold): “But when the images in the body are completely confused, **the mind also will imagine** all the bodies confusedly, **without any distinction**, and comprehend them as if **under one attribute**, namely, under the attribute of Being, Thing, and so forth. [...] Those notions they call **Universal, like Man**, Horse, Dog, and the like, have arisen from similar causes, namely, because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining – not entirely of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine **neither slight differences** of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most [NS: forcefully] by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word *man*, **and predicates it of infinitely many singulars**” (140).

<sup>312</sup> Of course, in retrospect, Zukofsky’s incorporation of Stalin tends to resemble Pound’s admiration for Mussolini in *The Cantos*. Stalin’s position in “*A*” speaks to one of the crises of the poem, and of its time. While initially valorized by communist groups and sympathizers in the U.S., public opinion of Stalin largely

recognizes his privileged status depends on “the people,” and yet this recognition does nothing to elevate the lowly status of those people. His toast is, in other words, an empty gesture. Yet it also states in precise terms how democratic discourse is grounded in celebrating the very people it excludes.<sup>313</sup>

The polyvocality of the poem beyond the confines of a single speaking subject—beyond the desires of Zukofsky as well—faces a more serious limit in the poem’s striving toward a logic of unity. Such a formalizing movement—even if disrupted by the excesses of the wandering letter—compromises the negative force of the poem by attempting to reify the place of the subject as the poetic object. This is most evident from “A”-24, a masque written not by Louis Zukofsky but by Celia Zukofsky, his wife and long-term contributor to his work.<sup>314</sup>

The “L. Z. Masque” is a crystalline and strikingly realized overview of Zukofsky’s life’s work. By juxtaposing the four voices of her husband’s work (Thought, Drama, Story, Poem – *Prepositions, Arise, arise, It was*, and “A”) against one another, and by plotting them all on the framework of Handel’s harpsichord pieces, Celia is able to demonstrate, musically and dramatically, the unity of her husband’s writing, what he had referred to back in

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reversed as evidence of atrocities and more brutal policies, such as the Moscow show trials of 1936 and 1938 and the Hitler/Stalin pact of 1939, became more widely known (Scroggins, “The Revolutionary Word,” 49, 56).

<sup>313</sup> Another quotation from Stalin, “Language serves all classes / In a society equally,” makes explicit the democratic quality of language (qtd. in Zukofsky 204). From Stalin the claim seems to be made in bad faith, given its blindness to its own fiction, yet if considered as a statement apart from its speaker, the claim has a quite different interpretation. Stalin’s comment, for example, exceeds his subject position and turns around to level a critique at his policies that exist counter to the statement he uttered. There is, in other words, a leveling at work in language that no attempted restriction or order can fully contain.

<sup>314</sup> Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*, 442. As the dating in the table of contents suggests, “A”-22 and “A”-23 were written after “A”-24 and therefore question the designation of “A”-24 as the end of the poem.

“A”-12: “Each writer writes / one long work whose beat he cannot / entirely be aware of.”<sup>315</sup>

Concluding “A” with a piece by Celia Zukofsky enacts Louis Zukofsky’s own belief in the subject as a concentration of relations. The ordering and containment of these relations in the form of the poem, however, compromises the very excess that constitutes these relations in the first place. For “A,” the “poem of a life,” can only be “completed” by a subject beyond the poet himself. Rather than privilege his own subjective creation, “A”-24 privileges the supplementary logic of the subject, not as an autonomous entity but as an entity only possible through its relations.

Yet because “A”-24 stresses an ideal unity of a life’s work, bringing together—literally and visually—some of the major elements of Zukofsky’s career, the poem implicitly tries to contain the subject’s supplementarity, which would negate the supplement as such. Such an attempt follows Rancière’s descriptions of the police order, which attempts to make the sum of its parts equal the whole, thereby erasing the supplement designated by the democratic miscount.<sup>316</sup> Zukofsky’s attempt to reconcile the subject with its supplement—an “objectified” subject, or subject beyond the subject—undermines the relational expansion of “A” by attempting to produce a unified entity similar to Whitman’s expanded, yet limited, conception of the “I.”<sup>317</sup> Celia Zukofsky’s introduction

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<sup>315</sup> Scroggins, 442. The quotation from “A”-12 continues, “Recurrences / follow him, crib and drink from a / well that’s his cadence – after / he’s gone” (“A” 214).

<sup>316</sup> *Disagreement*, 14.

<sup>317</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 113. See the discussion earlier in this chapter for the limits of Whitman’s position.

cites Zukofsky's drama, *Arise, Arise*, as a motivation for the masque. This play focuses on Zukofsky's family, and the contents of "A"-24 stress this aspect, given that scenes designate figures from his family life.<sup>318</sup> The poem's accompanying index closes by insisting once more on the family, with notes from Celia and Louis, which include a note on the help from their son, Paul:

"A" – 24  
Celia's  
L.Z. Masque

the gift –  
she hears  
the work  
in its recurrence  
L.Z.

Thanks to Paul Zukofsky for suggestions regarding typography and for the loan of his copy of Handel's *Pièces pour le Clavecin* as printed for The German Handel Society.

C.Z.

L.Z.<sup>319</sup>

The end of the poem is thus a gesture not simply of poetic unity, but of a community that attempts to exist without its constitutive division. The "rested totality" of the poem strived for in "A"-24 and throughout all twenty-four sections collectively, could be analogized to an ideal form of the community. The poem thus faces an unresolvable tension in its simultaneous desire to open the *demos* and to define or construct a frame for the *demos*, which necessarily involves its foreclosure through the very frame that produces it.

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<sup>318</sup> Zukofsky, "A", 564.

<sup>319</sup> Zukofsky, "A", 806.

The parataxis of “A,” its incessant juxtapositions of voices and phrases that destabilize both the authority of any single subject and the boundaries of any *demos*, thus recedes before a formal unification that reconstructs a hierarchical logic. The hierarchy of form therefore is inimical to the figural gesture of parataxis. The limit of Zukofsky’s parataxis could also be located in the genealogical critique of “A”-8, in the various attempts by Zukofsky and critics to unify that section of the epic—which has been called a “mirror fugue” and is said to “[exhibit] a clear pattern of juxtapositions, transformations, and reappearances of a limited number of discrete themes. Eight, to be precise, in keeping with the movement’s number.”<sup>320</sup> “A”’s attempt to unify all the gestures and themes of its 24 movements into an organized whole shows that “a poem of a life” recodes the subject in a poetic form.

This attempt to unify all the themes into the whole of the poem is the regulating formal gesture and closure that restricts the egalitarian movement of parataxis. Zukofsky’s drive toward unity reflects his desire “for the systematic order a ‘scientific definition’ of poetry [...] might provide.”<sup>321</sup> Zukofsky’s formalism, regardless of formal experimentation, leads to the regulating logic that ultimately limits the negative democratic impulse that appears in his work.<sup>322</sup> The drive toward synthesis in a system is precisely what the negative democratic impulse steadfastly resists. “A”’s destructive drive, then, conflicts with its

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<sup>320</sup> Scroggins, 176.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>322</sup> As Scroggins notes, Zukofsky’s desire for unity is reflected already in his youthful belief in a Marxist teleology (47, 102).

formalism that seeks to resolve these destructive operations. This formalism, of course, cannot contain all of the elements it tries to organize, just as the instituted *demos* cannot include all of the elements it ostensibly represents. There will always be a remainder, an excess, both within and without, that compromises the instituted form. “*A*” stages the contradiction between a destructive excess and an excessive order, and in its staging, the negative democratic impulse remains despite the poem’s enclosing formalism.<sup>323</sup> Poetic formalism threatens to deform its content by virtue of its regular—and regulatory—structure. Yet the negative democratic impulse speaks to a content, a figural excess, that remains radically resistant to such regulating logics.<sup>324</sup>

### **Against Form: *Cracy* and the Line**

While Zukofsky’s “*A*” empties the subject only to re-instantiate it in the form of the poem, thus reproducing in his “Objectivist” project a totalizing logic inimical

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<sup>323</sup> The contradictory impulses of “*A*” might be made to speak to the contradictory impulses of well-intentioned proponents of democracy in the U.S. who fail to recognize the full force of the negative.

<sup>324</sup> The formalism of “*A*” marks a problem for Zukofsky throughout his writings. The pairing of poems, “Mantis” and “‘Mantis,’ An interpretation” (1934), reflects the tension between on the one hand the egalitarian gesture of his figural language rhetoric and on the other hand the regulatory gesture of his formalism. Upon reading “Mantis,” a sestina in which the speaker allegorizes a mantis on the New York subway as a figure for the class struggle, William Carlos Williams writes critically to Zukofsky in a 30 October 1934 letter: “To me, so far as I can tell after a first glance, it seems as tho the form has made you do what you never would have done otherwise: stress too heavily what should have been lightly touched [...]. I myself dread the implications of a too regular form—our world will not stand it” (*The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky* 202). Zukofsky responds with a free verse interpretation of “Mantis.” This exchange highlights a concern that “the demands of the form *deformed* the expression of the poet’s thoughts” (Scroggins 153). While Zukofsky recognizes a tension, his attempts to resolve it disavow the force of the negative.

to the negative democratic impulse that his parataxis and critical genealogy of the United States initially suggests, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* produces a critique that follows the emptying of the subject with the emptying of the totality of form as well. *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's historical fiction that follows the partnership of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the British astronomer and surveyor most famous for their partnership surveying the Mason-Dixon Line, appears as a story narrated by the Rev<sup>d</sup> Wicks Cherrycoke to his nephews and extended family in the year 1786, just before the composition of, debates on, and ratification of the United States Constitution from 1787 to 1788. Cherrycoke's twin nephews request "'a Tale about America [...] With Indians in it, and Frenchmen,'" to which Cherrycoke responds with a story about Mason and Dixon, two British citizens who provide, throughout the narration, an outsider's perspective on colonial America during their time in that nascent country.<sup>325</sup> Cherrycoke also participates in the narrative, and he relies on documents—some real and some fictional—as well as his own imagination for those moments of the narrative he did not personally witness. A narration foregrounding an outsider's perspective on colonial America is therefore itself told by a figure at once an insider and an outsider, highlighting the tenuousness of borders and boundaries that will be thematized in the novel.

As this compromised narration suggests, and similar to Zukofsky's approach in "A," *Mason & Dixon* stresses the subjective and contingent. While

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<sup>325</sup> Pynchon, Thomas, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Picador, 1997), 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

Zukofsky tried to objectify the subjective in the objective poem, Pynchon maintains the subjectivity of the subject. The method of measurement, for example, used by Mason and Dixon—the parallax—depends upon the relational logic of subjective positions and decisions rather than objectivity. Before their journey to colonial America and while in Cape Town to measure the Transit of Venus, they explain the logic of the parallax to the Vroom girls, daughters of a Dutch family with whom they are staying:

To an Observer up at the North Cape, the Track of the Planet, across the Sun, will appear much to the south of the same Track as observ'd from down here, at the Cape of Good Hope. The further apart the Obs North and South, that is, the better. It is the Angular Distance between, that we wish to know. One day, someone sitting in a room will succeed in reducing all the Observations, from all 'round the World, to a simple number of Seconds, and tenths of a Second, of Arc, – and that will be the Parallax. (93)<sup>326</sup>

As Christy Burns notes, “the parallactic method subjectively frames the supposed objectivity of science in Pynchon’s work.”<sup>327</sup> Zukofsky’s “Objectivist” poetics also depends on a relational logic of positions, but Zukofsky, unlike Pynchon, attempts to organize these positions into a totalizing system. Just as imperialist and nationalist narratives depend on a sovereign logic of determinate pre-destination, objective discourses maintain their force by denying their subjective and often arbitrary foundations. While Zukofsky attempts to substitute the whole of “A” for its parts, Pynchon’s narrative disturbs any such substitution. The

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<sup>326</sup> The apparent gesture toward totality—“One day, someone sitting in a room will succeed in reducing all the Observations”—will be addressed more fully in the coming pages.

<sup>327</sup> Burns, “Postmodern Historiography: Politics and the Parallactic Method in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*,” *Postmodern Culture* 14.1 (September 2003).

measurements conducted by Mason and Dixon are entirely contingent on human positions. This work allows for a persistent narrative play on the use of subjective and imaginary lines imposed on real spaces—lines that form borders with significant and determining effects in the world.<sup>328</sup>

While the Mason and Dixon Line was meant to settle a land dispute between the Penns of Pennsylvania and the Baltimores of Maryland—thus linking scientific work with a dispute over property—it came to represent a symbolic divide in the U.S. between northern, supposedly free states and southern slave states.<sup>329</sup> Dixon anticipates this perspective, while Mason “goads” him by suggesting a similarity across the Line; however, it is Zhang—a companion of Mason and Dixon after escaping from the Jesuit College—who challenges the perceived division marked by the line:

“If you think you see no Slaves in Pennsylvania, [...] why, look again. They are not all African, nor do some of them even yet know,— may never know,— that they are Slaves. Slavery is very old upon these shores,— there is no Innocence upon the Practice anywhere, neither among the Indians nor the Spanish nor in the behavior of the rest of Christendom, if it come to that.” (615-616)

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<sup>328</sup> See Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006). Especially relevant here is chapter ten, “Census, Map, Museum.” As Anderson argues, “European-style maps worked on the basis of a totalizing classification” (173). Winichakul Thongchai provides further details of this phenomenon: “a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent. . . It had become a real instrument to concretize projections on the earth’s surface” (qtd. in Anderson 173-174). In *Mason & Dixon* this consequence is emphasized when, after surveying the Line, Dixon draws a map representing their work (687-688). See also Sylvia Wynter’s “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project.”

<sup>329</sup> Burns.

Zhang articulates a shared practice of slavery among a diverse set of populations, emphasizing a complicity as well as a reproduction of the same damaging practices. As Toni Morrison will indicate in *A Mercy*, the indentured servitude practiced in the colonies operates as another kind of slavery that depends on class-based, rather than primarily race-based, oppression.<sup>330</sup> Zhang here alludes to slavery practiced by the indigenous populations and the Spanish, whose actions in the “new world” were made infamous by accounts such as Bartolomé de las Casas’s *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. As Dixon later laments, “Where does it end? No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves? America was the one place we should *not* have found them” (693). The existence of these hierarchies and oppressive structures, “this public Secret, this shameful Core” of colonial America, reveals the empty promise of democratic rhetoric that gives rise to the belief in the United States as exception, as “the one place” such practices of inequality should not exist.<sup>331</sup>

The production of such a line, in other words, is meant to produce a kind of knowledge by imposing a recognizable form onto an unruly excess, yet as Zhang indicates, and as Dixon comes to recognize, such knowledge is always

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<sup>330</sup> *A Mercy* also stresses “the complicity of seemingly kind white northerners, exceptionalist pre-Americans who distance themselves from slavery” (Strehle 113). Strehle, Susan, “I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism,” *Critique* 54 (2013): 109-123.

<sup>331</sup> For a discussion of U.S. exceptionalism, see Donald E. Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and the edited collection, *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

already compromised by its illusory, or fictional and arbitrary, beginnings.<sup>332</sup> Dixon fears open, unbounded territory, associating knowledge-production with a regulative ideal of surveying. It is precisely this fear of openness that “provide[s] Dixon] with an incentive, to enclose that which had hitherto been without Form, and hence haunted by anything and ev’rything” (504). Mapping the vast territories of pre-independence Pennsylvania and Maryland, Mason and Dixon aim to convert the unknown into the knowable. One such expanse becomes, for example, Maryland: “Mapp’d at last, ‘Maryland’ is reveal’d as but a set of Lines meant to Frame Potowmack to the West, and Chesapeake to the East” (616). The imaginative, or aesthetic, project of imposing invisible lines onto the territory thus produces the perception of a stable, coherent, and bounded place.<sup>333</sup>

This imposition of knowledge operates in subjective relations as well, which is evident in a side story of a “domestick Drama” (579). This story centers on Catherine Wheat’s claim under oath that Tom Hynes is the father of her baby (575).<sup>334</sup> The legal dispute quickly escalates into an attempt by Tom, with the help of a mob, to take the baby from Catherine, who is at this point in her family’s home, under the protection of her father, Conrad Wheat (576). While under siege by this mob, Conrad “watches, not yet able to believe that these men he thought

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<sup>332</sup> *Mason & Dixon* frequently reflects satirically on its setting during the so-called Age of Reason, often emphasizing the rule of faith over reason and knowledge, as in America, or the fascination with and adherence to the unreasonable.

<sup>333</sup> Again, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, “Census, Map, Museum” (163-185).

<sup>334</sup> Pynchon develops this drama from historical events detailed in *Proceedings of the Council of Maryland*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1766, and much of his language is taken directly from court records.

he knew could become a Band of Raiders who mean him harm” (578). During the ensuing fight, characters can no longer see each other in the darkness, and the description, “All are Phantoms to one another,” offers an appropriate characterization of human relations more generally. This is all the more apparent in a novel that presents itself on the surface as “a great buddy act” yet reveals the impossibility of overcoming the gap between subjects.<sup>335</sup> As Cherrycoke phrases it, “Mason and Dixon could not cross the perilous boundaries between themselves” (689). The formal boundaries used to designate a subject, thereby making the subject knowable, end up producing the opposite effect: making visible the unknowability of each subject.

As its attention to the imposition of and limits to formal boundaries suggests, Pynchon’s narrative offers a damning critique of the totalizing logic of form. In part, the critique appears in the suggestions of an uneasy force associated with the Line itself, which is meant to bring rather than to undermine order: “The Line makes itself felt,— thro’ some Energy unknown, ever are we haunted by that Edge so precise, so near. In the Dark, one never knows” (650).<sup>336</sup> The haunting of unbounded space that Dixon fears reappears in his very boundary work. The haunting quality of the line speaks of a force beyond Mason and Dixon, the two figures who measure and therefore create and impose the line on the land. Such excess can be seen in the simple disconnect between the project’s stated purpose of settling a land dispute and the greater consequences of the symbolic division of

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<sup>335</sup> Kakutani, Michiko, “‘Mason & Dixon’: Pynchon Hits the Road with Mason and Dixon,” *New York Times*, Book Review.

<sup>336</sup> Later, the Line is characterized as “a conduit for Evil” (701).

the U.S. according to northern and southern halves. While democracy poses a threat because of an excessive equality, here the line poses a threat because of the excessive quality of sovereign rule. The excess of democratic equality marks democracy as an always-incomplete concept. Because democracy cannot realize the equality that constitutes it, the democratic drive will always undermine democracy's own formal organization—which, by definition, is bound to include inequality in some form of exclusion—in the name of equality. *Mason & Dixon* therefore stages an encounter between the excess of a totalizing rule and the excess of the negative democratic impulse's absolutely anarchic principle.<sup>337</sup>

While resistance to the logics of rule and form manifests itself throughout *Mason & Dixon*, the gestures of conspiracy, and of paranoid logic more generally, common to all of Pynchon's writing, propose a radical challenge to the presumptions of an ordering form and its sovereign rule.<sup>338</sup> *Mason & Dixon*

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<sup>337</sup> Though not reducible to anarchy, democracy for Rancière is often characterized by an anarchic principle of disordering force. See, for example, Rancière's claim in *Hatred of Democracy* that democracy signifies "the an-archic supplement" of politics (58). Rancière follows this claim with a discussion of democracy as "the impurity of politics" (62). While Todd May attempts to represent Rancière's democracy alongside anarchy in *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, Samuel Chambers stresses in *The Lessons of Rancière* that such a representation reduces Rancière's democracy to a "pure politics" antagonistic to the very impurity on which Rancière insists (Chambers 34).

<sup>338</sup> Leo Bersani, in "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," describes Pynchon's tendency in *Gravity's Rainbow* to universalize paranoid structures of thought (101). Bersani notes that for Pynchon, "The paranoid intuition is [...] one of an *invisible interconnectedness*" (102). Bersani's reading highlights the tension described in Pynchon's work. On the one hand, paranoia's totalizing logic of connection and inclusiveness is unbearable. On the other hand, an anti-paranoid stance, in which nothing is connected, is equally unbearable: "to escape from paranoia would be to escape from the movement that is life" (Bersani 102). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Bersani notes the sensation that World War II itself may be

includes numerous paranoid moments and the conspiracies that follow from such feelings of paranoia. On the surface, paranoia seems to be a gesture toward totalization, including the totality of form the narrative so strongly critiques. This reading of paranoia famously appears in Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," included as the fourth chapter of *Touching Feeling*.<sup>339</sup> The totalization of paranoia is perhaps most apparent in two of the five qualities described by Sedgwick: paranoia as anticipatory and paranoia as a strong theory (130). The anticipatory quality of paranoia announces an "imperative of paranoia": "*There must be no bad surprises.*"<sup>340</sup> This imperative leads to a complex temporality "that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known."<sup>341</sup> After surviving a French attack at sea, Mason speaks to Dixon of "an apparent Design [...] to put me in harm's way," to which Dixon adds himself (44). The statement follows Sedgwick's characterization, in that a

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masking what the novel calls "the true war," "a celebration of markets," of capitalist exchange (Bersani 106; Pynchon 107). Like paranoia, capitalism is a totalizing operation, but there is a certain emptiness to it: capitalism is without center; it is simply accumulation, expansion, and circulation.

<sup>339</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

<sup>340</sup> Sedgwick, 130.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

reference to a “Design” against them allows them to anticipate and potentially eliminate any further “bad surprises.”<sup>342</sup>

Sedgwick’s designation of paranoia as a strong theory refers to “the size and topology of the domain that it organizes,” to the drive toward an all-encompassing totality.<sup>343</sup> The most developed conspiracy plotline in *Mason & Dixon* involves a Jesuit-Chinese alliance; while this plotline initially seems to confirm the all-encompassing quality of paranoia, it also offers a crucial disruption. Dixon first learns of the Jesuit network around the world, with intentions possibly “to penetrate China” (224). The global scope of the Jesuit plan offers a literally totalizing representation in its command over all of earthly space. Hints of this plotline are interspersed throughout the narrative, but a sudden shift occurs when it is revealed that the Jesuit-Chinese plot stems from an erotic adventure book being read by Tenebrae and Ethelmer, cousins and two characters in the frame narrative. Mid-sentence, the Jesuit-Chinese plot cuts off, and the narrative reveals, “Brae has discover’d the sinister Volume in ’Thelmer’s Room, lying open” (527). Ethelmer then identifies this volume as part of “The Ghastly

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<sup>342</sup> Though the fact that Mason and Dixon are repeatedly surprised and only retroactively position the surprise as an expected circumstance suggests a limit to the totality of paranoia. The temporality of paranoia described by Sedgwick cannot be realized in actual practice.

<sup>343</sup> Sedgwick, 134. Already in his reading of Pynchon, however, Bersani notes a limit to the totality of knowledge presumed by paranoid logic: “It is as if we could know everything and still not know what kind of a text *Gravity’s Rainbow* is” (108).

Fop,” a series of stories read by characters in the frame narrative (Ethelmer) and in the recounted narrative of Mason and Dixon (Nathanial “Nathe” McClean).<sup>344</sup>

Yet when Mason and Dixon enter into the Jesuit-Chinese narrative read by Ethelmer and Tenebrae, the interrelation of the narratives becomes even more unclear. The narrative then shifts again, seamlessly, to an interruption by Cherrycoke, which suggests he had been narrating all of the previous narrative (535-537). This is, of course, not simply a mistake in *Mason & Dixon*. The blurring of the narratives and the levels of narration calls into question the stability of narrative as such. The blurring also calls into question the totality of paranoia, since there is no reason to privilege the Jesuit-Chinese conspiracy within the Mason and Dixon narrative over the re-interpretation of the conspiracy as in fact an “innocent” adventure narrative read by the two cousins. The reader’s paranoid approach toward *Mason & Dixon* will face a similarly irresolvable problem of structure. Everything may appear connected, but in a fundamentally disconnected way. The Jesuit-Chinese plot itself oscillates between dominating the narrative and subsiding into its background. Paranoia therefore at once covers too much ground and too little. There is a certain empty promise, an inherent emptiness, in the totality presumed by paranoia.

Even beyond the Jesuit-Chinese plotline, *Mason & Dixon* emphasizes form’s inability to totalize in its own narrative structure. Chapter 73, the final

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<sup>344</sup> The intertext appears elsewhere in the novel as well. For example, in Cape Town, Mason discovers that Nick Mournival reads it to his preserved and “brine-soak’d” ear (178), and Dixon also finds Mason reading an installment of *The Ghastly Fop* (347).

episode of the book's second part, "America," opens with a humorously idealized alternative ending beyond the scope of its own narrative: "As all History must converge to Opera in the Italian Style, however, their Tale as Commemorated might have to proceed a bit more hopefully. Suppose that Mason and Dixon and their Line cross Ohio after all, and continue West" (706). History "converge[s]," that is, history's multiplicities move toward and meet in a single point, and as argued by John Hess, the mediation through Italian Opera here suggests an idealized and comic alternative to the more tragic reality (4-5).<sup>345</sup> The convergence named by Pynchon also, notably, recalls Zukofsky's definition of the objective in "Program": "An objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars" (268). Pynchon's comment on history therefore seems to follow the logic of objectification as a unification of

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<sup>345</sup> Hess characterizes this move according to Italian Opera as *seria* or *buffa*: "In place of the real, the final chapter of the 'America' section of the novel offers an idealized, comic, happy ending" (4-5). Pynchon's opening to the chapter echoes an earlier chapter epigraph by Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke on history: "History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers,—nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History" instead should be understood as "a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common" (349). Where Cherrycoke's epigraph gestures toward catastrophe echoes Walter Benjamin's famous allegory of the Angel of History, whose "face is turned toward the past" and who "sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his face" ("On the Concept of History" 392), Pynchon's opening reference to "Opera in the Italian Style" re-orientes the convergence to avoid the catastrophe described by Benjamin.

multiplicities, though unlike objectification, Pynchon's project presents the logic of convergence as explicitly imaginary.

The subsequent move in *Mason & Dixon* presents a crucial shift from the logic of objectification, in that it proposes to imagine the remainder, the excess that becomes excluded from this convergence. Given the narrative slippage in the Jesuit-Chinese plot, Pynchon's hypothetical continuation of the tale here attends to the excesses of narrative, and history qua narrative, that cannot be contained in any formalized version that attempts to dominate and regulate its particulars, a regulation that entails a decision about what counts as included and excluded. Chapter 73 offers a hypothetical account of Mason and Dixon continuing West past the limit imposed on their surveying work, which the narrative asks readers to "Suppose" happened. After detailing this hypothetical continuation West and noting that some of their party might disappear and never return to the surveyors, the narrative states, in a manner that again emphasizes the fabrication of all of this, "They would be rediscover'd in episodes to come, were the episodes ever to be enacted, did Mason and Dixon choose *not* to turn, back to certain Fortune and global Acclaim, but rather to continue West, away from the law, into the savage Vacancy ever before them..." (709). *Mason & Dixon* here presents a theme common to all of Pynchon's work: the gesture toward alternatives and excesses left out in dominant narratives and in the convergences toward a single point. Crucially, this is not simply another totalizing gesture of trying to include in a narrative that which is excluded by that narrative, as discussed by Giorgio

Agamben.<sup>346</sup> The quickness of the final chapter gestures to a hypothetical alternative in such a way as to acknowledge an incompleteness in the presumed totality of the present version of the narrative without trying to complete it. The narrative implies, then, an existence beyond that which is represented in the narrative itself. This instability of narrative logic and borders provides a paradigm for Pynchon's negative democratic gesture, one that exceeds Zukofsky's since it prevents any delimited notion of a "rested totality." The rule, or *cracy*, of totality is undermined by *Mason & Dixon*.<sup>347</sup>

Rather than supporting a claim for the domination of totality, Pynchon's text reveals that totality is in fact empty. With such emptiness in mind, *Mason & Dixon* ends with a scene that, read superficially, proposes a hopeful orientation, yet when read in context of what precedes it includes a destructive or ironic turn. Mason returns to the U.S. near the end of his life with his second wife, Mary, and their children, including two from his first marriage with Rebekah, William and Dr. Isaac. After Mason dies, William and Dr. Isaac decide to "stay, and be Americans" and discuss their plans for their future, while addressing their dead father (772):

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<sup>346</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7. Agamben's logic of the "inclusive exclusion" is largely formal and juridical.

<sup>347</sup> *Mason & Dixon* also manifests Pynchon's interest in the rule of time. The narrative repeatedly plays on the eleven missing days, a reference to the English adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1752. To make the change, British parliament decided that 2 September 1752 would be followed by 14 September 1752. This historical occurrence leads several characters to imagine or posit an alternate reality. Mason tells Dixon, for example, that he entered a "Whirlpool in Time" and lived through these lost 11 days (556-559). Cherrycoke also frequently points to patterns of eleven, such as eleven-day gaps in the field books of Mason and Dixon (682).

“Since I was ten,” said Doc, “I wanted you to take me and Willy to America. I kept hoping, ev’ry Birthday, this would be the year. I knew next time you’d take us.”

“We can get jobs,” said William, “save enough to go out where you were,—”

“Marry and go out where you were,” said Doc.

“The Stars are so close you won’t need a Telescope.”

“The Fish jump into your Arms. The Indians know Magick.”

“We’ll go there. We’ll live there.”

“We’ll fish there. And you too.” (773)

In an act of filial inheritance, the two oldest sons voice a desire to go where their father was, on the West Line. The passage ends with an image of spiritual communion as they are living not only where their father was, but also with him still there. This brief dialogue also stages what is recognizable as two sons buying in to the heteronormative promise offered by the U.S. The heteronormativity of this discussion emphasizes family life, but it does so in a way that stresses the exclusionary logic of the promise of the newly-constituted nation. The abundance of the American land exists because of an erasure of indigenous peoples, but this abundance is also only accessible to a select population. The “you too” that ends the novel designates a specific, rather than all-inclusive, other. Mason’s two sons, and others like them, can position themselves as this “you,” but many others—including indigenous peoples, African Americans, and women, to name a few—remain erased and excluded from this white male fantasy of life in the United States. Given the often brutal observations of colonial America by Mason and Dixon, which leads to their profound ambivalence toward the emerging nation, this dialogue reads as highly selective of the U.S.’s supposed qualities and duplicitous narrative. Rather than affirmative, this dialogue confirms that the two

sons are bound to replay anew the fictional element of this representation of the U.S., a representation that masks the emptiness of its promise. Rather than affirmation, *Mason & Dixon* closes by insisting on the negativity of the American project.

The end of the novel thus plays on the logic of *arche* (rule, beginning, source) and *telos* (end, purpose). Teleology constitutes a totalizing logic; there is a coincidence between beginnings and ends, as T.S. Eliot reminds us: “In my beginning is my end.”<sup>348</sup> This is also of course the logic of U.S. obsession with its own origin, as the description by Cynthia Chase that opened this chapter demonstrates. The emptiness Mason and Dixon uncover in the democratic promise, however, offers an important reminder about utopian impulses. For the narrative can be understood as utopian in the precise sense of utopia as “no place.” Rather than construct an imagined utopia, the narrative reveals instead the nothingness covered over by popular utopian discourses about the democratic promise in the founding moment of the U.S.<sup>349</sup> The utopianism of the democratic promise thus acquires a forcefully negative value. In other words, if Americans inherit a utopian democratic promise, then this inheritance could be recast as a negative force that promises nothing, rather than something.

Such is indeed the logic of the promise of colonial America proposed throughout *Mason & Dixon*. The side-plots of Cherrycoke’s narration frequently

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<sup>348</sup> Eliot, “East Coker,” *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*, 123.

<sup>349</sup> Thomas Cresap, who Mason and Dixon encounter in Western Maryland, describes the western territory as “U-topia” because of its lack of rule (638). The anarchic nothingness, then, proves to be the distinguishing trait of utopia in this conception.

foreground the complications of juridical disputes often motivated by the forces of capitalism. While engaging with Mr. and Mrs. Edgewise, who Cherrycoke meets amidst travel on “a Coach-ful of assorted Travelers mak[ing] their way Philadelphiaward” (353), Cherrycoke meets Frau Luise Redzinger (356). Luise hopes to employ a Philadelphia lawyer to settle a land dispute begun by Grodt, a neighboring farmer to the Redzinger farm (356-360).<sup>350</sup> Grodt “has long coveted their farm, and furthermore believes that both farms are located in Maryland” (360). Luise has paid taxes to Pennsylvania, so Grodt’s claim means that Luise “owes more back taxes there than she can ever pay” (360). Economic aims—by Grodt in this instance and made possible by the confusion of whether Luise lives in the arbitrarily delineated Pennsylvania or Maryland—therefore undermine Luise’s attempt at making a place for herself. Cherrycoke and Mr. Edgewise try to console Luise over this effort by Grodt to force her off her farm for his own gain, but Mr. Edgewise then pointedly retells the Christian creation myth: on ““the second Day of Creation, when ‘G-d made the Firmament, and divided the Waters which were under the Firmament, from the Waters which were above the Firmament,’— thus the first Boundary Line. All else after that, in all History, is but Sub-Division”” (361).<sup>351</sup> The logic of any ordering division, then, always reveals from the outset the contingency and compromise of any positive utopian drive to

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<sup>350</sup> This conversation begins only after Mr. Edgewise passes around a “refreshing liquid” in a “strange and apparently inexhaustible Flask” (356).

<sup>351</sup> Pynchon’s counterfactual narrative emphasizes as well that history itself is the positioning and articulation of such lines. Giorgio Agamben discusses representations of time and history according to the logic of the line in “Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum,” in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (89-105).

make a place for oneself. For the dividing line, which determines an inside and an outside, an inclusion and exclusion, is essential to the figuration of utopia. As Michel Foucault has suggested, utopias always depend on the existence of heterotopias, or “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (24); that is, utopias always depend on an excluded outside.<sup>352</sup>

During a discussion with some proto-revolutionaries, Mason is informed that his work is “[a]n exercise in futility,” for “all your Work must be left to grow over, never to be redrawn, for in the world that is to come, all boundaries shall be eras’d” (406). This, then, voices the destructive character of the revolutionary orientation, its negative democratic impulse. Against the regulatory division as that made by God, the negative democratic impulse names a divisive force, a dis-ordering division, that disrupts all regulatory principles. The negative democratic impulse is not of a stable utopian community but of an unbounded and infinitely self-dividing *demos* that persistently challenges any sovereign rule and ordering principles. The negativity of the *demos* insists on resisting the utopian drive toward a *demos* that aims to be inclusive, since the logic of inclusion depends on exclusion.

Yet the founding and delineation of the United States of America as a nation following the revolution for independence from Britain entails precisely the opposite of what such revolutionary sentiment proclaims. In contrast to the negative democratic impulse, which is constituted by the repetition of division,

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<sup>352</sup> See Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec *diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

this founding act models itself on the division made by God, a division that aims to be stable and total in its rule.<sup>353</sup> Before the formation of the U.S., Cherrycoke describes an unrestricted liberty, and though the U.S. may have freed itself from external rule, it imposed its own internal rule by regulating what was perceived to be a threat:

“Unfortunately, young people,” recalls the Rev<sup>d</sup>, “the word *Liberty*, so unreflectively sacred to us today, was taken in those Times to encompass even the darkest of Men’s rights, – to injure whomever we might wish, – unto extermination, were it possible, – Free of Royal advice or Proclamation Lines and such. This being, indeed and alas, one of the Liberties our late War was fought to secure.” (307)

In this telling aside to his narration, Reverend Cherrycoke points to the negativity of liberty. Cherrycoke suggests in his narrative of 1786, on the eve of the debates on the United States Constitution in 1787 and its ratification in 1788, that the form of liberty allowed under the U.S.’s post-revolutionary Republican government attempts to prevent the destructive and violent potential of unrestricted liberty, which allows for “the darkest of Men’s rights,” so often associated with democracy.<sup>354</sup> The violence of this unrestricted liberty in the

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<sup>353</sup> *Mason & Dixon* draws attention to this homology between the messianic covenant of God and the mythic promise that characterizes the founding of the United States.

<sup>354</sup> As suggested in the introduction, such an association between a threatening limitless liberty and democracy may be traced as far back as Plato, in *The Republic* for instance, but may also be traced to the Federalist and Anti-Federalist debates, as well as to figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson in the American intellectual tradition. A restricted notion of liberty calls into question whether the concept remains. This is of course one of the difficulties of understanding the United States as a Republic founded in the Enlightenment and of grasping its history of democratic ideology, an ideology constituted by a conception of equality that—following Rancière—cannot be reconciled to the Enlightenment’s liberal discourses of liberty and freedom.

space of the social articulates the force of what Rancière refers to as the police, for this liberty leads to a rule of the strongest rather than to a community of equals.<sup>355</sup> Cherrycoke’s critical remarks on liberty in his narrative aside counter the violent imposition of the police order, and its reproduction in the founding of the United States, with the kind of egalitarian gesture that constitutes the politics of aesthetics since they emerge from an interruption, a parabasis, of the dominant Mason and Dixon narrative.<sup>356</sup> For the interruption stresses the contingency and incompleteness of the narrative. Cherrycoke’s narration throughout *Mason & Dixon* is highly suspect, and this recalls Rancière’s discussion in *Mute Speech* of “the regime of writing, [...] in which the law is given by wanderings of the orphaned letter.”<sup>357</sup> The equality of the letter lends writing its democratic force.

Yet this equality, as evinced in the blurred narrative logics of *Mason & Dixon* and its resistance to totality, makes possible meaning at the same time as it undermines meaning’s imposition. For Cherrycoke’s ironic orientation makes it impossible to decide whether his comment on liberty as “*unreflectively* sacred to us today” should be taken at face value as a positive superlative (“unreflective” as

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<sup>355</sup> As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, the founders of the United States excised democratic politics from the Constitution in favor of a Republican government, which represents, in Rancière’s terms, the order of the police rather than politics proper.

<sup>356</sup> The violence of liberty and the violence of equality here perhaps seem too proximate. Liberalism’s concepts of liberty and freedom depend on logics of exclusion. Lisa Lowe has convincingly argued for this inherent contradiction of liberalism in *The Intimacy of Four Continents*. According to Lowe, it has been—and will always be—the case that “liberties are reserved for some and wholly denied to others” (3). Rancière’s project, in contrast, insists that equality must be a presupposition, rather than a response to inequality (see “The Method of Equality” in *Recognition or Disagreement*).

<sup>357</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 95.

normalized, institutionalized) or should be read as a critique of the present attitude (“unreflective” as thoughtless). Democracy has always been associated with some conception of freedom, egalitarianism, or liberty, along with a corresponding positive or anxious affective investment.<sup>358</sup> This affective investment responds to the fact that democracy already includes its symmetrical opposite in the very excessive nature of its equality, leading to what Rancière has referred to as “democratic anarchy.”<sup>359</sup> To restrict, limit, and contain this excess, regulating forms have always been imposed: a Republican government in the U.S. and an interpretative frame or hermeneutic practice in literature, for example. The discourse of a positive, or realized, democratic utopia, then, tries to make invisible and silent both the negativity of democracy and the anarchic nothingness of utopia that persistently disrupt the visible, or sensible space of the social, a space that depends on meaning-making practices. These practices exclude the non-meaning within meaning that threatens to destroy all Symbolic logic, and it is a faithfulness to the negativity of such non-meaning that the negative democratic impulse of *Mason & Dixon* adheres.

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<sup>358</sup> For an example of a combination of the two affective orientations, see Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville at once fears the democratic equality in the U.S. because of its threat to the aristocracy and values the construction of equality in a society’s organization. More recently, Judith Butler has remarked, “democratic theories have always feared ‘the mob’ even as they affirm the importance of expressions of the popular will, even in their unruly form” (*Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* 1).

<sup>359</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006), 65. In his discussion of the U.S., Rancière describes the way in which Republican standards were imposed on the anarchy of democracy in order to make possible the founding of a government and nation through the stabilizing presence of institutions and regulations, both social and moral.

**Competing Dynamics: “making a place out of no place” and the Negative  
Democratic Impulse**

The repeated and violent imposition of boundary lines in *Mason & Dixon* implies the emptiness of utopia, and of the utopian American dream, constituted as it is by an empty promise of a better future. The negative democratic gesture of Pynchon’s text, then, is to confront the regulative nature of these ideals and to reveal the fragility of their imposed lines of demarcation. Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008) similarly confronts the restrictions imposed by the United States’ founding narrative and its myths, such as the democratic promise, and the text rethinks the nature of the *demos* itself. *A Mercy* reveals that there can never be a totalizing, and totally inclusive, *demos*, for the *demos* is constituted by a persistent mobility and supplemental logic opposed to any stable formulation. While *Mason & Dixon* portrays the ways in which revolutionary America restricted equality, *A Mercy* represents inequalities established even deeper in colonial America’s past, during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and stages the oppositional drives of creation and destruction. In its staging, *A Mercy* follows the movement of the negative democratic impulse, whose persistence is emphasized in the negation of the creative forces presented in the novel.

Early in the novel, during the only section devoted to the point of view of Jacob Vaark and set during his 1682 trip through Virginia to Maryland to conclude a transaction with Senhor D’Ortega, Jacob offers profound insight into the early colonial history of the continent that emphasizes its early plurality. As he

rides to his destination, the narrative voice details this through an elaboration on the danger in the territory:

In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured – had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done – which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land – spawned a thicket of *new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order*. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, *they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry’s profits*. In Jacob Vaark’s view, these were *lawless laws* encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.<sup>360</sup>

As the novel makes abundantly clear, the “order” that these “lawless laws” defend by allowing chaos simply means the repressive white (European) aristocratic patriarchal order. These laws therefore emphasize “that the synonymity of *white* and *American* was a construction enacted and reenacted by law.”<sup>361</sup> This construction also designates an exclusion based on class, not simply race. For also excluded from such an order are the laborers: as similarly suggested by Zukofsky, in this proto-capitalist moment when feudal and aristocratic organizations are in the process of being superseded by a capitalist organization, economic forces are at work in what became the U.S. to isolate and privilege those of the gentry who

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<sup>360</sup> Morrison, *A Mercy*, 11-12, my emphasis. Hereafter cited in the text. The historical reference here is to Bacon’s rebellion of 1676 (Strehle 115-116), and as Babb suggests, the legal language here resonates with the “1680 Virginia statute that instituted white privilege by subjugating black slaves” (152).

<sup>361</sup> Babb, 152.

reaped the most profit from the system. The history of American oppression and exclusion here far pre-exists any foundation of the U.S. as such. Instead, in this view, the foundation of the U.S. merely preserved in a different form the exclusionary logic of existence—the rights of some, not all—rather than radically changing any fact of that existence.<sup>362</sup> Put differently, the Constitution of the U.S. normalizes and unifies the exclusion that was already taking place in colonial America—in, for example, the declaration that an African American counts as 3/5 of a person.

The novel's representation of colonial America implies, like *Mason & Dixon*, that the American Revolution offered no truly emancipatory or egalitarian gesture, yet the novel's democratic perspectival shifts counter this failure of the revolution by allowing each of its main characters—most of whom are excluded from the white patriarchal order of society—a place and right to speak.<sup>363</sup> *A Mercy* opens with a brief section from the point of view of Florens, shifting between 1682 and 1690.<sup>364</sup> The next section, set in 1682, takes Jacob Vaark's perspective, but Jacob dies shortly thereafter. The bulk of the novel, then, shifts

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<sup>362</sup> Laura F. Edwards notes the continued, and perhaps increased, dependence on defining the rights of one group by the exclusion of another group (“The Contradictions of Democracy” 54).

<sup>363</sup> See Babb and Strehle. Babb approaches the novel as a critique of individualism, while Strehle focuses on the novel as a critique of American exceptionalism. In both cases, adherence to individualism or exceptionalism undermines the construction of a community. In an interview with NPR, Morrison discussed exploring the dangers of individualism in the novel.

<sup>364</sup> Florens also recounts the first of many iterations of the scene in which her mother nurses her infant and convinces Jacob to take Florens instead of her. The novel repeatedly returns to this scene, and in the final section, from the perspective of Florens's mother, the episode is described not as a betrayal but as “a mercy” (195).

between the perspectives of those who remain in the wake of Jacob's death. These figures include Rebekka, Jacob's wife, Lina, a Native American, Sorrow, a multiethnic woman,<sup>365</sup> Willard and Scully, two indentured servants on a neighboring farm, and Florens's mother.<sup>366</sup> The novel thus covers the perspectives of most of the major characters of the narrative, but *A Mercy* suggests that these perspectives are not totalizing. More characters could be given voices, such as the blacksmith, a freed black man,<sup>367</sup> and some of the characters who do speak might be given more opportunity to do so, as much of the narrative's plotting only emerges through suggestive omissions. Like Pynchon, then, Morrison does not pretend to offer a totality like that desired by Zukofsky in "A."

This narrative technique in *A Mercy* emphasizes its destructive drive. As Strehle suggests, the seemingly productive aspects of the shifting narrative perspectives in the novel stress instead a principle of difference and dissolution: "While the narratives supplement each other, reveal multiple judgments of

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<sup>365</sup> The novel offers no definitive characterization of Sorrow's ethnicity, though it implies she is "the biracial daughter of a slave" and "of a ship's captain whose cargo suggests that he serves the triangular trade" (Strehle 115).

<sup>366</sup> Florens's mother remains unnamed in the novel; the narrative designates her only by her relation to the daughter she convinces Jacob to take in her stead. Florens's mother suggests that Jacob sees Florens "as a human child, not pieces of eight," which offers the hope of a better life (195).

<sup>367</sup> The blacksmith offers an intriguing example, since as Babb indicates, his relative freedom in colonial America would actually be continually restricted over time. The Constitution designates any African American as 3/5 of a person, and acts such as the Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 will insist on increasing restrictions of black freedom and mobility (Babb 153). This echoes, albeit in a different context, the comments by Cherrycoke in *Mason & Dixon* regarding the founding of the U.S. and the simultaneous restriction of liberty. More fundamentally, the constitutional designation of any African American as 3/5 of a person stresses the inequality on which the United States founds itself, and which the liberal discourses of freedom and liberty try to mask.

characters and events, and reflect on common history, they serve most dramatically to emphasize the separations between characters and to anticipate the dissolution of their community.”<sup>368</sup> Ultimately, this dissolution “underscores the absence of community” among the characters.<sup>369</sup> Despite this insight, Strehle follows other critics of Morrison by insisting on the positive potential inherent in her novel. For Strehle, the absence of community “at the end of the novel can only rekindle the hope for other logics, other Americas.”<sup>370</sup> This reading seems to emerge from the world-building projects of the characters in *A Mercy*, projects that emphasize “the perennial human need for community.”<sup>371</sup> A series of examples from *A Mercy* emphasizes this aspect of Morrison’s text. In Jacob’s section, the narrative characterizes him as “a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place” (13).<sup>372</sup> Similarly, Lina “Found [...] a way to be in the world” after the deaths and loss of her indigenous community (56-57). After the birth of her child, Sorrow re-names herself, in an act of self-recreation and self-definition, “Complete,” though the reader is made aware of the tenuous

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<sup>368</sup> Strehle, 121.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>371</sup> Strehle, 122.

<sup>372</sup> See also Terry, Jennifer, “‘Breathing the Air of a World So New’: Rewriting the Landscape of America in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” *Journal of American Studies*, 48.1 (2014): 127-145. Terry notes a tension in Jacob’s desire to “[make] a place out of no place,” which resonates with “an established discourse of opportunity for European self-realization and reinvention in the New World” but opposes his “respect for the rights and ways of life of indigenous inhabitants” (133). See, for example, *A Mercy*, 12-13. Though as Terry continues, Lina reveals that Jacob’s decision to build a third house, following his investment “in remote slave labour and sugar production in Barbados,” marks a shift in his character, for he becomes the embodiment of destructive colonizer.

nature of this designation, especially when Sorrow's child later dies (157-158, 182). During Willard and Scully's section, the narrative states that "their wages" were "enough to imagine a future" (183). All of these moments gesture toward the positive project of creating a space for oneself, for "making a place out of no place" by imagining both a present and future sense of belonging. Yet *A Mercy* does not offer a coherent and stable whole; instead, the narrative's representation of the human need for community is found alongside a theorization of the necessary failure of such a task.

Another interpretation could be given to Jacob's "making a place out of no place" in relation to the project of the narrative itself. Rather than the positive creation of "a place," this could also be read as an ironic reversal of making the "no place" appear, of realizing utopia by substantializing its nothingness. Of course, to call colonial America "no place" also violently erases the indigenous populations and cultures already living there; Lina's account of her people's devastation emphasizes this violence (56-57). Lina perhaps most forcefully makes visible the "part of those who have no part," the supplemental part of the people denied by early America.<sup>373</sup> At stake in this imposition of a place, or in this construction of a no place, is the claiming of ownership over land. Such a claim imposes a rule, one that includes the exchangeability of land as property. This construction of utopia erases the relationship between indigenous peoples and the

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<sup>373</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9. The "disappearing Indian" trope, as that found in James Fenimore Cooper's novels, is emblematic of the construction of invisibility of indigenous peoples in early America. This persists in different ways today and might be seen, for example, in the Dakota Access Pipeline construction and resistance movements.

land, a relationship not constituted by the same Western logic of property.<sup>374</sup> The use of the trope of nothingness to justify the construction of something frequently characterizes the positive conception of democracy. Those who speak of a democratic promise in the future, for example, negate the present in the name of the future. This negation makes possible the ideological construction of a democracy to come. In contrast, the negative democratic impulse draws on the force of nothingness of utopia to resist the imposed and often violently exclusionary forms imposed on “no place.” While each of its characters strives to create a place to belong in the world, *A Mercy* insists upon the destructive manifestation of the nothingness at the core of such projects.

Lina’s attempt to come to terms with her place with the Vaarks offers one example of this negative dialectic between character and text. After “the destruction of her families,” Lina “decide[s] to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony” (56-57). Lina assembles fragments; she relies “on memory and her own resources” (56). The narrative tellingly states that Lina “recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things” (56).<sup>375</sup> Ultimately, Lina “[f]ound [...] a way to be in the world,” but the narrative then notes, “There was no comfort or place for her in the village; [Jacob] was there and not there” (56-57). Lina discovers “a way to be,” an *ethos*, but this mode of being does not amount to finding or creating a place. Finding “a way to

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<sup>374</sup> For a discussion of some of the indigenous negotiations of imposed legal systems, see *Native Claims: Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500-1920*.

<sup>375</sup> The “or” in this moment might be read as an “and.” See Derrida’s discussion of “invention” in “Psyche: Invention of the Other.”

be” cannot remove the repeated appearing of the negativity of no place. A later perspective from Florens, as she witnesses Lina speaking of her life in her sleep, also questions whether Lina’s “way to be” is even what it seems: “[Lina’s] braid is loose, strands of it escaping the hammock’s weave. She is saying that she is without clan and under a Europe’s rule” (123). Lina’s personal declaration of finding “a way to be” cannot erase or escape the “rule” under which she now lives. The close to Willard and Scully’s chapter similarly reveals the limits to the creative efforts of the characters, as it details the collapse of the Vaark farm and its community of women: “They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false” (183). The imaginative project cannot overcome its own groundlessness. *A Mercy* insists upon the limits to an individual’s world-building project, and in this way the text insists on the negative democratic impulse, the destructive character of democracy.<sup>376</sup>

Morrison speaks to this crucial difference between the projects of *A Mercy* and its characters in her *Salon* interview following the publication of *Paradise* (1997). In response to the comment that *Paradise* is a feminist novel, Morrison responds in the negative, saying, “I would never write any ‘ist.’ I don’t write ‘ist’

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<sup>376</sup> Jacob Vaark’s descent from a “beneficent” pioneer resistant to the commodification of human bodies—“Flesh was not his commodity” (25)—in his chapter to a willing participant in and benefactor of the slave trade makes visible the illusory and tenuous nature of his initial positive utopian aims.

novels.”<sup>377</sup> Asked to elaborate on a potentially controversial statement, Morrison continues to say that she distances herself from feminism:

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity. I detest and loathe [those categories]. I think it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things.<sup>378</sup>

Morrison thus articulates a position of “equitable access,” one that necessitates an unrelenting openness. By opposing herself to categorization and aligning herself with equality, Morrison implies her desired freedom to be one founded on a principle of equality, rather than on exclusive categories, as is the case with liberalism's conception of freedom. Morrison's dismissal of the “feminist *tract*” also disavows any association between her work and the propaganda characteristic of political and religious tracts (OED). As *Mason & Dixon* suggests too, “tract” signals a bounded area of land. Morrison's notion of “opening doors” is a notion of unboundedness that resists the enclosure figured by a tract. Morrison's description here recalls the logic of Benjamin's destructive character. While characters within her novels often engage in creative, positive acts of world-building, Morrison's own project is best encapsulated by destructive openness: “The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room.

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<sup>377</sup> Morrison, “The Salon Interview – Toni Morrison,” Interview by Zia Jaffrey, *Salon*.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred.”<sup>379</sup>

The contrast between Morrison’s destructive character and the world-building of her narrative’s characters reveals both the force and the masking of the negative democratic impulse in her work. Jacob’s desire to “[make] a place out of no place” marks a desire that persists throughout U.S. history. The “Founding Fathers” invent the United States of America by discounting the indigenous peoples and cultures that pre-existed the colonial period and by extracting from the past and recombining those elements into a new configuration, that is, they make a recognizable place—recognizable as a nation to other world nations—where previously there was no legible place. Yet *A Mercy* offers no defined, positive “place.”<sup>380</sup> The narrative stages an encounter with world-building activities to show at once their perceived necessity, as well as, ultimately, their fragility and emptiness. Florens’s final narration in the novel, for instance, details the disintegration of the relationship between the women left after Jacob’s death, as well as the destruction of her relationship with the blacksmith. Inscribing her narration in the empty house Jacob ordered to be built before his death, Florens suggests that the loss of all connections produces a shattering sensation: “There is no more room in this room” (188). This returns us to the opening of the novel, in which Florens describes her writing as similar to a

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<sup>379</sup> Benjamin, “Destructive Character,” 541.

<sup>380</sup> Strehle characterizes *A Mercy* as a *bildungsroman*, privileging the formation and growth of Florens in the novel (117). Yet there is no *Bild* supporting as foundation this *bildung*; the formation is guided by no fixed image or form.

“confession” (3). Florens has written her story, and this writing has been produced because of the suffering she experiences in the formation and destruction of connections, of communities. Without community, the subject falls apart; only the wandering letter remains as testament to that subject. *A Mercy* could be conceptualized, then, as a critique, in the Kantian sense, of the *demos* and of the community-building necessary to instantiate a *demos* and inaugurate its rule.

*A Mercy*, with its focus on community and self-definition, offers a glimpse of the movement and formation of the *demos*, at the same time that the shattering of these communities and their figures emphasizes the impossibility of achieving a *demos* that would satisfy the apparent demand of democracy as it is commonly understood. Following Jacob Vaark’s death and her own recovery from illness, Rebekka’s latent spirituality manifests itself in a strong turn toward religion, specifically toward the Anabaptists from whom the Vaarks had previously separated themselves. Out of necessity the women on the farm initially had formed a tentative community with each other, but this collective begins to fall apart toward the narrative’s close: “There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though, with or without Florens, they were falling away from one another” (158). This tentative, hesitant emergence of a community and its disintegration follows the movement of the negative democratic impulse and its ever-shifting reconfiguration of the *demos*. In the section from Willard and Scully’s perspective, a similar account emerges: “They [the women on the farm] once thought they were a kind of family because

together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false” (183). The imagined world and unity thus fail to maintain themselves. Scully’s thoughts continue to suggest that there seems no unity “on the horizon” for the women, and “remembering how the curate described what existed before Creation,” he “saw dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world” (183). The narrative thus continues with the world-building drive that aims to shape the “dark matter,” the inchoate mass. As with *Mason & Dixon*’s account of God’s originary division in the creation myth and its repercussions (Pynchon 361), *A Mercy* emphasizes the force of this negative “dark matter,” the negative democratic impulse that persistently denies any world-building because of the imaginative limits of that shaping, limits that might not be immediately recognizable but that inevitably undo the formed community. No matter how formed this dark matter might become, its originary chaos and division, as well as its non-meaning, will persist in any and every formation. The narratives of both *Mason & Dixon* and *A Mercy* therefore anticipate the kind of shaping undertaken in the formation of the United States, at least as it was narrated retroactively, as well as in its excluded remainders that continually resist the limitations of the original founding moment.

While *A Mercy* thus details the falling apart of a community, it also gestures to the conditions that prevent, in advance, the formation of a *demos* that does not fall into exclusionary restrictions. As Lina nurses Rebekka during the illness Rebekka contracts after Jacob dies, she recognizes, beyond any sympathetic concern for Rebekka, the material reality of her situation:

Don't die, Miss. Don't. Herself, Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens – three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. The farm could be claimed by or auctioned off to the Baptists. Lina had relished her place in this small, tight family, but now saw its fall. Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow's nest. (68)

Lina notes their precarious position here. The women are already outside of the local, religious community and therefore cannot claim what few rights that community might grant them. If Rebekka dies, they belong “to no one,” which slips into a potential to be “wild game for anyone.” The central problem here is a logic of possession. Before he dies, Jacob voices this logic bluntly to Rebekka, ““What a man leaves behind is what a man is”” (104), suggesting an identity between a man and the property that is his legacy, his inheritance for others. The women on the farm are not allowed, by the law and society, to inherit. Yet Jacob's blunt expression allows for another possible interpretation as well, one that ironically reverses the apparently intended meaning of the expression. For Jacob's expression describes the very logic of abjection or of disavowal. To constitute oneself as a man, one must abject or disavow that which disturbs one's image of masculinity, as well as that which challenges the coherence of the self more generally. Jacob's statement, read this way, characterizes what will occur with democracy in the United States about a hundred years after the narrative's setting. At the founding of the United States, the nation's democratic principles are compromised by the Constitution's establishment of a Republican government.

American democracy can only emerge and survive by leaving behind what it is, by abjecting and disavowing democratic equality. The destructive force of democratic equality—or what I am referring to as the negative democratic impulse—itself meets a force of sovereign destruction: the exclusion of the democratic from so-called democracy. As a consequence of its resistance to the autonomous subject, the negative democratic impulse also resists the proper and property, concepts of possession, as well as of inheritance. In this way, then, *A Mercy* thinks the negative democratic impulse as the force of the negative, uncompromised and uncompromising.

### Chapter 3:

#### Anxious Literature: Scenes of Democratic Violence

Every anguish is arbitrary but no one is neuter. [...] We give microphones to the voiceless to amplify their silence. [...] Once was illegal for we to testify. Now all us do is testify. We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish. It's the rickety rickshaw that will drive us to the brink.

Harryette Mullen, "Natural Anguish," *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), 52.

in our induced days and our wingless days,  
my every waking was incarcerated,  
each square metre of air so toxic with violence

the atmospheres were breathless there  
Dionne Brand, *Ossuaries* (2010), 10.

I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), 220n.8.

The Hegelian formula is in fact partial and a little out, and even out of kilter. I've indicated for you on many occasions the perversion that results—and which is very far-reaching, as far as the political domain—from the whole of the beginning of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, which is too tightly focused on the imaginary. It's very nice to say that the slave's servitude is brimming with the whole future right up to absolute knowledge, but politically this means that till the end of time the slave will remain a slave. One does have to tell it like it is once in a while.

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety* (1962-1963), 25.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, “[o]ne hundred and thirty-seven people from more than 50 countries became citizens of the United States in a naturalization ceremony at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.”<sup>381</sup> Following the dramatic staging (the first naturalization ceremony hosted by the ICA), Chief Magistrate Judge Jennifer Boal, who, as Kevin Slane reports, “presided over the ceremony,” remarked, “[N]ow you are all citizens of the United States of America. We are all Americans. Together we stand as one people, defined not by blood or race or tribe or wealth, but by the fact of citizenship.” Given my discussion of citizenship in the introduction of this dissertation, one can note in this process of naturalization (contra the affirmative tone of Judge Boal) what Lauren Berlant would call cruel optimism.<sup>382</sup> For in the United States, far from satisfying desires of rights or freedoms, citizenship acts as a way of ordering and regulating the population. Specifically, citizenship operates as one site where sexual and racial identitarian practices converge within a national schema.<sup>383</sup> Roderick Ferguson argues, “As a technology of race, U.S. citizenship has historically ascribed heteronormativity (universality) to certain subjects and nonheteronormativity (particularity) to others. The state worked to regulate the gender and sexual nonnormativity of these racialized groups in a variety of ways. In doing so, it produced discourses

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<sup>381</sup> Kevin Slane, *Boston.com*, (5 May 2017), accessed 10 June 2017.

<sup>382</sup> Berlant opens *Cruel Optimism* by stating, “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1).

<sup>383</sup> For further elaboration of this convergence, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

that pathologized nonheteronormative U.S. racial formations.”<sup>384</sup> Citizenship, then, is a cause for both celebration and despair.

After the staging of this ceremony at the ICA, the new citizens were invited to view Nari Ward’s special exhibition several floors above. Ward has come to the United States from Jamaica and has lived and worked extensively in New York City. When entering the gallery that houses Ward’s exhibition, one encounters “We The People,” “a 2011 piece he created using around 1,000 hand-dyed shoelaces tied together to spell out the first three words of the preamble to the Constitution. The shoelaces are not shiny and new, but stretched and worn, many varying in length and some missing aglets” (**Figure 2**).<sup>385</sup>



**Figure 2:** Nari Ward, “We The People,” *The Art Newspaper*

Ward’s materialization of the opening words from the Constitution serves as a dramatic background for the naturalization ceremony, in which a new group

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<sup>384</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>385</sup> Slane.

joins the “we” named by the Constitution.<sup>386</sup> Yet Ward’s image and its appearance also complicate the optimism of citizenship, which designates one as part of the national community of Americans, at least legally. Ward’s exhibition at the ICA marks the second appearance of “We The People,” which was first constructed and displayed in 2011 during Barack Obama’s presidency. Its second appearance coincides with the Trump administration’s antagonism toward immigrant communities, which undercuts some of the optimistic affect potentially accompanying the work.<sup>387</sup> The composition of the phrase from material fragments also suggests a more critical relation to the Constitution. This composition can be seen more clearly upon closer observation and becomes emphasized in images of Ward’s construction (**Figure 3**). Rather than simply creating a whole from parts—and thereby adhering to the logic of synecdoche discussed in the introduction—Ward’s piece emphasizes the persistence of the fragments or parts.

From a distance the letters seem to bleed, giving an effect of ink running down a page, or an effect of three-dimensionality, in which the viewer can perceive a shadow effect. Still, the shoelaces do not come together neatly but

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<sup>386</sup> As Priscilla Wald argues, however, “The changing ‘we’ of the nation-state makes the very name of any ‘us’ mean ‘something not ourselves.’ The task of any official story of the nation is to enable a smooth transition, to accommodate revisions in order simultaneously to transform and preserve ‘us’” (*Constituting Americans* 299). Slane notes as well other pieces by Ward that draw on his own experiences of becoming a naturalized citizen.

<sup>387</sup> Though Trump serves as the most recent and more obvious antagonist to immigrants, his attitude is by no means a new phenomenon in the United States’ view toward immigration. For a response to the Obama administration’s response to immigration, see Amanda Sakuma’s “Obama Leaves Behind a Mixed Legacy on Immigration,” *NBC* (15 Jan. 2017), accessed 10 June 2017.

make visible their construction. On the surface, this seems similar to the fantasy of citizenship, in which diverse populations come together as one people constituted and enriched by a unity of differences. Ward has characterized the piece as “participatory,” for in some of its exhibitions visitors have been able to exchange their shoelaces for shoelaces in the piece.<sup>388</sup> Rather than focus on a fantasmatic projection of the whole from parts, however, this exchange focuses on a metonymic logic of substituting parts for other parts. While the specter of the whole remains—visitors who participate in this exchange also thereby participate in the realization of the whole—Ward’s focus on the substitutability of parts deprivileges the stability and totalizing rule of the whole by turning away from the logic of synecdoche to the logic of metonymy.

This substitutability also draws our attention to the incompleteness of “We the People.” As Judith Butler says of the lines in the Constitution, “‘we the people’—the utterance, the chant, the written line—is always missing some group of people it claims to represent.”<sup>389</sup> The naturalization ceremony emphasizes the nationalist paradigm that structures this “we,” for citizenship is exclusionary by design in more ways than one; the 137 new citizens may have found themselves nominally included in “the people” designated by the Constitution, but they remain immigrants to the U.S. and thus always in some way outside of the normative citizens. Many Hispanic citizens, for example, will remain suspect in

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<sup>388</sup> Victoria Stapley-Brown, “We the People: Nari Ward to re-create monumental work in New York,” *The Art Newspaper* (7 Feb. 2017).

<sup>389</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 166.

the eyes of the law, even once they “count” as part of the “we” of the Constitution. The promise of equality announced by citizenship status thus possesses this structural antagonism for some part of the population. There are also countless others who cannot emigrate to the U.S. or who refuse to participate in the citizenship process, as well as countless others still excluded. The naturalization ceremony epitomizes the legal boundaries that block or slow inclusion, as well as the nationalist character of U.S. citizenship. These boundaries not only exclude, but also restrict those included. When becoming a U.S. citizen, one gains (at least nominally) the rights accorded to U.S. citizens, but one also comes under greater control.

One’s perception of the materiality of Ward’s piece and of its articulation of substitutability depends on one’s spatial relation to the artwork. From a distance, “We the People” seems to cohere in an elegant reproduction of script. One might notice the strands of shoelace hanging asymmetrically (**Figure 2**), but the words seem fully-formed. As one approaches the art object, however, the fragments come into more explicit view. The play between proximity and distance, as well as between attraction and repulsion, allegorizes the relation between the democratic drive (politics) and democracy-as-form (the police). Democracy when instituted depends on a “distance” and a certain attraction; that is, if a subject of democracy (especially a normative subject) does not look too closely, the distribution of the sensible may in fact appear to fulfill the democratic promise of equality. From an alternative viewpoint, however, the inequalities may become increasingly apparent. The promise of equality is one of the seductions

highlighted by the citizenship process. Subjects excluded from the democratic promise—subjects designated as immigrants, queer, black, women, trans, to name a few of the many categories that figure those excluded in different ways from the social order—might experience instead a sense of repulsion at the outset, since the democratic promise works through the unpredictable permeability of boundaries. Who counts as included and to what extent constantly shifts, such that inclusion, if granted, can never be taken as secure. The democratic impulse, as the inherent structural antagonist of the democratic promise, insists on a proximity to the negativity of equality that rejects the false promise of democracy and undermines its seductions and attractions; this negativity cannot be positivized in a form of government without being betrayed.



**Figure 3: Ward constructing “We The People” at *The Fabric Workshop and Museum*, Philadelphia 2011**

I begin with this dramatic scene and the question of citizenship to emphasize the process in which the individual projects onto a larger collective,

such as a national, social, and legal order. By becoming a citizen of the United States, the subject becomes a subject of and a subject to the United States. In other words, the subject enters into a legal form of subjection, which produces a gain and loss. Pragmatically speaking, citizenship confers rights to the immigrant, yet by becoming a citizen, one becomes even further entrenched in the system of surveillance and discipline of the nation.<sup>390</sup> This bind has a long history in the U.S., and as Joy James notes, citizenship has always depended on exclusionary racial norms: “For centuries democracy was idealized through the rise of white citizenship, and portrayed as the manifestation of freedom. Black radical thought witnessed it as building democracy’s boundaries: establishing the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially-fashioned captivity.”<sup>391</sup>

Citizenship operates as a means to construct and reinforce the boundaries of the nation-state.<sup>392</sup> As James highlights, however, citizenship can also exclude those nominally included within its boundaries. One need only look to the mass murder of black and trans men and women by police in the United States to see the ways

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<sup>390</sup> Michel Foucault discusses this phenomenon in both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. In the latter, and in a different context than the one under discussion here, Foucault describes “the endlessly proliferating economy of the discourse on sex” (35). “What is peculiar to modern societies,” Foucault notes, “is not that they consigned sex to a shadow of existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*” (35).

<sup>391</sup> “Afrarealism and the Black Matrix: Maroon Philosophy at Democracy’s Border,” *On Marronage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiblackness*, ed. P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2015), 34.

<sup>392</sup> Much has been written on the ostensible demise and re-instantiation of the nation-state. See Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010) for one approach to this topic. Trump’s rise and the recent policies of the GOP might be considered in relation to anxieties over the status of the United States as sovereign nation.

in which the status of citizen means little when that citizen is not a white, cis-gendered male.<sup>393</sup> The persistence of the materials in Ward's piece stress a resistance to this projection of the subject onto the police order of the nation-state, as if recognizing the violence of erasure and of forgetting required to become a naturalized citizen.

In my previous chapter, I described the ways in which any instituted form of democracy betrays the very democratic elements on which it grounds itself. Through a reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* at the conclusion of the chapter, I argued that democracy can only appear and survive by leaving behind what it is, by abjecting and disavowing democratic equality. An anti-democratic sovereign force or violence overwhelms the nonsovereign force of the negative democratic impulse. The negative democratic impulse mobilizes an equality irreducible to any form of democratic representation, as this representation relies on a logic of synecdoche. This is perhaps most evident in popular sovereignty models of democracy. The "people" may be the majority, but they can never include everyone. The negative democratic impulse insists on repeating, in a destructive cycle, the miscount that will recur and reappear because of the lack inherent in any representative act, especially those acts that have the pretense of speaking for "the people" as a whole.

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<sup>393</sup> There are a number of online sources that track these police murders, including *killedbypolice.net* and the Police Shootings Database of *The Washington Post*. The final chapter of this dissertation will turn more closely to these questions and to the status of immigrants in the U.S.

In this chapter, I turn to three contemporary poets—Robin Coste Lewis, Ocean Vuong, and Safiya Sinclair—who recognize the ways in which American democracy enacts violence on the individuals on whom it depends to construct “the people” or “community.” Part of the motivation in my selection of these three poets is an effort to counter the “delusions of whiteness” of avant-garde poetry, which “has been an overwhelmingly white enterprise, ignoring major swaths of innovators.”<sup>394</sup> These poets engage in experimental forms of writing to articulate forms of resistance, negotiation, or refusal against the police order’s enactment of violence by performing a reciprocal, but asymmetric, violence (or what Frantz Fanon might call “counter-violence”).<sup>395</sup> By putting these poets in conversation, I do not intend to imply a uniformity to their projects. Each poet addresses differently the problematic relation between the divided, excluded subject and the community of the police order. The previous chapter focused on the totalizing drive of form and formal organization; this chapter focuses on the violence that emerges from the materials that get redistributed in such organizations. I argue that these poets work toward a negative democratic politics

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<sup>394</sup> Cathy Park Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* 7, accessed 10 June 2017. Further in her article, Hong writes that “poets of color have always been expected to sit quietly in the backbenches of *both* mainstream and avant-garde poetry.” In an interview with Leah Mirakhor, Robin Coste Lewis has remarked on the “pathology of whiteness,” which “is the darkest ideology around” (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, 24 April 2016).

<sup>395</sup> Fanon discusses counter-violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity. [...] The development of violence among the colonized people will be proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime” (88).

in their insistence on the non-relation of this relation; that is, they point to the gaps between subject and collective, refusing to be subsumed by the organizing violence of a collective, or even of a stable identity. While Rancière focuses on the divided community, or the nonsovereign political subject, I will add an emphasis on the nonsovereign individual subject.<sup>396</sup> My attention to the subject and its (non)relation to the community proliferates the negativity of the democratic drive by accounting for a double division, of the subject and of the community.<sup>397</sup>

This relation between the individual subject and the collective subject replays the dialectic of proximity and distance, and speaks to my title, which names a constellation (or concatenation) related to this dialectic: scenes of anxiety, violence, and democracy. Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* provides one precedent for the work of these conjunctions. For Wald, the nation-state requires "official stories" to constitute its people; Wald includes the Constitution's "We the People" as an

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<sup>396</sup> Yarimar Bonilla's *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) approaches questions of nonsovereignty from a somewhat different perspective. For Bonilla, "non-sovereign politics" refers to acts that "challenge the modernist premise of absolute sovereignty by revealing its insufficiencies" and that "operate as forms of immanent critique: they are attempts to break free from the epistemic constraints of political modernity, even while still being compelled to think through its normative categories. Non-sovereignty thus needs to be understood as both a positive project and a negative placeholder for an anticipated future characterized by something *other than* the search for sovereignty" (xiv).

<sup>397</sup> My chapter therefore explores the disjunction of Rancière's subject and the subject of psychoanalysis. For a precedent, see Solange Guénoun, "Jacques Rancière's Freudian Cause," *SubStance* 33.1 (2004), 25-53. Guénoun focuses on Rancière's relationship to psychoanalysis primarily through a reading of Rancière's *Aesthetic Unconscious*.

exemplary iteration of such an official story.<sup>398</sup> Because these official stories always construct norms and collectives that exclude, many authors write with the “unsettling sense of not enjoying full authorial liberty,” with the “uneasy awareness of a larger story controlling their stories.”<sup>399</sup> Wald specifies an interest “in the anxiety surrounding the conceptualization of personhood that these authors confronted as they sought to tell, represent, and analyze untold stories: what had been suppressed and repressed by official stories of We the People.”<sup>400</sup> Wald names the Freudian “uncanny” as something that “helps us understand what inaugurates narratives of identity and what haunts them.”<sup>401</sup>

Through an etymological reading, Freud shows in “The Uncanny” how the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar, unhomely) coincides with what seems to be its opposite, the *heimlich* (familiar, homely).<sup>402</sup> Freud links the uncanny to the return of the repressed, which allows it to be at once familiar and strange in its sensation: “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”<sup>403</sup> In this chapter, I extend the work done by Wald, but

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<sup>398</sup> *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Wald notes that “the uncanny sends us home to the discovery that ‘home’ is not what or where we think it is and that we, by extension, are not who or what we think we are” (7).

<sup>402</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII (1917-1919), 220, 226. “What is *heimlich*,” Freud writes, “comes to be *unheimlich*” (224).

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. Freud’s essay mimetically reproduces the effects of the uncanny, in that he persistently disavows the uncanny in a metonymic series of examples and discussions. This generates the movement of the text, for at such moments of

rather than focus on anxieties about what it means to be “American,” I focus on anxieties associated with the specifically democratic project in the U.S. The uncanny returns of violence in the poems discussed in this chapter are uncanny precisely because they articulate through repetition the political act the police order disavows, and these returns emphasize the violence required by the police to erase the equality articulated in the political act; this violence haunts and exposes the lies proliferated by the police order’s façade.

Part of this extension depends on moving from Freud to Lacan, who develops a theory of anxiety as an affect from a rereading of Freud, especially Freud’s theory of the uncanny.<sup>404</sup> Lacan’s discussion of anxiety reverses traditional conceptions, for he says, “Anxiety isn’t about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren’t missing [...] *there’s no lack*.”<sup>405</sup> In other words, and in a double negative, anxiety “*is not without an object*.”<sup>406</sup> In contrast to loss, anxiety for Lacan has to do with “the sudden appearance of the *Heimliche* within

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disavowal Freud must then shift to another signifier of the uncanny. For example, Freud notes that “not everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking [...] is on that account uncanny” (245). Later, Freud writes, “Our conclusion could then be stated thus: an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revised by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (249).

<sup>404</sup> It should be clear, then, that my psycho-affective approach differs from approaches to anxiety as a “physiological symptom” operating at the level of medical discourse on nerves (Murison 6). For an example of a physiological approach, see Justine Murison’s *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*.

<sup>405</sup> Lacan, *Anxiety, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 54.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

the frame, and this is why it's wrong to say that anxiety is without object."<sup>407</sup>

Lacan's reference to a "frame" is crucial; "The field of anxiety is situated as something framed."<sup>408</sup> As such, anxiety entails "the relationship between the stage and the world"; that is, anxiety depends on constructed borders and the permeability of those borders.<sup>409</sup> Lacan claims, "*Suddenly, all at once*, you'll always find this term the moment the phenomenon of the *Unheimliche* enters. You'll always find the stage that presents itself in its own specific dimension and which allows for the emergence in the world of that which *may not* be said."<sup>410</sup> "Anxiety," Lacan says, is a "cut—this clean cut without which the presence of the signifier, its functioning, its furrow in the real, is unthinkable—it's the cut that opens up, affording a view of what now you can hear better, the unexpected."<sup>411</sup>

In the context of this dissertation, and at the risk of making an unfair transposition, I suggest that the police order, or consensus democracy, imposes a world, within which democratic stages appear that pierce the fantasy of this order's distribution and its consensus.<sup>412</sup> As Rancière claims, "*The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its*

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>412</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 102-103. In "A Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of Democracy," Alain Badiou argues, "Today the word 'democracy' is the principal organiser [*sic*] of consensus" (*Metapolitics* 78). See also Rancière's *Hatred of Democracy* for a discussion of the antagonism between the so-called democratic governments and the democratic drive for equality.

*subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.*”<sup>413</sup> Rancière’s “polemical assertion of equality” “cuts, or splices” the police order of consensus.<sup>414</sup> The democratic impulse operates as a “cut that opens up” the closed system of consensus democracy imposed by the police order.<sup>415</sup>

The Lacanian “stage”—which allows for “for the emergence in the world of that which *may not* be said”<sup>416</sup>—resembles the aesthetic scene privileged by Rancière. Both name an interruption of the distribution of the sensible that necessitates a re-ordering of things to attempt to account for what was (and

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<sup>413</sup> “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 45. An earlier thesis claims that democracy “*is the very regime of politics itself*” (39).

<sup>414</sup> Davide Panagia, “Rancière’s Style,” *Novel* 47.2 (Summer 2014), 287-288.

<sup>415</sup> In *Negotiating Postmodernism*, Wayne Gabardi speaks to the logic of this closed system of the police, as well as to the institutional exclusions of democracy as form of government, when he describes the ways in which “the *demos* has been effectively colonized by the modern *domus*” (124). In other words, the open and “transgressive *demos*” gets restricted by the “bounded, state-centered *domus*” (124). Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* offers a similar and extensive engagement with neoliberalism’s erasure of (liberal) democracy through its logic of economic reduction. Though Gabardi’s analysis focuses on the neoliberal transformation of democracy, the movement from the excessively open and disruptive *demos* to the excessively bounded *domus* works also as an analogy for the movement from politics to the police order. Paradoxically, democracy *qua domus* (police) enables the (re)appearance of the democratic *demos* (the political subject). The neoliberal order described by Gabardi attempts to “domesticate” the social order, but the authors in this chapter resist this imposition by focusing on the excessive force of the *demos* that resists all ordered distributions. In an interview with Leah Mirakhor, Robin Coste Lewis states, “Blackness for me is incredibly vast. It’s not domestic, nor is it *domesticated*” (*Los Angeles Review of Books*). In this chapter, black, queer, and immigrant are some of the terms that describe the excess and lack of the *demos*, that is, the democratic miscount, which the *domus* attempts to do without. For the *domus* can only offer a “complete” count by erasing the democratic miscount—the void or supplement.

<sup>416</sup> Lacan, *Anxiety*, 75.

remains) unaccountable.<sup>417</sup> Anxiety, as the cut that constitutes the signifying chain, is a signal that belongs to the real, which is why it does not deceive.<sup>418</sup> This cut names, in other words, the constitutive negativity of the signifying system. As such, it resembles Rancière's dissensus, which disrupts the distribution of the sensible by introducing a stage or scene into an order that assumed itself to be complete. Dissensus generates, then, a redistribution of the sensible. The negativity of dissensus reveals the incompleteness of the world, the inequality of any presumed equality.<sup>419</sup> For example, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, critical statements by trans activists at the Women's March reveal the false and inegalitarian promise of the Women's March's claims to inclusion and to equality. Democratic dissensus uncannily returns equality into the world of the police order, a world that constituted itself by disavowing the very dissensus on which it grounded itself. As such, the reappearance of dissensus, of equality, produces a shattering sense of anxiety in the police order, which depends on distributions of inequality.

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<sup>417</sup> For Lacan, "the *world*" names "the place where the real bears down," while "the *stage* of the Other" names the place "where man as subject has to be constituted, to take up his place as he who bears speech, but only ever in a structure that, as truthful as it sets itself out to be, has the structure of fiction" (116).

<sup>418</sup> Lacan privileges anxiety as "*that which deceives not*, that which is entirely free of doubt," so that "[a]nxiety is not doubt, anxiety is the cause of doubt" (76).

<sup>419</sup> Capitalism's logic of equivalence, for example, depends on an inegalitarian principle to make the easy substitutability of things possible. The democratic miscount names a supplemental status excluded from the logic of equivalence. See Panagia 287-288.

Near the end of his seminar, Lacan develops a “formula for the emergence of the *Unheimliche*” based on the link between the eye and the desirable.<sup>420</sup> According to Lacan, “the eye institutes the fundamental relationship of the *desirable* inasmuch as it always tends, in the relation to the Other, to lead one to misrecognize how beneath the *desirable* there is a *desirer*.”<sup>421</sup> Lacan continues, “Imagine that you’re dealing with the most restful *desirable*, in its most soothing form, a divine statue that is just divine—what could be more *unheimlich* than to see it come to life, that is, to show itself as a *desirer*?”<sup>422</sup> Democracy, as a paradoxical distancing from and disavowal of those democratic elements on which it grounds itself, attempts to remove (or at least regulate) any anxiety from its conception. In contrast, the “anxious literature” that is the subject of this chapter insists on anxiety as fundamental to the negative democratic impulse. In this literature, the “objects” of democracy—that is, the people nominally included, yet in fact excluded, from the democratic count—present themselves as desiring subjects. The democratic drive takes place on the stage, within the frame, of the police order’s consensus democracy. It is the appearance—the presence, *not* the absence—of the constitutive force of democracy, the egalitarian drive that

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<sup>420</sup> Lacan, *Anxiety*, 271.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid. In his study of Lacan’s *Anxiety* seminar, Roberto Harari claims of this moment, “*the uncanny does not fall away when, from the place of the desirer, the other is located in the place of the desirable; it occurs when the desirable suddenly manifests itself as desiring, since the desirer is what was veiled [...]* this unveiling inversion—instituted by the eye—of what is desired into desirer can only be uncanny, since the desire of the Other turns back, ungovernable, towards the subject, which arouses anxiety” (*Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety”: An Introduction* 226-7).

<sup>422</sup> Lacan, *Anxiety*, 271.

haunts the democratic promise as its structural antagonist, that makes the police order tremble. The sense of anxiety—which can be felt or experienced because of the appearance of equality (the object or objective that democracy promises)—involves violence because it shatters the fantasy of the social order and of the constituted subjects of that order.<sup>423</sup>

### Negotiating Violence

In an interview with Matthew Sharpe, Robin Coste Lewis describes her confrontation with Thomas Stothard's eighteenth-century etching, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, which provides her 2015 poetry collection (*Voyage of the Sable Venus*) and its titular central poem sequence ("Voyage of the Sable Venus") their titles and genesis: "It's really horrible. It's beautiful and horrible simultaneously. It's a redux of the Botticelli Venus on the half-shell, except this 'Venus' is a black woman. Like Botticelli's Venus, she's

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<sup>423</sup> If the *domus*, the police order of consensus democracy, imposes a stage, then the democratic elements excluded in this imposition are what insist on the insufficiency of this stage and its erasure of democratic dissensus. For Rancière, "Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it" (*Disagreement* 26-27). Political acts produce anxiety precisely because "a part of those who have no part" appear; that is, the stage suddenly lacks lack since its supplemental object appears (*Disagreement* 28). There is, then, a certain shattering violence to the political act, since it produces an impossible conjunction of worlds: "Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something 'between' them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing" (*Disagreement* 27). The appearance of the part of those who have no part dis-orders the police distribution of the sensible. The poets and poems in this chapter create stages or scenes in which consensus democracy enacts its sovereign violence and in which subjects enact democratic violence against this force.

attended by all these classical figures, but then you notice something in Triton's or Neptune's hand. Instead of the usual trident, he's carrying a flag of the Union Jack! So it's a pro-slavery image."<sup>424</sup> Though Lewis begins by describing the image as horrible, her description signals first the image's presumably beautiful characteristics, such as the representation of a black woman in the image of Botticelli's Venus. The Union Jack suddenly introduces contextual reference—"but then you notice something"—which subverts the initial sensation of the image as beautiful. Lewis articulates the conjunction of the beautiful and the horrible as a conjunction of the aesthetic and the historical, which produces a disjunctive experience for the perceiving subject. Rather than exist in isolation, the aesthetic judgment depends upon the scene of the encounter, and Lewis's description emphasizes this process as the appearance of something which should not be in the frame; that is, the conjunction of beauty and horror names a dissensus of two incommensurable experiences.

Lewis then provides a strikingly compressed articulation of this paradox of attraction and repulsion that she experiences in her encounter with the etching:

And I remember two things about first seeing this. One is, I thought this is exactly what it feels like to be an American, for anyone, but more specifically for African Americans. On the one hand you have this myth of democracy and it's all beautiful, so you're compelled by the propaganda of nation—but at the same

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<sup>424</sup> "Robin Coste Lewis," *BOMB Magazine* (13 Jan. 2016), accessed 10 June 2017. Stothard's etching appears in the third edition of Bryan Edwards's *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, published in 1801. Saidiya V. Hartman has written on similar racist and sexist images in "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (June 2008), 1-14.

time you're repelled, because you know the history, you know the country is blood-soaked in every way.<sup>425</sup>

Lewis locates the paradoxical experience in the American, specifically African American, subject. Her shift from American to African American has, among other significances, the effect of narrating the differentials of power. Americans experience attraction and repulsion, but this experience occurs “more specifically” for African Americans, who of course experience a racialized subjection not included in the ostensibly neutral “American.” The myth of democracy includes the discourse of equality as well as the promise of equality to come, yet the historical reality of democracy in America destroys any of these pretensions.<sup>426</sup> Lewis’s description therefore highlights the way in which the myth of democracy seduces its subjects, yet she also acknowledges the horrifying realization of the violent and exclusionary norms inherent in this myth.

This simultaneous attraction and repulsion divides the subject such that it must navigate various forms of order, and “Plantation,” the collection’s opening poem, emphasizes the negotiations a subject must perform within the racist,

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<sup>425</sup> Lewis and Sharpe. The quotation continues, “The second thing is I thought the title, ‘Voyage of the Sable Venus,’ just that one line, was an epic in and of itself. And I just wanted to luxuriate in the title, ‘Voyage of the Sable Venus,’ forever. Then I started to think about that, how a title can be an epic, and I wondered about other images of objects that contained black figures and asked myself: Well, what are some of the other titles?” (Lewis and Sharpe). Lewis’s re-appropriation of such titles, along with curatorial descriptions, constitutes the collection’s title poem, “Voyage of the Sable Venus.”

<sup>426</sup> See again Joy James’s “Afrarealism”: “For centuries democracy was idealized through the rise of white citizenship, and portrayed as the manifestation of freedom” (34). Yet, James continues, “Black radical thought witnessed [white citizenship] as building democracy’s boundaries: establishing the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially-fashioned captivity” (34).

heteropatriarchal order of consensus democracy. Even before the opening stanza, the title draws the reader's attention to slavery. The poem then opens with a scene between two lovers framed by images of incarceration and a dialogue on slavery:

And then one morning we woke up  
embracing on the bare floor of a large cage.

To keep you happy, I decorated the bars.  
Because you had never been hungry, I knew

I could tell you the black side  
of my family owned slaves.<sup>427</sup>

"Plantation" situates itself in no historically specifiable moment. While the title and dialogue on slavery refer to a past, the poem's scene between lovers and its carceral logic refer to the present. As Joy James argues, "Prison is the modern-day manifestation of the plantation."<sup>428</sup> The poem's conjunction of past and present therefore speaks to the way in which "[t]he means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain."<sup>429</sup> The opening scene of "Plantation" gestures to the way in which the myth of American democracy depends on violent exclusion and containment.

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<sup>427</sup> Robin Coste Lewis, "Plantation," *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>428</sup> "Democracy and Captivity," *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 121.

<sup>429</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12. For Sharpe, "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14). Sharpe's text aims to "investigate the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human." This investigation "ask[s] what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation" (14). Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* might be said to be engaged in a similar kind of "wake work."

In its conjunction of incarceration and enslavement, the poem also insists on the indistinction between living in subjection and living as if in subjection. “Plantation” exposes the impossibility of distinguishing the boundaries between the two for those black subjects living outside of the prison. Because the poem opens with the lovers waking up “embracing on the bare floor of a large cage,” the reader cannot with certainty take this as literal or figural (3). Such an indistinction announces, at the outset of this collection, the reconfiguration of slavery in our modern carceral state, that is, the state in which the technologies of the prison—including surveillance, containment, policing, and discipline—become generalized technologies of society.<sup>430</sup> The indistinction of the poem’s opening asks the reader to confront the “open-air” version of the “closed prison” as another iteration of carceral logic.<sup>431</sup> Those black subjects outside of the prison confines still find themselves very much living in subjection.

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<sup>430</sup> See Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault’s model has been criticized, however, for its failure—or refusal—to account for race. See, for example, Rashad Shabazz’s *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* for a recent analysis of the particular emergence of carceral logics and their corresponding constructions of black masculinity in Chicago. Taking a broader angle than Lewis, Angela Davis describes a globalized prison-industrial complex and highlights a specific experience visiting Palestine: “The Israeli military made no attempt to conceal or even mitigate the character of the violence they inflicted on the Palestinian people. Gun-carrying military men and women—many extremely young—were everywhere. The wall, the concrete, the razor wire everywhere conveyed the impression that we were in prison. Before Palestinians are even arrested, they are already in prison. One misstep and one can be arrested and hauled off to prison; one can be transferred from an open-air prison to a closed prison” (“On Palestine, G4S, and the Prison-Industrial Complex” 59). Davis’s account of Palestine draws attention to the way in which “Plantation” similarly deconstructs the relationship between inside and outside.

<sup>431</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “On Palestine, G4S, and the Prison-Industrial Complex,” *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 59.

I am *not* suggesting that imprisonment and life outside of the prison are the same. There are clearly numerous differences of degree and kind between the two.<sup>432</sup> Rather, I am arguing that carceral logics structure life outside of—and supposedly distinct from—the prison. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler asserts, “[T]he prison is the limit case of the public sphere, and that freedom of assembly is haunted by the possibility of imprisonment. [...] That very power of confinement is a way of defining, producing, and controlling what will be the public sphere and who will be admitted to public assembly.”<sup>433</sup> With the indistinction named by “Plantation,” the experience of quasi-death within prison applies to the social order itself.<sup>434</sup> Though the lovers may not literally encounter each other in a cage, they are nonetheless imprisoned by the social and historical forces that restrict and confine their identities.

In “Plantation” Lewis returns to the past scenes of subjection and places them in a new configuration in the present. Rather than unmasking what Michel Foucault names “subjugated knowledges,” Lewis’s poem suggests that such

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<sup>432</sup> George Jackson claims an implicit difference when he writes that “[c]apture, imprisonment, is the closest thing to being dead that one is likely to experience in this life” (*Soledad Brother* 14). Though elsewhere in *Soledad Brother* Jackson describes black and brown life in the United States as captive, this quotation suggests a difference at least in degree between literal imprisonment and the imprisonment experienced under various forms of social control.

<sup>433</sup> Butler, 173.

<sup>434</sup> See Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* for a theory of social death. Many others have elaborated on and responded to the concept. See, for example, Calvin Warren’s *Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, & Ethics*.

subjugation exists on the surface.<sup>435</sup> Its visibility thus stands as a given; Lewis attempts to re-make this visibility, to make it appear anew and differently. Lewis therefore evades the binary of invisibility/visibility that Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes as “an Enlightenment-inspired bifurcation between the invisible and the visible, between private and public expressions of desire in which invisibility and privacy are linked to oppression, while access to visibility and publicity is aligned with empowerment.”<sup>436</sup> Against this enlightenment binary, Rancière suggests, “[W]e always start from some definite knots of the visibility and intelligibility of things.”<sup>437</sup> The police order dominates by constructing a particular distribution of the sensible, of what can be seen and known, rather than by imposing invisibility and privacy.<sup>438</sup> The indistinction of “Plantation” stresses

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<sup>435</sup> Foucault’s “subjugated knowledges” name both “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations” and “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges” (“*Society Must Be Defended*” 7).

<sup>436</sup> *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 25. Tinsley is addressing here Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and its legacy: “too many northern studies of same-sex sexuality stay out of springs or swamps and close to bedrooms. Their cartographies often rely on standard metaphors of interior and exterior space, of the closet and of ‘coming out’” (25). Before turning to queer of color writers, Tinsley remarks, “[T]he closet’ seems to work not (only) as the space that confines queers but also as the space that confines queer studies, whose closed-off perspective—closed off, too often, to the world *outside* the Global North—speaks to the field’s early myopia” (26).

<sup>437</sup> “Writing, Repetition, Displacement: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” interviewed by Abraham Geil, *Novel* 47.2 (Summer 2014), 305.

<sup>438</sup> The distinction here is slight, and perhaps a matter of emphasis. Neoliberalism’s privatization of life for example, depends upon a particular configuration of the sensible rather than a willful construction of the invisible. The invisible instead emerges as a consequence of the “count” of the police order, which denies the democratic miscount.

two registers of visibility: the police order's distribution of the sensible as normative and the critical re-reading of this distribution as unequal and incomplete. The poem's critical orientation follows from its articulations of the negotiations with which the speaker must engage.

The poem's opening indistinction between literal and figural persists in the nature of the speaker's relationship to her lover to suggest a sense of confinement that complicates any potential experience of liberation, as the speaker describes both a fondness for her partner and a recognition of violence: "Then your tongue / was inside my mouth, and I wanted to say // *Please ask me first*, but it was your / tongue, so who cared suddenly // about your poor manners?" (4). The "poor manners" seem to normalize and regulate what appears to be sexual assault, an assault that escalates in its violence at the end of the poem:

You pulled

my pubic bone toward you. I didn't  
say, *It's still broken*; I didn't tell

you, *There's still this crack*. It was sore,  
but I stayed silent because you were smiling.

You said, *The bars look pretty, Baby*,  
then rubbed your hind legs up against me. (4-5)

Rehearsing a sexual scene in which the woman suppresses her own pain for the sake of the man's pleasure, the poem describes what Dionne Brand refers to as "[t]he burden of the body" at the same time it reiterates the trope of a cage with which it began.<sup>439</sup> Here the woman remains silent, which speaks to the way in

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<sup>439</sup> Dionne Brand, "This Body for Itself," *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994), 39.

which “[t]he female is made for a man” in the heteropatriarchal order.<sup>440</sup> An internal fracture persists in the woman’s body, a fracture exacerbated by her sexual encounter. The violence of slavery and the violence to the woman’s body stress how structures of violence enact themselves on the body. The speaker’s broken bone is presumably “*still broken*” because her lover insists on gratification in the sexual act, a desired gratification the speaker seems to have internalized by remaining silent despite her body’s pain. In this reading, the poem implicitly asserts, “we are all trapped within ontological constraints in which individuality is an effect rather than a cause of power.”<sup>441</sup> The constructions of the woman and man of this poem appear as constructions of and through power relations. Yet the speaker complicates this reading by saying “who cared.” With this turn, the speaker resists the binary logic of consent and its violation that a reading of individuality necessitates. Instead, the poem challenges any reading that depends on a stable sense of identity or individual agency. The violence of the scene, therefore, is not clearly the sexual violence that my first reading suggests. Instead, the violence might be understood as the violence of living in a subjectivity in which individuality remains impossible to escape at the same time as an anti-individual referentiality—to the world, through language—also remains impossible to escape. The violence of the poem therefore appears as the violence of the psychic-emotional structures the narrator presents and subverts by resisting the imposition of psychology or of individuality.

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>441</sup> Madhavi Menon, *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 21.

The closing description of the man's "hind legs" engages in the violence of animalizing the human figure and suggests again the dynamics of power and violence. Earlier in the poem, the man moves through a series of metamorphoses, "from a prancing black buck / into a small high yellow girl" (3). While the speaker declares her biracial identification when she refers to "the black side / of my family" earlier, these lines that figure her lover maintain more racial ambiguity. The end of the poem in a sense realizes the metaphoric configuration of the man as a gendered, racialized, and inhuman figure. Yet the poem refuses to allow any stability in these identity positions. As soon as the man becomes the "high yellow girl," he transforms into "the girl's mother, pulling // yourself away from yourself" (3-4). The man undergoes a series of divisions here, such that in the end he is both being pulled apart and pulling himself apart. His violence against the speaker represents a reciprocal violence, for the man also pulls her apart in their sexual encounter. This double gesture—being pulled apart and pulling oneself apart—speaks to the violence enacted on subjects by the police order and by any collectivizing effort, as well as to the violence inherent in the subject. The violence enacted on others then mirrors these violent formations.

"Plantation" dramatizes, then, the way in which identity formations are always an effect of the enactment of (sovereign) power. As Madhavi Menon suggests, "Identity is the demand made by power—tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make our identity different from one another's, we

are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it.”<sup>442</sup> Rather than complying, however, the speaker’s ambiguous position in “Plantation” suggests a negotiation with, as well as a struggle against, controlling and violent identity relations. The focus on a sexual encounter in this poem is by no means arbitrary, for “[t]here is perhaps nothing like sex to bring us face-to-face with the failure of regimes of identity. There is also nothing like sex to make us violently insist on identity nonetheless.”<sup>443</sup> “Plantation” articulates the way in which the lived subject exceeds all identity constructions imposed upon her; the woman in “Plantation,” negotiates, or “traverses,” different identity formations in a way that suggests she cannot be reduced to any single identity.<sup>444</sup> For Lewis, in “Plantation” “people are reincarnating in their own body many, many, many times within one lifetime.”<sup>445</sup> Here “identities can move even if the body stays static (which is to say repressed).”<sup>446</sup> In her interview with Leah Mirakhor, Lewis states, “Blackness for me is incredibly vast. It’s not domestic, nor is it *domesticated*.” For Lewis and in

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<sup>442</sup> Menon, 2. Menon attempts a profound challenge to the persistence of identity politics in both liberal and conservative discourses. Menon notes that “*lived reality is at odds with identity politics*,” and she asks, “Race and sex and gender and class are certainly policed fiercely in all societies, but why do we confuse that policing with the truth about ourselves? If anything, the categorization is the problem, not our challenging of it. In a bizarre move of sympathizing with our oppressors, we take to heart regimes that restrict us, and then tell ourselves that the restriction is the truth of our being in the world” (3). “Lure,” an autobiographical poem from Lewis’s collection not addressed in this chapter, perhaps speaks most explicitly to a nuanced approach to identity consistent with Menon’s work.

<sup>443</sup> Menon, 3.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 13. Menon argues for a traversal across particular identity formations “without settling on any one in particular” (13).

<sup>445</sup> Lewis and Sharpe.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

“Plantation,” blackness becomes a name for what exceeds restrictive identity categories. “Plantation” expresses an encounter that dramatizes the process in which the black woman’s body is constructed by its relations with others and with the world to exist “as a captive body, marked and branded as such from one generation to the next.”<sup>447</sup> By conceptualizing the subject as both mobile and as that which arises at the intersection of different regimes of violent racial and gender categorizations, Lewis radically challenges the restrictions imposed by any identity position grounded in consensus. Any such position constitutes the subject as autonomous only by excluding heteronomous qualities.

### **Fragmentation, Metonymy, Catachresis**

If Lewis stresses the negotiations required of the subject in the face of sovereign violence, Ocean Vuong focuses on the gaps between and internal to the positions one traverses. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, both “Notebook Fragments” and “Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds” focus on the divisions within the subject, as well as on the subject’s division from different iterations of the community.<sup>448</sup> In doing so, Vuong turns to the divisions of the enunciating subject that must be disavowed to construct the (political) subject of the statement. Any “we” or *demos* that emerges, no matter how divided, can only emerge by leaving behind or imposing

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<sup>447</sup> P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, “What is the *Danger* in Black Studies and Can We Look at It Again (and Again)?” *On Marronage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiblackness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2015), 13-4. Aligned with one of the calls of black studies, “Plantation” “address[es] the status of social *death* as the condition of possibility for black social *life*” (Saucier and Woods 13).

<sup>448</sup> *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016). Hereafter cited in the text.

a connection onto the subjects on whom it depends. Vuong shares with Lewis a resistance to the identity categorizations forced upon individuals. They also share a recognition that one must negotiate such categories, for categorization and the impositions of identity are inevitable. In an interview with Kaveh Akbar, Vuong offers a telling metaphor of identity: “I see identity more as a thread being pushed through a piece of fabric as it’s being woven, and that all of our identities are fibers woven in that thread.”<sup>449</sup> Vuong’s figure of the thread combines dynamism and stasis. Yet he then acknowledges that external forces impose identity formations: “Of course, no matter what I do or say, I will always be an Asian-American, Vietnamese, Queer, etc, including all the identities that I don’t even have the language for yet.”<sup>450</sup> Vuong poses a double problem with identity in these statements. The first involves an internal or immanent focus: how one might come to terms with one’s own proliferating selves. The second involves the external focus of the social order determining one’s sense of self. While the latter may seem the more violent of the two, Vuong—in line with the insights of psychoanalysis—suggests that a subject’s internal divisions perform a comparable form of violence. Rather than reconcile these problems with difference, or try to articulate an identity that would somehow include them all, Vuong’s poetry, as will soon be evident, stresses the “‘entanglements’, ‘imbrications’, ‘intimacies,’ or ‘encounters’” of these different identity categories and their constitutive

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<sup>449</sup> *Dive Dapper*, accessed 15 June 2017.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

forces.<sup>451</sup> Vuong thus avoids consensus in favor of a democratic dissensus, of placing on the stages of his poems irreconcilable worlds.

Jacques Rancière has recently drawn on a similar figure of the thread to describe the problem of the modern novel as the problem of reconciling two incommensurable orders: either the arbitrary or the necessary, “either the empirical succession of individual facts or the construction of a causal arrangement of events.”<sup>452</sup> Such an opposition informs Vuong’s “Notebook Fragments,” whose very title offers the “suggestion of arbitrariness.”<sup>453</sup> Constructed from a series of fragments and ranging from the humorously pragmatic—“Note to self: If a guy tells you his favorite poet is Jack Kerouac, / there’s a very good chance he’s a douchebag”—to the pseudo-existential—“Shouldn’t heaven be superheavy by now?”—the poem does offer a sense of order, or necessity, despite its suggestion of arbitrariness (69). In one span of several lines, the statements seem to work as a sequence: “In Vietnamese, the word for grenade is ‘bom,’ from the French ‘pomme,’ / meaning ‘apple.’ // Or was it American for ‘bomb’?” (69). Here the “it” only makes sense if read as referring to an antecedent, which in this case would be “bom.” Another sequence later in the poem similarly requires the reader to link the fragments into a chain to construct a narrative, that is, to construct meaning:

I met a man tonight. A high school English teacher  
from the next town. A small town. Maybe

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<sup>451</sup> Lisa Lowe, “Insufficient Difference,” *Ethnicities* 5.3 (2005), 412.

<sup>452</sup> “The Thread of the Novel” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 47.2 (Summer 2014), 197. Rancière’s *The Lost Thread* extends this discussion.

<sup>453</sup> Vuong and Akbar.

I shouldn't have, but he had the hands  
of someone I used to know. Someone I used to.

The way they formed brief churches  
over the table as he searched for the right words.

I met a man, not you. In his room the Bibles shook on the shelf  
from candlelight. His scrotum a bruised fruit. I kissed it

lightly, the way one might kiss a grenade  
before hurling it into the night's mouth.

Yikes.

*I could eat you* he said, brushing my cheek with his knuckles. (70)

One might read some of these lines as separate. The repetition of "I met a man" followed by "not you" might signal a shift. Though the repetition throughout the poem of "I met a man" suggests a sequence of men, it could also signal the reappearance of the same man. In later repetitions, the "man" changes, yet each man can be substituted for the other in the erotic pairing with the speaker. The analogy to a grenade—"the way one might kiss a grenade"—in the previous sequence also refers back to the earlier linguistic discussion of grenade in Vietnamese, French, and English. There seems to be, in other words, a thread that weaves the various fragments together into some recognizable sequence or narrative.

The fragment as a part for the whole, as a synecdoche, operates as one of the governing logics of "Notebook Fragments," in that each fragment can be read as part of the larger narrative unity of the poem, a narrative that constructs some version of the speaker's identity. In his discussion of German Romantic

philosophy, Rancière describes the new form of “totality” promised by the fragment:

The fragment is a symbol: a random bit and microcosm of a world. It is both a free fabrication of the imagination and a living form borne along with the movement of forms of life. In its Romantic birth, the fragment is not the detotalization that founds literature as an experience of the impossible, but rather the resolution of the new totality’s contradictions. Literature’s emergence from this moment occurs by scission of what the fragment aimed to gather together. In fact, the entire history of literature can be characterized as the fate of this “garland of fragments” that presented the image of another totality in opposition to the former narrative and discursive order.<sup>454</sup>

As I have been describing “Notebook Fragments,” the poem certainly seems to inherit this Romantic logic of the fragment. The “narrative” that emerges from reading the fragments in sequence is a narrative that contains within it the disruptions that, if left unchecked, would sever the thread—the connective tissue—required by narration.

Yet Rancière highlights that the reading of fragment as synecdoche operates alongside the reading of fragments metonymically, according to a logic of contiguity (the “garland of fragments”). Vuong’s references to “grenade” can be read as related because they appear rather proximately to each other. There is, in other words, no necessary link between them. Similarly, Vuong’s repetition of “I met a man” insists not on totality (part for whole) but on incompleteness. Something remains that generates the repetition. This remainder, the excess and lack, can be understood as what Paul de Man named irony. For de Man, “any

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<sup>454</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 78.

theory of irony is the undoing [...] of any theory of narrative,” for irony is “what makes it impossible ever to achieve a theory of narrative that would be consistent.”<sup>455</sup> To narrativize “Notebook Fragments,” one has to restrict the negativity of the gaps between the fragments. This restriction then allows one to impose a reading onto the series.

Vuong’s sequences leave themselves open to falling apart, and many of the individual moments in the poem similarly emphasize and leave themselves open to the negativity that undermines any cohesion. One of the fragments, for example, details a version of the speaker’s (and Vuong’s) origins: “An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me” (70). Existence emerges from the violence of fucking, which itself takes place within the violence of America’s imperialist war in Vietnam. Michiko Kakutani’s review of *Night Sky* cites this passage and notes how “Vuong contemplates the irony of the war” in his dependence on it for his existence.<sup>456</sup> The irony of this moment does not get resolved; instead, “such irony undermines every affirmative presentation of self and guarantees only the persistence, in its multitude of forms, of the negativity, the unresolved question, that drives us to pick at the scab of selfhood that aims to suture the wound of being.”<sup>457</sup> “Notebook Fragments” opens with a similar image: “A scar’s width of

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<sup>455</sup> “The Concept of Irony,” *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 179.

<sup>456</sup> “Portraits of Vietnam in Love and War,” *The New York Times* (10 May 2016), accessed 4 June 2017.

<sup>457</sup> Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 109. This quotation comes from Edelman’s assertion, which Berlant would not endorse. Edelman continues, “This is where, to borrow

warmth on a worn man's neck. / That's all I wanted to be" (68). Vuong opens "Notebook Fragments," then, with a desire to be a trace of an originary cut, not the void but its remainder. To want to be a scar is to want to be a healed wound: that which has been (perhaps incompletely) reconciled. This desire, then, seems to be a desire for participation in a consensus order. Yet the unfolding of the fragments that follow in the poem suggests a return to the wound. Vuong's speaker in "Notebook Fragments" figuratively might be said to be picking at the wound's scar tissue. Rather than offer "another totality," fragments also fragment totality. That is, fragments insist on the hole from which every whole emerges. Both scar tissue and fragments insist, in other words, on the void of the wound, the democratic interruption that has been partially covered over and elided.

Vuong's poem articulates, albeit differently, the relation described by de Man in his reading of Proust, metaphor, and metonymy.<sup>458</sup> The "necessity" of the link between two terms implied by metaphor depends on the arbitrary "contiguity" of metonymy.<sup>459</sup> Proust's "assertion of the mastery of metaphor over metonymy owes its persuasive power to the use of metonymic structures."<sup>460</sup>

Similarly, the effects of "Notebook Fragments" depend on reading the fragments both as a series of fragments connected (as a thread) and as a fragmented series of

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[Berlant's] phrase, I locate political potentiality, by which I mean the potential to experience the negativity that *is* the political: the division *within* community as well as the division *from* community; the division that leaves community, like the self, an always unresolved question" (109).

<sup>458</sup> "Semiotics and Rhetoric," *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3-19.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

contiguous moments. For the poem's connections emerge from the contiguous relationship between the fragments in the series. The connective thread must be imposed over this contingent and arbitrary relation. As Ben Lerner has recently suggested, it can be more difficult "to resist the will to integration than to combine various scenes into coherent and compelling fiction."<sup>461</sup> Vuong's poem plays with the seductions of narrative, of meaning-making practices, even when those imposed links are fragile and tenuous. It is harder, in other words, to hold onto the negativity that generates narrativization than it is to hold onto the generated narrative.

"Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds" extends this attention to the negativity that persistently fragments the self, as evident already in the analogy of the title between a self-portrait and the exit wounds of gunshots. The poem opens disjunctively with "Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep / drowned out by rain" (26). If read against the title, the "instead" seems to draw readers away from the analogy to exit wounds. In this reading, "it" refers to the self-portrait, which becomes "the echo to every footstep," rather than exit wounds. Later, though, the speaker repeats the use of ambiguous referential language, "let me weave this deathbeam," in a way that reiterates the opening analogy. The deathbeam as gunshot suggests that the poem has indeed followed through on the analogy of the title. This moment asks readers to reread the "it" of the first line, such that "it" may refer instead to exit wounds or to the entirety of the title, "self-portrait as exit wounds." The "as" of the title produces an indistinction similar to Lewis's

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<sup>461</sup> Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Picador, 2014), 53.

“Plantation,” since it may work to name an analogy—as if—or to name an ontological status—as such. In either case, the self of the self-portrait becomes characterized by a series of wounds, or violent penetrations, which anticipates the opening “scar” of “Notebook Fragments” later in the collection.

The “instead” of the opening line also gestures to the apparent turn away from the self of the ostensible self-portrait. The self-portrait begins not from a stable position, but from a turning movement, an already divided and mobile state. References to a boat, a refugee camp, a Vietnamese phrase, and an American scene (“Wonder Bread // & mayonnaise raised to cracked lips”) suggest a process of migration from Vietnam to the U.S. (26).<sup>462</sup> Included in this sequence is a reference to the American culture industry, in which the reader encounters the racist spectacle/spectacular racism of people watching a Hollywood film about Vietnam: “everyone cheering as another // brown gook crumbles under John Wayne’s M16, Vietnam / burning on the screen” (26). The violence of the Vietnam War gets repeated, endlessly and spectacularly, on film for the entertainment of American audiences. The scene here dramatizes the violence of this repetition on viewers who see themselves not in the place of John Wayne, but in the place of the murdered Vietnamese.<sup>463</sup> Alternatively, viewers who identify

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<sup>462</sup> This “narrative” resembles the biographical details of Vuong’s own life. In addition to Vuong’s interview with Akbar, see Daniel Wenger’s “How a Poet Named Ocean Means to Fix the English Language” in the *New Yorker* and Christopher Soto’s review of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* for the *Lambda Literary Review*.

<sup>463</sup> As part of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*, the narrator-confessor remarks on his complicity in the production of such a film (which resembles Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*) and offers a similar critique of the Hollywood film industry.

as both Vietnamese and American—such as a naturalized citizen of the U.S.—might see themselves in the place of both John Wayne and the murdered Vietnamese. This emphasizes the division that, far from reconciling, citizenship intensifies.

“Self-Portrait” also includes an event later presented as a formula in “Notebook Fragments.” After situating the reader in “’68, Ha Long Bay,” the speaker alludes to “the grandfather fucking / the pregnant farmgirl in the back of his army jeep” (27). From “pregnant farmgirl,” the reader can infer this act to be a repetition of sexual violation, though the poem maintains ambiguity as to whether the grandfather is alone in this violence. The designation of “grandfather” names a relation between the figure and the speaker, yet prefacing “grandfather” with the abstraction of “the” introduces a distance between him and the speaker. The scene resembles the speaker’s origin story in “Notebook Fragments,” which suggests that this “pregnant farmgirl” might be the speaker’s grandmother. By leaving the farmgirl unnamed and without clear relation, however, Vuong’s speaker in “Self-Portrait” emphasizes the logic of U.S. violence in Vietnam as a violence of substitution and equivalence. This substitutability depends on a general subject-as-object, for if the violated women were given proper names, the system of substitution and violence would cease to work in the same way. Vuong therefore stresses here the danger of hierarchy, for if one population (here the U.S. military) maintains power over another (Vietnamese women), then the dissymmetry proliferates inequality. It is this hierarchical relation that democratic politics seeks to interrupt. The poem performs a version of this interruption by seeming to avoid

the “self” that is the ostensible subject organizing the poem. For throughout its references, which seem to offer a kind of genealogy, the “self” of the self-portrait seems absent. The speaker employs a “we” and “our” at one moment, but it is not until “let me weave this deathbeam” that the speaker refers to the self unambiguously. The “I” pronoun only appears in the closing lines. The connection between scenes described and the speaker, as well as connections across poems, can only be inferred, or imposed, by the reader.

“Self-Portrait” then concludes with an inversion of these scenes and acts of violence, a form of counter-violence, in which the speaker asserts his position through the “I” pronoun. After stating, “let me weave this deathbeam,” the speaker reaffirms this gesture:

Yes—let me believe I was born  
to cock back this rifle, smooth & slick, like a true

Charlie, like the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain  
as I lower myself between the sights—& pray

that nothing moves. (27-28)

The simile here, “like the footsteps of ghosts,” returns the reader to the opening line of the poem that confuses both the subject and the subject’s temporal position. Where previously he names the “echo to every footstep,” here he makes a direct analogy to the footsteps themselves. In other words, what seemed the delayed after-effect now appears as the more immediate effect, if not the cause. As this suggests, Vuong’s counter-violence operates in a strange form. While the speaker seems to turn the gunshot against his oppressors, “like a true // Charlie,” re-appropriating the derogatory label used against the Vietnamese, he also seems

indistinguishable from those oppressors. This emphasizes the reciprocal nature of colonizing violence and decolonizing counter-violence. Though the second reacts to the first, the two enter a “zone of indistinction.”<sup>464</sup> The final prayer “that nothing moves” asserts not simply the absence of movement, but also the movement and force of absence—the nothing, the void, supplement, or miscount—that figures as the remainder in any construction of the self or of the community. Vuong therefore closes his self-portrait with that which should not appear in a portrait of the self but which constitutes the possibility of that self.

In both poems, Vuong emphasizes how the community, or the broader social orders, re-enact on the subject the division that is already constitutive of the subject. At the close of “Self-Portrait,” the “I” emerges in an act of counter-violence, which suggests the construction of the “I” only from the violence of history, social context, and social relations. The “I” emerges in the space of a catachresis, the gap created by the violent wound or gunshot. The dialectical relationship, then, can only be understood as a negative dialectic, as signaled by the “nothing” at the poem’s close; that is, as a dialectic without synthesis. Vuong’s poetry instead insists “on the unintelligible’s unintelligibility,” which Lee Edelman links to “the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the drive.”<sup>465</sup> Vuong’s emphasis on irony and

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<sup>464</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>465</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 106-7.

on catachresis reiterates that no projected narrative or meaning can be guaranteed.

As Edelman writes in *No Future*,

Catachresis [...] cannot assure the progressive redistribution of meaning. To the extent that the rearticulation of the signifier, and therefore the reach of a term like ‘human,’ supplements *without* effacing the prior uses to which it was put, no historical category of abjection is ever simply obsolete. It abides, instead, in its latency, affecting subsequent significations, always available, always waiting, to be mobilized again. Catachresis can only *formalize* contestation over “the proper,” repeating the violence at the core of its own always willed impositions of meaning.<sup>466</sup>

Vuong’s investment in catachresis appears in his focus on the unintelligible materiality of the body and the sexual, as when he grounds his being in the violence of fucking, which can only be accounted for in the poems with inadequate linguistic placeholders. Lacan, in “L’*étourdit*,” writes that the “lack-of-sense (*ab-sens*) designates sex” and that sense depends on the exclusion of sex, “(*sens-absexe*).”<sup>467</sup> Sex names precisely that which is insensible, unintelligible; as such, sex marks the limit to the sensible and intelligible. In this way, sex registers one of the limits to Rancière’s conception of politics. Rancière’s dismissal of the individual subject in favor of the collective, political subject, allows him to conceptualize a political category that would otherwise be impossible, for the subjects on whom this category depends are constituted by an unintelligible and irrational drive that resists the meaning required by Rancière’s axiom of

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 114-115. Edelman continues, “*Sinthomosexuality* presents itself as the realization of that violence exactly to the extent that it insists on the derealization of those meanings, occupying the place of what, in sex, remains structurally unspeakable: the lack or loss that relates to the Real and survives in the pressure of the drive.”

<sup>467</sup> Jacques Lacan, “L’*étourdit*,” trans. Cormac Gallagher, *The Letter: Irish Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 41 (Summer 2009), 38.

equality.<sup>468</sup> In other words, by excluding the psychic and the sexual, Rancière can guarantee the movement “between sense and sense” rather than the impossible leap from non-sense to sense.<sup>469</sup>

In attending to the psycho-affective dimensions of the self in his poetry, Vuong gestures to both the processes of recognition—within the self, between the self and other—and to the gaps inherent in these processes. Recognition depends upon a logic of reflexivity, yet Vuong persistently destabilizes the reflexive relations necessary for (and constitutive of) recognition. In his interview with Akbar, however, Vuong seems to follow a Rancièrian paradigm when he details his sense of the poem in terms of communicability, that is, in terms of sense: “The poem is for self-preservation, but it is also written in the hopes of speaking to these private fears and joys that we all share, but that we don’t get to talk about in public spheres. In that sense, it is also communication between people in order to build a space where we can recognize one another.”<sup>470</sup> Though Vuong describes “self-preservation” and a recognition process here, his qualifier of “a space” in which such recognition can take place between subjects stresses the primacy of the aesthetic. In other words, “to build a space” suggests that such a space does

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<sup>468</sup> Nathan Brown’s “The Distribution of the Insensible” offers a strong (and, I would add, an often ungrounded) critique of Rancière’s project from a Marxist perspective for failing to account for the “distribution of the insensible,” which, Brown claims, is “the key to thinking about the relation between aesthetics and politics in a materialist way, in a manner properly responsive to the exigencies of Marxist historical materialism” (2). By avoiding the psycho-affective dimension of the subject, I am also claiming that Rancière fails to account for the insensible, though my claim differs from Brown’s.

<sup>469</sup> “Writing, Repetition, Displacement,” 304.

<sup>470</sup> Vuong and Akbar.

not pre-exist the recognition experience. “The assertion of a common world,” Rancière argues, “happens through a paradoxical mise-en-scène that brings the community and the noncommunity together.”<sup>471</sup> Rancière’s project similarly depends on the construction of such a space, and it is the aesthetic that “allows separate regimes of expression” to be conjoined, confronted.<sup>472</sup> For Rancière, disagreement or dissensus therefore has a rationality.<sup>473</sup> There can be no dialogue between rational and irrational; instead, the rationality of the police must be confronted with the rationality of political disagreement. Rancière’s democratic politics thus depends on but disavows the negativity of the psyche.<sup>474</sup>

Yet Vuong’s poetry emphasizes that the irrationality of the subject underlies the rationality of the political subject. Though Vuong’s comments in the interview seem to suggest a similar line of thinking to Rancière, his poetry suggests otherwise. The rationality of disagreement can only appear if it disregards the irrationality of the “nothing” constitutive of the divided self and the divided community. By insisting on “a space” or “a common world,” both Vuong and Rancière attempt to circumvent a problem of the self by emphasizing the

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<sup>471</sup> *Disagreement*, 55.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>473</sup> In his first thesis on politics, Rancière asserts that politics “*has its own proper rationality*” (“Ten Theses on Politics” 35). See also “The Rationality of Disagreement” in *Disagreement* (43-60).

<sup>474</sup> Achille Mbembe has discussed some of the consequences for maintaining a privilege of reason over unreason in a liberal regime. For Mbembe, various forms of sovereignty (aligned with the police for Rancière) depend on their link to reason. See “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), 11-40.

construction of a space that will allow for dissensus.<sup>475</sup> At stake in breaking from the irrationality of the self to privilege a logic of reciprocity, then, is a break from the reproduction of the same. Vuong and Rancière attempt to break from this reproduction by constructing a space that allows for two incommensurable orders of rationality: that of the police, and that of political disagreement.

Rancière avoids “recognition” in his thinking in part because it often stems from a Hegelian schema that centers on “the person as an autonomous entity, able to identify itself as autonomous and knowing that the others identify him or her as such.”<sup>476</sup> This of course depends on a particular reading of Hegel, as well as one that avoids the psychoanalytic re-articulations of the master/slave dialectic. Rancière fears that recognition will overstate identity, “thinking the

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<sup>475</sup> Frantz Fanon theorized the limits to recognition in an exemplary way by in the provocative footnote in *Black Skin, White Masks* that serves as one of this chapter’s epigraphs: “I hope I have shown that here [in the colonial and racialized encounter] the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work” (220n.8). Fanon’s discussion of the master-slave dialectic anticipates his theorization and critique of neocolonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which the neocolonial regime merely reproduces the same order of inequality as that found in the colonial regime. Glen Sean Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks* develops a critique of recognition from Fanon’s work: “instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of *reciprocity* or *mutual* recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous people’s demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (3). Though Coulthard focuses on Indigenous peoples in Canada, his argument can be extended to other contemporary situations in which an apparently “tolerant” nation works with minority and indigenous populations for recognition.

<sup>476</sup> Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière, *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, eds. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Derarnty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 87.

activity of a subject mainly as an affirmation of self-identity.<sup>477</sup> Recognition, for Rancière, therefore threatens to prevent in advance any political act from taking place. Vuong's turn to recognition, however, suggests something different. While attending to the psycho-affective dimensions of the self troubles Rancière's theory of the political subject, it does so by adding division, not by reconciling division into an order of identity, of the same. Vuong's poetry insists, contra Vuong's own statements in his interview, that the enunciating subject cannot be subsumed—or sublated—by the subject of the statement. Any political subject that appears through the axiom of equality, an axiom that evacuates the libidinal movements of the self and of the social, voids the enunciating subjects who voiced it into being.<sup>478</sup>

### **A Democratic Site: Refusing Democracy's Fantasy**

Safiya Sinclair in *Cannibal* similarly draws on the negativity of catachresis, on intelligibility's limit, but she also turns to the negativity of the enunciating subject by attending to the unconscious drives and libidinal economy of the self.<sup>479</sup> Like Vuong's poetry, Sinclair's poetry emphasizes the self as both the stage of intelligibility and the site of unintelligibility. Sinclair does so in part by thinking through the notion of home as both the self and the space in which the self resides. The collection obsesses over various notions of home as a place and as a

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>478</sup> This betrayal mirrors, in a strange way, the betrayal that founds American republicanism, in which political representatives speak for those who voted them into power.

<sup>479</sup> Safiya Sinclair, *Cannibal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Hereafter cited in the text.

state of being. Its title—*Cannibal*—refers to the linguistic error, the catachresis, that continues to name those of Caribbean/West Indian descent, which Sinclair makes explicit with a prefatory comment to the collection:

The word “cannibal,” the English variant of the Spanish word *canibal*, comes from the word *caribal*, a reference to the native Carib in the West Indies, who Columbus thought ate human flesh and from whom the word “Caribbean” originated. By virtue of being *Caribbean*, all “West Indian” people are already, in a purely linguistic sense, born savage. (xi)

An error, a catachresis, borne out of Columbus’s dehumanizing and racist imposition, follows the people of the West Indies as their inheritance. Like original sin, the etymology of cannibal traps the people of the West Indies within a certain predetermined form of being.

Much of Sinclair’s collection aims to re-appropriate the word cannibal, for she attempts to cannibalize the English language, along with its assumptions and impositions.<sup>480</sup> The counter-violence of the collection’s cannibalizing act registers the democratic drive produced by and from within the totalizing fantasy of the normative, Eurocentric impositions of consensus democracy. The negative democratic impulse, as figured by this cannibalizing act, therefore insists on its inseparability from the formal closure of the democratic promise that it simultaneously structures and destructures. This becomes evident in “Home,” the collection’s opening poem, which problematizes the speaker’s relation to her

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<sup>480</sup> Sinclair therefore generalizes “cannibal” from its specific, denotative usage. An analogous strategy occurs with “creole” in *The Creolization of Theory*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). See especially their introduction. In *Cannibal Democracy: Race and Representation in the Literature of the Americas*, Zita Nunes reads cannibalization as a productive metaphor of construction through incorporation.

home. The poem opens with the speaker's suggestion that she's "forgotten it— / wild conch-shell dialect, // black apostrophe curled / tight on my tongue" (3). In many ways, "Home" explains to the reader how to read the collection. The speaker, for instance, acknowledges *both* the link between language and the material it can only inadequately grasp *and* her disruptions of language and material: "My diction now as straight // as my hair; that stranger we've / long stopped searching for" (3-4). The metrically regular or "straight" opening line gives way to the disjunctive line breaks, the caesura, and the metrically uneven lines in the following couplet. Sinclair's conjunction of the linguistic and the bodily also depends on a sense of irony. This irony partly emerges from the fact that much of Sinclair's diction resists being "straight"; instead, "Home," like many of the poems in *Cannibal*, depends on labyrinthine movements in language. But this irony also emerges because "straightening" one's hair often involves a complex negotiation of or subjection to changing Western standards of female beauty. Sinclair draws attention to a particularly fraught topic for black women in the U.S. and the Caribbean by invoking this discourse of the body, yet her matter-of-fact presentation resists the essentialism such discourse often assumes.<sup>481</sup>

While such discourse often relies on the language of the natural and the unnatural, Sinclair's presentation suggests that one cannot escape the hybridization (and

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<sup>481</sup> See, for example, Assata Shakur's autobiography, in which "natural" hair speaks to some essential identity denied by American beauty standards of her time (173-174), or bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman*, in which hooks implies that black women who straighten their hair have a desire for whiteness (247-248). This aesthetic effort intensifies the internal and external alienation of black women. See also Fanon's chapter, "The Woman of Color and the White Man" in *Black Skin, White Masks* (28-44).

cannibalization) of the encounter with otherness in the colonial space. Sinclair's direct tone, as well as the disjunctive syntax and lines that seem to undercut the "straightness" of the diction, suggest a critical response to some of the particular norms that Western, white society expects its subjects to internalize. She does this, however, without falling back into the essentialist language of identity's self-coherence, for she also recognizes, through the trope of cannibalization, that every culture possesses norms that it then expects its subjects to internalize.

In an interview for *The Kenyon Review*, Sinclair acknowledges her fraught relationship to the English language evident from the outset of her poetry collection:

A large part of my interest as a Jamaican poet is the history of the language I've been handed as a colonial remnant, and how this language informs my identity as a black poet navigating the world through verse. For me the English language is always going to be the language of the colonist, the language of oppression; so as a poet writing in English, I am always in some way a stranger to myself. I wanted to explore the nature of this linguistic exile by breaking the language and the structure of the poem in different ways than I normally do, by forcing the grammar and syntax beyond what is "correct," while also exploring the nature of this fragmentation.<sup>482</sup>

One remarkable aspect of this passage emerges from Sinclair's metonymic substitutions of identity. Sinclair moves across identity formations: "as a Jamaican poet," "as a colonial remnant," "as a black poet," and "as a poet writing in English." Like Janelle Monáe and Robin Coste Lewis, Sinclair negotiates the world and its impositions of categorization. Unlike Monáe, however, who lands on a stable category at the Women's March, Sinclair claims that she will always

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<sup>482</sup> *Kenyon Review*.

be “in some way a stranger to myself.” This perpetual estrangement suggests that these categories are neither equivalent nor equal; if they are substitutable, they are so only through an act of violence. “Jamaican poet,” for example, could be read as neutral—simply stating a fact of one’s nationality—or it could be read as affirmative—stating with pride one’s national origins. Yet the “colonial remnant” emphasizes that neither the neutral nor the affirmative sense of that identity can erase the fact that it names one who has survived, and continues to survive, a history of colonialism and slavery, even as a “remnant.” “Colonial remnant” names, in other words, a being living or persisting “in the wake.”<sup>483</sup> While this status as “colonial remnant” can be generalized to other national subjects, Sinclair links her use of this figure to the specific history of colonization in Jamaica. Sinclair names herself as the remainder of this colonial project, a project in which the black woman exists in “a zone of nonbeing.”<sup>484</sup> Just as Sinclair thus figures herself as a survivor of this history, she figures the survival of that history that inscribes identities onto subjects who have not choice but to live for others. The “remnant” names at once the subject of the identitarian logic of colonial oppression and the anti-identitarian fracturing of that logic. Far from designating the equality of anyone and everyone—as Whitman does for Rancière—Sinclair designates the impossibility of this equality, an impossibility apparent as soon as

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<sup>483</sup> See again Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

<sup>484</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 8. In *Onticide*, Calvin Warren writes, “The non-ontology of blackness secures the boundaries of the human; it delimits the coordinates of the human. Blackness is an exclusion that enables ontology” (6-7).

one approaches the psycho-affective and historical dimensions of unredeemable violence.

Sinclair's "Home" emphasizes the impossibility of equality when she weaves together the personal and the socio-historical, as when the speaker alludes to "lignum vitae plumes":

The ramshackle altar I visited  
often, packed full with fish-skull,  
bright with lignum vitae plumes:  
  
Father, I have asked so many miracles  
of it. (3)

Lignum vitae refers to a wood indigenous to the Caribbean and to the national flower of Jamaica. It literally means "wood of life," a name stemming from a belief in its medicinal properties.<sup>485</sup> Lignum vitae was also, however, a crucial export to Europe beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for its strength and durability made it valuable. As a result of this colonial exportation, lignum vitae is now listed as an endangered species.<sup>486</sup> In part because of its believed medicinal qualities, the wood also has phallic associations, which are implicit in its name.<sup>487</sup> This, in conjunction with the floral "plumes," adds an erotic implication to the

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<sup>485</sup> *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*, accessed 20 June 2017. "This is Jamaica," "National Symbols," *Archive.org*, accessed 20 June 2017.

<sup>486</sup> See John Poyer, *The History of Barbados, from the first Discovery of the Island in the Year 1605, till the Accession of Lord Seaforth, 1801* (London: Mawman, 1808) and Nadine Hunt, "Expanding the Frontiers of Western Jamaica through Minor Atlantic Ports in the Eighteenth Century," *Canadian Journal of History* 45.3 (Winter 2010), 485-501.

<sup>487</sup> See John Cowley, "West Indies Blues," *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, ed. Robert Springer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

poem before it shifts to the “Father,” the source of phallic authority. With the overlay of the personal, religious, and social, “Home” presents a home at once familiar and unfamiliar. The “sugar cane” and “gungo peas” mentioned later in the poem allude to the slave economy of the Caribbean, especially given that gungo peas came to the Americas from India via the slave trade around the 17<sup>th</sup> century. “Home” thus gestures to what Lisa Lowe calls the “intimacy of four continents,”<sup>488</sup> for the poem registers the results of global capitalism’s circulation in relation to the projects of colonialism. By closing the poem with “the sea that again and again / calls out my name,” the speaker closes with a call that at once offers security and presents a threat. There is an anxiety to “Home,” since what appears in the frame of the homely—the reminders of colonial and patriarchal domination, for instance—disturb that frame.<sup>489</sup> “Home” therefore dramatizes how the homely depends on the unhomely; the space of the home is always already fractured by the uncanny. Put differently, the home does not exist as an enclosed, “private” space but as a site where “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history” meet “the wider disjunctions of political existence.”<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacy of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>489</sup> In “The World and the Home,” Homi Bhabha develops a reading of the unhomely as a description of a moment that “relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (144). For Bhabha, this moment involves “freak displacements” in which “the profound divisions of an enslaved or apartheid society—negrification, denigration, classification, violence, incarceration—are re-located in the midst of the ambivalence of psychic identification” (145).

<sup>490</sup> Bhabha, 144. As Bhabha emphasizes, the public/private binary organized by the space of the home does not in fact work as seamlessly as it promises. Nicole Loraux and Giorgio Agamben have noted that the divisions between public life and private life have been, at least since the time of the ancient Greeks,

Sinclair's representations of inequality and the negotiation across positions become increasingly complicated when, in section II of *Cannibal*, Sinclair shifts from a Jamaican/Caribbean to a United States landscape. Each section opens with an epigraph from either Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, and the second section gestures, ironically, to the turn to the U.S. by citing Miranda's proclamation from *The Tempest*: "O, wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in't!" (29).<sup>491</sup> The irony—if not already apparent from the context of *The Tempest*—becomes explicit in the opening prose-poem of the section, "Notes on the State of Virginia, I" (31). The poem begins with a reflection on Jamaica, as well as with an image of either the speaker or a figure described by the speaker as bearer of geography: "Child of the colonies. Carrying the swift waves of oceans inside of you" (31). Because the poem later shifts to a first-person voice, it generates an ambiguity in its use of "you" here; it also conflates inside and outside in this statement, with the natural world being carried within the body. The conjunctions and disjunctions of the poem disturb the scene it creates. This disturbance increases when the poem situates itself in Virginia,

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susceptible to slippage and indistinction. See Loraux's *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens* and Agamben's *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*.

<sup>491</sup> See Sylvia Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" for a rereading of Shakespeare's play and of the relation between the man/woman binary and man/native binary. Three of the five sections of *Cannibal* open with a quotation from Caliban, with one of these three being the Caliban of Césaire. As Tiana Reid notes in her review of Sinclair's collection, Shakespeare "anagrammed *canibal* (from the Spanish) to make *Caliban*" (*Cordite Poetry Review*).

with its allusion to Thomas Jefferson's invention of the word "belittle": "Here [...] Where Thomas Jefferson learnt how to belittle a thing. How to own it. He created the word and wanted my mouth to know it. He wanted the whole world pulled through me on a fishing string. Where I will find my fingers in the muscle of my throat, where I will marvel at the body asking to live" (31). The referential language—"Here" and "Where"—marks the poem's conjunction of the speaker's present in Virginia and Virginia's colonial past. This temporal conflation registers the persistence of that past, the persistence of the violence of language: "He created the word and wanted my mouth to know it."<sup>492</sup> The reader understands that Jefferson does not simply or literally want the speaker to know the word "belittle," but the speaker, as a black woman, inherits the implications of the word and "knows" it in an even greater sense than a literal understanding of its meaning. To know in this case is to know what it means to be belittled by the police order, to be excluded as part of the democratic miscount, "as a colonial remnant."<sup>493</sup> The promise of consensus democracy, then, is a promise of

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<sup>492</sup> Jefferson is credited with the first use of "belittle" in *Notes on the State of Virginia* when he argues against some of the prevailing characterizations of American nature (OED): "So far the Count de Buffon has carried this new theory of the tendency of nature to belittle her productions of this side of the Atlantic" (*Notes* VI 69).

<sup>493</sup> Sinclair's poem manifests the conjunction of past and present described by Saidiya Hartman in "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (Fall 2002), 757-777. Here, Hartman writes, "[T]he distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath. How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only perdure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening? The point here is not to deny the abolition of slavery or to assert the identity or continuity of racism over the course of centuries, but rather to consider the constitutive nature of loss in the making the African diaspora and the role of grief in transatlantic identification" (758).

inequality. The unsettled scene of Sinclair's poem produces an effect of anxiety, in that the negativity of the miscount and its unintelligibility, rather than safely at a distance, seems to inhere in the poem, fracturing the illusions of the police order.<sup>494</sup>

In all of its discussions of home, the self, and the body, *Cannibal* emphasizes an uncanny experience and abject space produced by the violence of the police order. Yet the effect of uncanniness and the abject space in turn puncture the police order from within. "The Art of Unselfing," for instance, privileges a process of negating the self (99-100). The opening lines suggest that "unselfing" occurs because of "[t]he mind's [...] wild / exigencies" (99). These exigencies constitute the woman, of "a pitched hysteria" (99), who appears as the subject of the poem.<sup>495</sup> In the poem, the woman's "old selves" are "shuffled off into labyrinths," an image that threatens the consistency and coherence of the

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<sup>494</sup> "Coming to America," Sinclair states, "really sharpened my rage in very unexpected and crucial ways" (*Kenyon Review*). The legacy of Jefferson, and of the "founding fathers," who built into the structure of the United States a logic of belittlement, is paradigmatic of "the systemic erasure of any black history outside of slavery, the disruption of language and the power in naming, the danger of categorization, and a maddening frustration that while this constant massacre of black men and women now gets passing attention in national news, none of this was truly new" (*Kenyon Review*). The police order depends on identity, on a reproduction of the same. By denying the democratic miscount, and preventing politics from happening (or by minimizing its effects), the police order ensures the continuation of this violence against those not included (or only nominally included) in the count, in the order of things.

<sup>495</sup> Discourses of "hysteria" have a complex history that exceed the scope of this chapter. On the one hand, hysteria has operated as a means to subjugate women and alienate them from society. On the other hand, some feminist scholars have tried to reclaim hysteria (in a way similar, perhaps, to Sinclair's operation of cannibalizing the English language). See for example *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), which comprises essays by Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G.S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter.

present self more than Vuong's (or Rancière's) "thread." As in Sylvia Plath's "Fever 103°," whose speaker finds her "selves dissolving," in Sinclair's "The Art of Unselfing," the speaker figures the loss of the consistency necessary to maintain her sense of self.<sup>496</sup> The poem ends with the intersection of unselfing and the home, though the home reads more as the unhomey: "This hour a purge // of its own unselfing. / She must make a home of it" (100). As with her shifts between the "you" and "me" or "I," Sinclair here uses "it" to generate an ambiguity of speaker and position. The passage suggests first that the "hour" "purge[s]" "its own unselfing," though to refer to a temporal marker ("this hour") as having a self presents a disjunctive analogy. Rather than merely productive, the "hour," in its "purge // of its own unselfing," describes a negation ("purge") of a negation ("unselfing"). The purification movement seems to divest the hour of its temporal decay; at the same time, however, the action of "a purge" introduces a cut into time that restarts the temporal process and emphasizes its own temporality. This is similar to how democratic promises operate: the longer the time that passes since the promise (of equality), the greater the betrayal and loss seem. To make a home of that which is unselfed is to make a home of a process of negation.

Sinclair's insistence on the "un" in unselfing marks an insistence on the process of negation, absencing, voiding. The "un" of unselfing names, as does the "un" of the uncanny or unhomey, both the undoing of the self and the return of

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<sup>496</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Fever 103°," *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 55. Like Plath's poems in *Ariel*, Sinclair's poems are also labyrinthine. I am grateful to Lee Edelman for drawing my attention to this association.

the repressed originary division that constitutes the self.<sup>497</sup> The poem thus suggests a violence inherent in the self, related to but distinct from any violence that emerges in the self/other or self/world relation. In this suggestion, the poem subverts any notion of the self as one maintained by autonomy and its “possessive individualism,” characteristic of liberal ideology.<sup>498</sup> With reference to “One Hundred Amazing Facts about the Negro, with Complete Proof, II,” part of a sequence of poems in the collection’s second section, Sinclair suggests, “there is really only one fact: in America and the world at large the Negro has been and continues to be nameless, faceless, voiceless. A threat or a nothing. A hashtag, a talking point, or a nothing. A symbol or a victim, but never a man with a name that meant something, who lived and loved and erred.”<sup>499</sup> Sinclair’s suggestion that black people in the U.S. and the world can either be “[a] threat or a nothing” can be read in a second register that inverts the relation. For example, to turn a person into a symbol—such as the hysterical woman of Sinclair’s poem or the image of the over-sexualized and criminalized black man<sup>500</sup>—is to turn a person

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<sup>497</sup> Citing Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, Bhabha writes “that ‘beginnings’ require an ‘originary non-place,’ something ‘unspoken’ which then produces a chronology of events. Beginnings can, in this sense, be the narrative limits of the knowable, the margins of the meaningful” (146).

<sup>498</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>499</sup> *Kenyon Review*. This statement might be read as grounds for Frantz Fanon’s call for the creation of “a new man” that concludes *The Wretched of the Earth* (316). Yet any construction of “a new man” that promises inclusion will depend on some form of exclusion, for no count can be total. There will always be a miscount.

<sup>500</sup> See Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* for one discussion of this image.

into a threat only within the logic of the symbolic order. In this way, black people can always be subjugated on the justification that they present a threat, yet this threat is an empty symbolic one that does not truly threaten the symbolic order. Instead, the symbolic order mobilizes this threat to shore itself up. White America and the police order transform an excess, a nothing, into something legible for their own ends. As Pauli Murray suggests, “A system of oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness.”<sup>501</sup> This betrayal of the excess of the subject enacts a violence of restriction, a violence of the regulating *domus*. In contrast, to be “a nothing” is to exist in a non-symbolic register, the register of the Real. Sinclair’s emphasis on the “un” of unselfing refuses the oppressive language of a paralyzing victimhood, and it marks her refusal to “become [a] willing [participant] in [her] own oppression.”<sup>502</sup> If the nothing remains as such, then it truly threatens the Symbolic by puncturing its fantasmatic consistency. This double register appears in Sinclair’s opening line to “Center of the World,” in which the speaker bluntly states, “The meek inherit nothing” (75). Read on the surface, this undermines the religious promise that the meek “shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Yet it also operates as its own promise: the meek inherit nothing, that is, the meek inherit the supplement, the void that constitutes and supports the Symbolic order. The meek, then, have a

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<sup>501</sup> *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*, qtd. in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 99.

<sup>502</sup> Collins, 99.

very real political power, for they can insist on the democratic void that the police order and consensus democracy try to cover over and forget.

“The Art of Unselfing,” along with Sinclair’s poetry more generally, suggests that the divisions of the self and the materiality of the body generate the negativity of the nothing, as well as that which can be read. The speaker suggests that “love” “unroot[s]” the woman figure of the poem (100). This “unrooting” severs her from any ground, and she seems to need “to grow a new body—to let each word be the wild rain / swallowed pure like an antidote” (100). Judith Butler claims that “the relation between the body and discourse is chiasmic, suggesting that the body has to be represented and that it is never fully exhausted by that representation.”<sup>503</sup> For Butler, though, “something [...] must fail as representation, and that we might call nonrepresentational and nonrepresentative.”<sup>504</sup> In this way, the body operates as that which allows the generation of representation, of a way to ground oneself. Yet Sinclair’s focus on nothing adds that the crossing movement of chiasmus (ABBA) operates because there is a catachrestic element between the body and language, a gap that separates them more radically than the reflexive relation implied by chiasmus.<sup>505</sup>

Thea N. Riofrancos, in her review of Butler’s *Notes Towards a Performative*

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<sup>503</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 180.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>505</sup> Sinclair’s critique resembles, then, Toni Morrison’s critique of “American Africanism” in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

*Theory of Assembly*, registers Butler's persistently optimistic stance.<sup>506</sup> Sinclair, in focusing on the nothing, the radical "site" of negativity that cannot be brought into any scene except by a figure of absence, insists instead on the negative democratic impulse, which promises nothing and produces nothing. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Edelman suggests that a "scene" "invokes the setting of a fantasy" while a "site" "bears the 'potential' for an 'encounter with the unbearable,' with 'nonsovereign relationality'" (106). Rather than try to capture "something," Sinclair turns to the site of nothing, whose democratic negativity repeats, endlessly, its annihilation of any fantasmatic construction in the police order. Against Rancière's positive political project, Sinclair turns to that which both escapes and constitutes the aesthetic scene.<sup>507</sup> "Notes on the State of Virginia, II," like Vuong's poetry, focuses on the image of a wound: "February, I am an open wound—woman discarded / and woman emerging. Scars devising scars. / To live here we know precisely how to be haunted" (42). Here wounds remain open and the scars do not heal; they proliferate.

Like Lewis's "Plantation," "Notes on the State of Virginia, II" stresses subjugation as a problem of visibility: "slave quarters found concealed / in the student dorms; buried rooms choked, sounds / bricked off" (42). Sinclair's poem seems to turn to buried "scenes of subjection" to engage a dialectic in which sites

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<sup>506</sup> "Precarious Politics: On Butler's *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*" *Theory & Event* 20.1 (Jan. 2017): 260-267. See also Edelman's critique of Butler in *No Future* (102-108).

<sup>507</sup> One of Rancière's recent books is titled *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, which suggests his privilege of the aesthetic scene.

of violence might become scenes.<sup>508</sup> Yet the poem also maintains a certain excess, or otherness, to the site that cannot be reconciled in any fantasmatic construction. This focus on that which disrupts, escapes, or exceeds the dialectic appears in the poem's second stanza:

Somewhere, the ghost arm of history  
still throttling me. This taste of old blood on the wind,  
the crouched statue of Sacajawea shrouded behind the pioneers.  
Creature of unbelonging, un-name a new silence. (42)

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Sinclair suggests that the statue of Sacajawea “unbelong[s]” and “un-name[s] a new silence.” Sinclair's poem maintains a suspicion of knowledge production, for the poem closes by reminding the reader of “squashed rebellion, scrutiny,” and “[i]ndoctrination” (42). Violence, surveillance, and imposed, normative education all go hand in hand. Against an integration into the police order, whose “[v]isibility is a trap,”<sup>509</sup> Sinclair insists on maintaining the “obliterated” position as obliterated, that is, as a negation.<sup>510</sup>

Sinclair's faithfulness to un-naming marks a faithfulness to the negativity, the division, that constitutes both the subject and the political subject. As Edelman writes, “The change that politics makes lies rather in keeping the question of relation (to oneself, to others, and therefore to politics) open to the negativity with which relation is bound up—and open, therefore, to the irony of attempts to totalize politics or community by negating those who embody its negativity, its

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<sup>508</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>509</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

<sup>510</sup> Wynter, “Beyond Miranda's Meanings,” 114.

‘antisociality.’”<sup>511</sup> With the statue that un-names a new silence, Sinclair defends against the totalizing drive of the police order and attends to the negativity of the political act. As I stated at the outset of this chapter, Joy James characterizes “white citizenship” “as building democracy’s boundaries: establishing the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially-fashioned captivity.”<sup>512</sup> Sinclair’s refusal to name the “silence,” the constitutive exclusion, is a refusal to participate in the construction of the boundaries necessary for consensus democracy. Instead, the destructive negativity inheres in Sinclair’s poem and remains a threat to that order of consensus and of meaning. The uncanny democratic miscount reappears where it should not be: in the frame of consensus democracy.

This negativity does not get integrated into any redistribution of the sensible; instead, this negativity names a remainder. Sinclair thus makes explicit something latent in Rancière’s notion of the political enunciation. Because, for Rancière, democracy is that which insists on the miscount, or the void that names the count of those unaccounted for by the police order, he describes the miscount as a logical remainder. Any redistribution of the sensible therefore inevitably fails to account for the miscount, since there will always be a supplement in excess of the distribution of the sensible.<sup>513</sup> Sinclair’s poetry, however, itself supplements

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<sup>511</sup> Berlant and Edelman, 114.

<sup>512</sup> “Afrarealism and the Black Matrix,” 34.

<sup>513</sup> This is perhaps more obvious in *mésentente*, which has been translated as disagreement. *Mésentente* can be translated instead as “misunderstanding,” and because *entente* “means both understanding and listening,” the word can also be translated as “missed listening” (Panagia 289). As a term that refers to the sensible rather than the conceptual, “[t]he *mésentente* of dissensus [...] marks the

Rancière's logical, or axiomatic, approach with a psycho-affective dimension. No response to politics by the police order can satisfy the demand of that political act's desire. Lacan states that "desire is situated in dependence on demand—which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both, absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued (*méconnu*), an element that is called desire."<sup>514</sup> Rancière's "wandering letter" introduces a metonymic figure against the figure of synecdoche. Yet Rancière's metonymy operates only at the register of the sensible. Sinclair reminds her reader of another register, a register of the insensible: the libidinal economy and the unconscious. Through repetition (with difference), Rancière claims, one realizes the possibility of "making little shifts" in the order of things.<sup>515</sup> This movement of repetition depends on the negativity of the democratic drive, a negativity which makes itself felt in the sensible, but which persists in the insensible unconscious and in the libidinal economy that undergirds the stage of politics. This other register interacts with the sensible order, but only through a leap, one that can never erase the catachresis between the insensible and sensible.

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impossibility of arriving at a place of understanding" (Panagia 290). This distinguishes Rancière's term from the connotations of disagreement, for as Panagia suggests, "a disagreement is something you can (typically) resolve [...] or disregard" (289).

<sup>514</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 154.

<sup>515</sup> "Writing, Repetition, Displacement," 305.

## Chapter 4:

### Against Representation, or, Utopia, After All

All the white people she has ever met needed, in one way or another, to be reassured, consoled, to have their consciences pricked but not blasted; could not, could not afford to hear a truth which would shatter, irrevocably, their image of themselves. It is astonishing the lengths to which a person, or a people, will go in order to avoid a truthful mirror.

James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" (1960), 151-2.

Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible [*Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar*].

Paul Klee, "Creative Confession" (1920), 7.

Now we understand that the principle of figurality that is also the principle of unbinding (the baffle) is the death drive: "the absolute anti-synthesis": Utopia.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (1971), 355.

## The Logic of Representation

My last chapter concluded with Safiya Sinclair’s demand to follow the negativity of “unselfing,” “unnaming,” and “unbelonging” that resists the positive articulations of representation and the interpellations of the police order. In this chapter, I consider more fully the stakes of this anti-representational strategy, as well as elaborate the distinction between the anti-representative negative democratic impulse and the representative system of consensus democracy it simultaneously structures and destructures. The two central “texts” of this chapter, representations of recent electoral politics and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982),<sup>516</sup> theorize the problems of representation in relation to identity and, by extension, the logic that grounds identity politics. I begin with a discussion of identity politics in the context of voting, since the logic of the vote exemplifies the logic of representation critiqued by *Dictee*.

Identity politics became especially evident during and following the 2016 presidential election. This resurgence of identity politics manifested itself in the obsession with voter demographics as an explanatory mechanism. The Pew Research Center offers one of the more exhaustive breakdowns of voter demographics according to categories of race and ethnicity (58% of white, non-Hispanic voters and 8% of black voters for Trump), gender (42% of women and 53% of men for Trump), education (43% of college graduates and 52% of non-college graduates for Trump), and age (53% of voters over the age of 65 for

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<sup>516</sup> Critics tend to vary the title of the novel, with some adding the accent—*Dictée*—and others capitalizing the entirety of the title—*DICTEE*. Except in citations, I normalize this tendency and use *Dictee*.

Trump).<sup>517</sup> These numbers of course change when categories intersect (e.g., 67% of non-college white voters supported Trump).<sup>518</sup> While many more statistics might be cited, I believe this gestures to the exhaustive (and exhausting) drive toward categorization to understand electoral processes. This drive assumes that one's identity mimetically corresponds in some way to one's actions, as if there is a logic of equivalence, symmetry, or at least resemblance between who one "is" and how one votes. The logic that assumes a link between a political representative and those constituents he or she claims to represent echoes the logic that assumes voter patterns can be transparent if we understand voter identity positions. The proliferation of categorization seems to attest to the false grounds of this assumption. Yet if anything, the 2016 election proves that the assumptions of identity politics remain alive and well, despite all of the critiques of stable forms of identity.<sup>519</sup>

Statistics on white voters from Trump's election also attempt to offer a quantitative interpretation of the phenomenon of the white male who perceives himself to be under attack (by the media, liberals, and identity politics). The white, cis-gendered man's perception of being under attack works to justify discussions taking place not only in conservative circles, but also in liberal

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<sup>517</sup> Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education," *Pew Research Center* (9 Nov. 2016), accessed 15 Nov. 2017.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>519</sup> See Jeet Heer's "Identity Heft: Why the Politics of Race and Gender are Dominating the 2016 Election" in *New Republic* and Eugene Scott's "The right disdains identity politics. But President Trump is proof it works for them, too" in *The Washington Post*.

forums.<sup>520</sup> Many voters who are white, like many who are not, are economically subjugated, and some of those voters interpret that subjugation as causally linked to their whiteness in ways that the political right encourages. The right thus aims to win support for candidates (like Trump) whose political programs, in many cases, do not address the economic concerns of those voters whose sense of social grievance they enflame. Even though identity politics fails to explain fully those people included within its categories, it can nevertheless be manipulated to have very real effects in the world. Identity politics functions, then, as a fantasmatic construction that governs and mobilizes the socio-political order.

In the U.S., voting operates in the name of, and enacts a form of, popular sovereignty. Judith Butler argues, however, that “the meaning of popular sovereignty has never been fully exhausted by the act of voting.”<sup>521</sup> “Something of popular sovereignty,” Butler claims, “remains untranslatable, nontransferable, and even unsubstitutable, which is why it can both elect and dissolve regimes.”<sup>522</sup> The simple reason for this excess is that without it, no democracy would be possible. For if “the power of the populace” matched “the power of those elected,” there would be no space for disagreement.<sup>523</sup> If the two powers were coextensive, then the result would be a totality, or what Claude Lefort refers to as

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<sup>520</sup> See, for example, Roland Merullo’s “In Defense of the White Male,” *The Boston Globe* (3 July 2017), accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

<sup>521</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 161.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*

the totalitarian “fantasy of the People-as-One.”<sup>524</sup> As Butler argues, “the conditions of democratic rule depend finally on an exercise of popular sovereignty that is never fully contained or expressed by any particular democratic order, but which is the condition of its democratic character.”<sup>525</sup> Butler labels this gap between the two powers an “‘anarchist’ interval or a permanent principle of revolution that resides within democratic orders, one that shows up more or less both at moments of founding and moments of dissolution.”<sup>526</sup> Butler here paraphrases Jason Frank’s claim that “the enactment of the people exceeds its representation.”<sup>527</sup> In other words, “something must fail as representation.”<sup>528</sup> Something “nonrepresentational” or “nonrepresentative” “becomes the basis of democratic forms of political self-determination.”<sup>529</sup> The “self” of this “self-determination” depends on reconfiguring the nonrepresentational resistance to any notion of self as a stable, autonomous agent.

Butler’s insight into the nonrepresentational core of democracy emphasizes the failure of any electoral or institutional process that presumes to speak for the people.<sup>530</sup> As Bonnie Honig has similarly argued, “democracy is not

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<sup>524</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy,” *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>525</sup> Butler, 162.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.* For Frank’s theory, see *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>528</sup> Butler, 170.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> From a different position, Lefort similarly remarks on the excess and lack of democracy when he claims, “The locus of power [in democracy] is an empty place, it cannot be occupied—it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it—and it cannot be represented. Only the mechanisms of the

just a set of governing institutions. It is also a commitment to generate actions in concert that exceed the institutional conditions that both enable and limit popular agencies.”<sup>531</sup> The fantasy of the “People-as-One” is a fantasy that seeks to eliminate the nonrepresentational excess of the democratic; that is, the “one” tries to erase the nothing—the democratic miscount, void, or supplement—that both constitutes and threatens its existence. Within this fantasy, there can be no possibility “to generate actions in concert” that would disrupt the totality of the system. Identity politics functions as a subtler articulation of this fantasy, since it proposes a homogeneity, a one-ness, where no such homogeneity exists.

In the democratic primaries leading up to the 2016 presidential election, Bernie Sanders offered a particular insistence on the one, and on counting, in a way that resembles the totalitarian fantasy.<sup>532</sup> This insistence reappears in *Our Revolution: A Future to Believe In*, where Sanders writes, “Democracy is about one person, one vote. It’s about all of us coming together to determine the future of our country.”<sup>533</sup> Sanders thus imagines equality as a form of equivalence—“one person, one vote”—that depends on counting. Sanders recognizes, of course, the profoundly exclusionary logic of U.S. society. Yet even as an aspirational

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exercise of power are visible, or only the men, the mere mortals, who hold political authority” (*Democracy and Political Theory* 17).

<sup>531</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>532</sup> As Frank B. Wilderson III argues, one can often find a symmetry between the left and right, and he reads in leftist cinema “the same ensemble of questions and the same structure of feeling that animates White supremacy” (*Red, White, and Black* 131). See *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>533</sup> Bernie Sanders, *Our Revolution: A Future to Believe In* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2016), 185.

ideal, any quantified figure for a democratic community risks obscuring democracy's constitutive division, thereby reproducing exclusion in a different form. The second sentence reiterates the aspirational logic of the first, yet as Jacques Rancière insists, no count can be total; that is, no logic of accounting can produce a consensual community ("all of us coming together"). Sanders follows a long line of (pragmatist) thinking here, one that begins with Aristotle's quantitative form of equality in the *Politics*.<sup>534</sup> The negative democratic impulse insists, against this Aristotelian inheritance, that no logic of counting or of popular sovereignty can be compatible with the logic of the democratic drive. Rather than aspire to a community structured by a fantasmatic totality, Rancière and Cha insist on the constitutive divided community, and this will be exemplified in my reading of Cha's use of a refraction that repeatedly disfigures the coherence of both the individual and the collective subject.

Voting depends on more than a logic of counting, even though it seems, in Sanders's formulation, to be exemplary of accounting logic. Grant Farred, for example, designates "the act of voting" as "the primal political event."<sup>535</sup> As the primal political event—or, perhaps, as the primal scene of politics—voting returns

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<sup>534</sup> See *Politics* 1317b-1318b. Aristotle introduces an important qualification, though. For Aristotle, the majority count should be determined by property. In a debate between two groups, for example, the group with the most property (accounting for the combination of the property of the poor and of the rich of that group) should be considered the majority. Aristotle warns of the danger of extreme inequality of wealth, since in such an instance (one that should seem all too familiar to us today) one person with a vast amount of property can skew the balance.

<sup>535</sup> Grant Farred, "A Fidelity to Politics: Shame and the African-American Vote in the 2004 Election" *Social Identities* 12.2 (March 2006), 215.

to haunt the results of that vote. This occurs precisely because every decision made by the vote remains contingent, and this becomes most explicit in those decisions that are highly contentious (as in the case of Florida in the 2000 U.S. presidential election) or suspect (as in the ongoing concern of Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election). There will always be a dissatisfaction felt by some part of the population, and there will always be a non-representational remainder not exhausted by the act of voting. Yet voting is also and at once the “most mundane of political practices,” emblematic of the routine or habitual practices required by the bureaucratization of political life of U.S. citizens.<sup>536</sup> In his discussion of African-American voters, “a constituency that is by no means ideologically homogenous or monolithic,”<sup>537</sup> Farred notes that voting entails the participation in an equivalence: “the vote is that moment [...] that makes all subjects, if only transiently and putatively, the same, regardless of which party or candidate the X [the sign of the voter on the ballot] favours; that political object whom the ‘X’, as it were, marks through anonymous preference.”<sup>538</sup> In the context of the 2016 election, Farred’s remarks suggest a contradiction about the act of voting. On the one hand, as we are told repeatedly by various news agencies and polling statistics, identity politics informs the thinking of voting in the U.S. On the other hand, as Farred suggests, voting has to do with the divestiture of one’s particular identity, such that one becomes the anonymous “X” on the ballot. According to Farred, “[e]very political subject,

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

every political constituency, possesses its own electoral unconscious” that “determines the horizon of the possible; it maps, through its delimitation or its (relative) lack of limits, what the constituency and its members imagine they can, or, would like to, expect from the political.”<sup>539</sup> The “X” on the ballot “defines both the horizon of the possible and the political unconscious where it is simultaneously pragmatic (voting for what is achievable) and ‘fantastical’ (the idealized, utopian impulse) in its political practice.”<sup>540</sup> The voter, then, perhaps divests his or her identity, but never fully divests his or her desires, which orient themselves toward the practical and “fantastical.”

The dual logic of voting—as pragmatic and fantasmatic—often operates in very insidious ways. Audre Lorde’s discussion of the task of the oppressed proves instructive here, as Lorde’s explanation of the logic by which normative subjects conceptualize and depend on non-normative subjects can be read as analogous to the expectations of voting and social collectives:

Traditionally, in american society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children’s culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.<sup>541</sup>

What Lorde calls “education” here can be reiterated as the act of political dissensus. The oppressed, in educating the oppressor, force a confrontation between the part of the population that counts and the part of the population that does not: the surplus or miscount. Education produces dissensus by drawing on the force of this miscount to challenge the order of the oppressor, who operates within a police logic. This dissensus disturbs the given-ness of reality, the (police) order of things.

While Lorde describes education as the production of dissensus, she also bemoans the fact that political dissensus so often (or necessarily) emerges from the part of the population that does not count, rather from those who do. Consensus democracy depends, in other words, on its inherent miscount to produce dissensus. Over and over again, the same logic of calling on the oppressed to “educate” the oppressor occurs. This also operates in the context of voting, where the oppressed populations are often called upon—primarily by liberal Democrats—to define and provide the moral or ethical grounds of the election. This moral or ethical foundation, of course, often simply appears coextensive with voting in favor of the Democratic candidate, rather than emerging from any transcendental signifier. The special election on 12 December

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<sup>541</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 114-115.

2017 in Alabama between Republican Roy Moore and Democrat Doug Jones provides a more recent example of this phenomenon, as Alabama became the site for both pragmatism and fantasy. A majority of white voters in Alabama—72% of white men, 63% of white women—voted for Moore; in contrast, the overwhelming majority of black voters—93% of black men, 98% of black women—voted for Jones and were thereby implicitly tasked with keeping a racist and sexual predator out of office.<sup>542</sup> While voters disputed the allegations of sexual abuse against Moore, they did not dispute Moore’s racism; “Moore had made his bigotry explicit, and the Republican Party had tolerated it. Jones placed the full Moore in front of voters, and he won.”<sup>543</sup> In contrast, Jones “had successfully prosecuted some of the murderers in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing case.”<sup>544</sup> While Moore clearly represented the proliferation of inequality, Jones represented the possibility of equality. This difference became figured as a moral-ethical injunction by liberal thinking, and this injunction depended on a constructed unity of black voters, one that reaffirms a stable identity over any excessive differences. In other words, black voters get codified as a unity when it serves the police order’s consensus project, even though black

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<sup>542</sup> “Exit poll results: How different groups voted in Alabama,” *The Washington Post* (13 Dec. 2017), accessed 14 Dec. 2017. As with the *Pew Research Center*’s details of the 2016 presidential election, the *Post* lists an exhaustive set of categories to break down the vote. See Stephanie McCrummen, Beth Reinhard, and Alice Crites’s “Woman says Roy Moore initiated sexual encounter when she was 14, he was 32” in *The Washington Post* for an account of the accusations against Moore.

<sup>543</sup> Amy Davidson Sorkin, “How Doug Jones Beat Roy Moore,” *The New Yorker* (13 Dec. 2017), accessed 10 March 2018.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*

people in the U.S. are also, at the same time, configured “as surplus people.”<sup>545</sup>

Writing on Nate Silver’s *FiveThirtyEight* election blog, David Wasserman noted, “If Jones prevails, as looks increasingly likely, a major reason would be that the black share of the Alabama vote is way up compared to past elections.”<sup>546</sup>

Minority voters have been understood by the Democratic Party as the means of maintaining a moral and ethical check on the political system that repeatedly subjugates them; at the same time, minority voters also vote in their own interests by supporting the candidate who has a record of fighting racism in Alabama. Their vote thus functions as the means of resisting their oppression by the political system. While economically subjugated voters who are white were encouraged by the right to vote against their own interests, black voters in Alabama were encouraged to vote in favor of their own interests, however weakly and reactively the Democratic Party will defend those interests. The rhetoric of the Alabama election emphasizes voting’s pragmatic drive to keep a racist, sexual predator out of office, as well as its fantasmatic orientation for Democrats who can use Alabama (where they have won a Senate seat for the first time since 1992) to ground their hope for the 2018 elections.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Lorde, 115.

<sup>546</sup> David Wasserman et. al., “Alabama Senate Election: Live Coverage and Results,” *FiveThirtyEight* (12 Dec. 2017), accessed 12 Dec. 2017.

<sup>547</sup> This trend continued in the Pennsylvania Special Election between Conor Lamb and Rick Saccone on 13 March 2018 in a district that overwhelmingly supported Trump in 2016. At the time of this writing, Lamb has declared victory, though by a very slim margin (“Pennsylvania Special Election Results: Lamb Wins 18<sup>th</sup> Congressional District,” *The New York Times*).

The logics of pragmatism and fantasy that structure the electoral process and produce different forms of violence on different voters have governed the electoral system since its inception, when the founders developed a representative system to manage the threats they envisioned in both democratic and aristocratic political organizations.<sup>548</sup> The representative system of electoral politics in the U.S. has its origins in the U.S. Constitution and the debates surrounding its ratification. In *Federalist* No. 9, Alexander Hamilton (anticipating a rhetorical move made by Thomas Paine in *Rights of Man*)<sup>549</sup> argues that the proposed U.S. republican system corrects the limitations of ancient (Greek) democracy:

The efficacy of various principles is now well understood, which were either not known at all, or imperfectly known to the ancients. The regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of legislative balances and checks; the institution of courts composed of judges holding their offices during good behavior; the representation of the people in the legislature by deputies of their own election: these are wholly new discoveries, or have made their principal progress towards perfection in modern times. They are means, and powerful means, by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained and its imperfections lessened or avoided.<sup>550</sup>

The departmentalization of power, the Enlightenment ideal *par excellence* of “balances and checks,” the institutionalization of judgment, and the representation of the many by the few constitute the core principles of the U.S. republican

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<sup>548</sup> For an excellent discussion of the constitutional debates on representation, see Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). In particular, see his chapter, “The Matter and Meaning of Representation” (123-66).

<sup>549</sup> See “Of the Old and New Systems of Government” in *Rights of Man* as collected in Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223-237.

<sup>550</sup> Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2014): 37.

system that uses and manages democratic excess. In *Federalist* No. 10, James Madison says even more strongly, “A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect and promises the cure for which we are seeking.”<sup>551</sup> Madison continues to claim, in *Federalist* No. 14, that republicanism becomes necessary for pragmatic reasons: “in a democracy the people meet and exercise the government in person; in a republic they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents. A democracy, consequently, must be confined to a small spot. A republic may be extended over a large region.”<sup>552</sup> Though the Federalists present republicanism as a solution or “cure” required by the problem of the size of the U.S., the introduction of a representative structure fundamentally changes democracy by making it possible to articulate democracy precisely as a form, a system.<sup>553</sup> Republicanism functions, then, as a *pharmakon*, that is, “as both remedy and poison.”<sup>554</sup> A representative political organization allows for mass populations to

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid., 45. Madison goes on to differentiate two systems of government: republics and democracies. For a discussion of the differences between a republic and a democracy, see August H. Nimtz Jr., *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America: The “Absolute Democracy” or “Defiled Republic”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 61. In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe takes issue with this distinction, claiming, “the difference between ancient and modern democracy is not one of *size* but of *nature*” (18).

<sup>553</sup> For a recent discussion of the viability of direct democracy and collective action on a large scale, see Scott Henkel, *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017).

<sup>554</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 70.

be included, in theory, in the daily workings of government. This inclusion would be impossible if so many people were to gather for every public decision.

Yet the substitutive figures of political representatives—figures of synecdoche and metaphor, which posit mimetic resemblance—engage in and perpetuate what Lefort refers to as “the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division.”<sup>555</sup> The representatives in each branch of government are united in their participation in a single United States society. The Federalists try to conceptualize a unity that includes division. Lefort’s quotation, however, alludes to a negative version of this ideal of unity, namely, the paradigm of the Nazis, which tries to conceptualize unity without division. White supremacy today in the U.S. of course relies on a similar fantasy of a substantial identity, and the violence emerges from the fact that the subject of this fantasy maintains “a consciousness of the other that can only be satisfied by Hegelian murder.”<sup>556</sup> A fantasy, in other words, that depends on a logic of purification, on annihilating the other to shore up the subject of the fantasy.<sup>557</sup>

Given this *telos*, the importance of Butler’s “anarchist interval” becomes clearer, as such an interval prevents, in theory, the erasure of division and

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<sup>555</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy,” 20.

<sup>556</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 80 [100].

<sup>557</sup> See Alain Badiou’s *The Century* for a discussion of the logics of purification in art and politics throughout the twentieth-century. See also Giorgio Agamben’s “What is a People?” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*.

difference in the name of “substantial identity.” Perhaps counterintuitively, this “anarchist interval” at once makes possible the democratic interruption of this fantasy of the one *and* operates as the means by which the fantasy reproduces its violence. That is, the police order repeats its acts of violence precisely because its count can never be complete. The anarchist miscount persists. This repetition speaks to the doubled violence of my previous chapter, but it also stresses a particular problem of representation as such. The democratic drive emerges from the non-representational catachresis—literally “misuse,” with a connotation of perversion (OED)—of every representative act. Yet the persistence of this drive, which names the structural antagonism of representation, requires the endless proliferation of representation.

Given this fact of representation, there can be no guarantee that every catachresis will produce a “more equal” form of representation. As Lee Edelman has shown in *No Future*, “Catachresis [...] cannot assure the progressive redistribution of meaning.”<sup>558</sup> Indeed, for Rancière, the concept of something as “more equal” than something else has a quality of non-sense, since there can only be equality or inequality. Butler seems to find difficulty in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* precisely because of her attempt to privilege some assemblies over others, which requires an assurance from catachresis that catachresis cannot give. Butler, for example, writes,

When the people break off from established power, they enact the popular will, though to know that for certain, we would have to know who is breaking off, and where, and who does not break off,

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<sup>558</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 114.

and where they are. There are, after all, all sorts of surging multitudes I would not want to endorse (even if I do not dispute their right to assemble), and they would include lynch mobs, anti-Semitic or racist or fascist congregations, and violent forms of antiparliamentary mass movements. I am less concerned with the ostensible vitality of surging multitudes or any nascent and promising life force that seems to belong to their collective action than I am with joining a struggle to establish more sustaining conditions of livability in the face of systematically induced precarity and forms of racial destitution. The final aim of politics is not simply to surge forth together (though this can be an essential moment of affective intensity within a broader struggle against precarity), constituting a new lived sense of the “people,” even if sometimes, for the purposes of radical democratic change—which I do endorse—it is important to surge forth in ways that claim and alter the attention of the world for some more enduring possibility of livable life for all.<sup>559</sup>

I cite this passage at length to give a sense of the complexity of its movements, but I also want to highlight that Butler designates certain collective formations to be “surging multitudes” that she “would not want to endorse (even if I do not dispute their right to assemble).” These include “lynch mobs, anti-Semitic or racist or fascist congregations, and violent forms of antiparliamentary mass movements.” In contrast, she does endorse others (those with “the purposes of radical democratic change” that “claim and alter the attention of the world for some more enduring possibility of livable life for all”). Scott Henkel’s *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas* highlights how figurative expressions, such as “surging multitudes,” have been deployed strategically to characterize different iterations of collective power.<sup>560</sup> Here, Butler clearly uses “surging multitudes” negatively, as the adjectival

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<sup>559</sup> Butler, 182-183.

<sup>560</sup> Henkel focuses on the “swarm” metaphor and notes that such figures have vastly different valuations depending on context (17-27).

qualification connotes a violent and threatening excess. “Surging” suggests a certain irrationality of the multitude, which might otherwise be viewed positively.<sup>561</sup> This excess seems to mark the locus of *jouissance*, which, as anti-rational must be excluded for her from the imagination of a democratic enclosure assuring “some more enduring possibility of livable life for all.”<sup>562</sup> Butler therefore aims to privilege rational, non-violent assemblies in this distinction, thereby guaranteeing a movement toward the democratic horizon of inclusivity.

On the one hand, these orientations are easy to sympathize with, especially for much of Butler’s liberal, academic audience. The desire to construct a “livable life for all” puts in more optimistic terms Rancière’s interest in the redistribution of the sensible. On the other hand, these endorsements, as well as much of the language of this passage, read as another version of liberal ideology, albeit a more sophisticated approach to liberalism than one often finds.<sup>563</sup> For example, the rhetoric of sustainability and livability seem to posit a form of liberal humanism counter to much of Butler’s own work.<sup>564</sup> Similarly, Butler’s emphasis on checking any assembly (“we would have to know who is breaking off, and where,

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<sup>561</sup> For an extensive engagement with the concept of “multitude,” see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude*.

<sup>562</sup> I am indebted to Lee Edelman for this formulation. See also *No Future* (102-108). While the “surging multitudes” refers to an anti-rational assembly in Butler’s passage, Henkel’s work on such figures emphasizes their rationality. That is, Henkel accounts for *jouissance* only to convert its Real force into Symbolic meaning.

<sup>563</sup> Butler’s preference for and theorization of nonviolence over violence offers another iteration of her liberalism (*Notes* 187-188).

<sup>564</sup> For instance, see her critiques in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*.

and who does not break off, and where they are”) recalls the Enlightenment ideals from which liberalism develops.

While Butler seems to attach herself to liberal values, many recent theorists of democracy, such as Bonnie Honig in *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, have more explicitly and adamantly called for a resuscitation of liberal institutions and public commons, against the privatization of neoliberalism.<sup>565</sup> While I do not discredit such work—indeed, many of these approaches to liberal discourses, such as Amanda Anderson’s *Bleak Liberalism*, offer extremely sophisticated readings—I do insist, along with Rancière, that institutions always necessarily operate according to the logic of the police.<sup>566</sup> No effort of openness and no attempt of inclusivity can erase this constitutive fact, which aligns institutions with the production of inequality, rather than equality.<sup>567</sup> What Butler requires in her valuation of good and bad assemblies is a conception of equality—the bad assemblies perpetuate inequality while the good assemblies strive for equality (a “livable life for all”). Yet such a conception of equality must remain pure—or axiomatic—for this evaluation to work every time. For Butler, assemblies possess “a desire to produce a new form of sociality on the spot.”<sup>568</sup> In other words, assemblies attempt to interrupt the distribution of the sensible,

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<sup>565</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

<sup>566</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>567</sup> In a discussion of democracy and freedom, Claude Lefort writes that “political freedom [...] is not reducible to a system of institutions designed to protect individual freedom” (“Reversibility,” *Democracy and Political Theory* 170).

<sup>568</sup> Butler, 183.

inaugurating a redistribution; however, Butler's evaluative judgments—judgments that only make sense in relation to a normative or regulative function—try to guarantee that this redistribution occurs in the name of greater equality rather than greater inequality.

Against such institutional production and against the axiomatic articulation of equality, the negative democratic impulse—like “queerness” for Edelman—“makes *nothing* happen; it *incises* that nothing in reality with an acid's caustic bite”; that is, it “dissolves the coherence to which our reality pretends.”<sup>569</sup> In what follows, I show how *Dictee* figures the incision of this nothing of the negative democratic impulse. Rather than expand our institutions or strive toward the horizon of inclusivity described by Butler, the democratic impulse refuses both. The negative democratic impulse, as described throughout this dissertation, functions as a specifically aesthetic project. As Rancière argues, aesthetics breaks from the hierarchy of any system of representation and its logic of equivalence or continuity, in which the representation declares itself to align with what it represents. *Dictee* dwells with the non-representational gap marked by nothing at the same time it dramatizes its persistence. More explicitly, through the figural gesture of refraction *Dictee* articulates the negative democratic impulse against the police order's consensus democracy, with all of its privilege of order, hierarchy, and coherence. Against these principles, on which democracy as a *form* of government, as a *system* of representation, depends, the negative democratic

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<sup>569</sup> Lee Edelman, “Learning Nothing: *Bad Education*,” *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 28.1 (May 2017), 125.

impulse insists on the miscount—the void and nothing—that both generates and threatens any system.

**“the certitude of absence”: *Dictee* and Refraction**

Although writing in a different context, Slavoj Žižek draws our attention to the non-representational gap constitutive of representation when he poses the ontological questions, “why is there (also) nothing and not (just) something? [...] How could nothing arise out of something?”<sup>570</sup> Extending this, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* might be said paradoxically to dwell with the non-representative that arises out of every representative act. For example, *Dictee* draws attention to this dialectic in its figurations of blood. As Juliana Spahr has suggested, blood designates a “metaphoric relation to wholes of nationality, race, and gender,” but in *Dictee* blood “becomes instead a ‘hole’ that assimilates the boundaries.”<sup>571</sup> This reveals one way that *Dictee* thematizes and figures the non-representational gap and privileges it over any representational production.

*Dictee*’s attention to the non-representational has contributed to its complicated reception history, one that reveals a number of tensions within and between ethnic studies and postmodern theory, but in what follows, I will bracket much of this history and focus instead on the democratic logics of the text.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>571</sup> Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>572</sup> Timothy Yu’s “Audience Distant Relative: Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha” provides a survey of *Dictee*’s reception by critics (*Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian-American Poetry Since 1965* 100-37). For another treatment of *Dictee*’s reception, see Hyo K. Kim, “Embodying the In-Between: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary*

*Dictee* presents itself as democratic in a variety of superficial, yet still important, ways. As many readers have noted, for example, *Dictee* often reads as an autobiographical text even as it resists the generic expectations of autobiography.<sup>573</sup> Its disarticulation of generic conventions speaks to its democratic resistance to the system of representation inherent in autobiography. For this reason, some readers, such as Nicole McDaniel, have approached *Dictee* “as a memoir which uses the heterogeneous technique of collage to emphasize the extent to which identity construction, self-representation, and the recovery of memory fragments are interrelational and serial.”<sup>574</sup> This tendency to read *Dictee* as a particular genre or form reproduces the tendency discussed earlier in this dissertation to speak as a particular identity formation. In both cases, the statement requires a regulation and reduction of the enunciating subject. For example, McDaniel’s attention to the non-representational aspects of the text seem to be undercut by the organizing gesture of reading the text as a memoir. To read *Dictee* as a memoir restricts the radical potential of the fragmented and fragmenting “technique of collage.” This fragmenting operation of collage arises out of its reliance on parataxis.<sup>575</sup> Though not exclusively tied to any particular

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*Study of Literature* 46.4 (Dec. 2013), 127-43. One might also read *Dictee*’s reception by ethnic studies through Jodi Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Melamed shows how many ostensibly antiracist discourses in literary studies produce normative “race-liberal orders” by subduing forms of difference (2).

<sup>573</sup> For a reading of Cha’s subversion of autobiography, see Nicole McDaniel’s “‘The Remnant is the Whole’: Collage, Serial Self-Representation, and Recovering Fragments in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” *Ariel* 40.4 (Oct. 2009), 69-88.

<sup>574</sup> McDaniel, 71.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

movement, parataxis—as collage or montage—alludes to modernist aesthetic practices, such as those favored by Louis Zukofsky. In this chapter, however, I argue that Cha persistently resists the substitution of part for whole on which Zukofsky depends. *Dictee* uses, then, an exemplary modernist strategy to undermine the very modernist project of constructing order.

Many of *Dictee*'s readers have attended to the negativity of the text. Juliana Spahr, for example, stresses that Cha's text "resists the totalizing processes of cultural assimilation" and insists "that America is not, and never has been, monolingual."<sup>576</sup> *Dictee* therefore "complicates and, in many ways, dissolves the powerful narratives of 'national character' and 'ethnicity,' as well as exceptionalist and isolationist frameworks. *Dictee* does not propose a 'true home' and it does not 'reconstitute.'"<sup>577</sup> In her foundational essay on *Dictee*, Shelley Sunn Wong claims, "*Dictee* is not a representative work."<sup>578</sup> According to Wong, "In *Dictee*, the different genres, or modes of literary (and, I might add, cinematic) production, do not coexist harmoniously but, rather, undermine each other through a process of reciprocal critique."<sup>579</sup> In a similar way, Anne Anlin Cheng asserts, "Although, and perhaps precisely because, *Dictée* is not interested in identities, it is profoundly interested in the processes of *identification*. [...] *Dictée*

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<sup>576</sup> Juliana M. Spahr, "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*," *College Literature* 23.3 (Oct. 1996), 39, 28.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>578</sup> Shelley Sunn Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*," *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictee by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 103.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

is anything *but* self-evident.”<sup>580</sup> Any attempt to categorize *Dictee* therefore betrays the very project of the text to resist and refuse categorization. *Dictee* strives to maintain a movement of contradictions that does not lead to the resolution of a generic or formal synthesis.

Lisa Lowe’s reading of *Dictee* makes a similar claim to Wong and Cheng, but Lowe draws particular attention to the way in which *Dictee*’s critique of representation draws on the contradictions of representation addressed in the preceding section of this chapter:

If one of the aims of literary representation, with its premise of mimetic correspondence between the name and the thing, is to provide a fiction of reconciliation that resolves the material contradictions of differentiation in and between spheres other than the literary, *Dictee* suggests that every representation claiming such correspondence must bear the anxious traces of the fundamental conditions of unmimetic irresolution. In its discontinuity, fragmentation, and episodic unfluency, *Dictee* attests to such irresolution, and its aesthetic of infidelity not only prompts the revelation of differences beneath the claim of verisimilitude, but in disturbing the function of representation as reconciliation, it returns us, as readers, to the material contradictions of lived political life.<sup>581</sup>

*Dictee* therefore points to those “anxious traces” that “representation as reconciliation” would like to forget. In a different way, Cheng notes, “the dictaphonic structure of linguistic interpellation” operates as “the central political conceit of the text” and asserts “that language *is* occupation, *and* it is coercive.”<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141.

<sup>581</sup> Lisa Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*,” *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictee by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 62.

<sup>582</sup> Cheng, 162.

In other words, reconciliation can only exist as part of a fantasy—be it of nation, race, gender, or any other constructed form of identity representation. Identity politics similarly depends on such fantasies, yet every identity politics remains haunted by the “anxious traces [...] of unmimetic irresolution” that disturb the consistency of its subjective categorizations.

One particularly effective means of disrupting order and categorization appears in the text’s disavowal of identity restrictions. In the “Calliope Epic Poetry” chapter, one section appears framed as a biographical sketch of the naturalization of the narrator’s (or author’s) mother. *Dictee* emphasizes the superficiality of identity as a constructed, rather than innate, phenomenon.<sup>583</sup> The narrator’s comment, “I write. I write you. Daily,” for example, suggests at the same time a correspondence—the narrator writing and addressing letters to her mother—and a literary construction—the narrator in this section writes her mother into being on the page.<sup>584</sup> The text therefore makes it impossible to determine whether the narrator’s mother pre-exists the narrative or emerges through the narrative. The constructed nature of identity becomes most evident in the narrator’s description of naturalization that follows this maternal address:

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American.

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<sup>583</sup> I ought to acknowledge that this moment is one of the few moments in the text focused on the United States. As Hee-Jung Serenity Joo and Christina Lux note, “in terms of content, the US nation-state takes up comparatively little space in the text” (“Dismantling Bellicose Identities: Strategic Language Games in Theresak Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE*” 12).

<sup>584</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 56. Hereafter cited in the text. In what follows, I refer to “the narrator” and “Cha,” but these references should not be taken to suggest either that *Dictee* has a single narrative voice or that it can be read simply as an autobiography.

They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image. And you learn the executive branch the legislative branch and the third. Justice. Judicial branch. It makes the difference. The rest is past. (56)

Since this passage appears in a section devoted to the narrator's mother, some have read the "I" and "you" as referring to the maternal figure, yet the ambiguity of the pronouns suggests that the passage could just as easily be read as self-referential of the narrator's own naturalization. Michelle Black Wester, for instance, assumes the "I" and "you" of this passage to be Cha herself. The pronoun split reflects the division produced by the identity construction of citizenship. Because "the U.S. through its documents, photos, and signatures strips one's identity and replaces it with a façade through which people have difficulty seeing, Cha illustrates the process of becoming 'other.'"<sup>585</sup> At least two problems face this reading: first, the easy identification of this narrative voice with Cha herself takes as a given the autobiographical elements of the text, and second, the assumption that this imposed identity of citizenship ("a façade") replaces what seems, in Wester's phrasing, to be a pre-existing, stable identity. Yet the entirety of *Dictee* troubles both of these assumptions. Sue J. Kim, in contrast to Wester, notes that the address of a "you" by an "I" in this section designates the "you" as "presumably but not necessarily the Mother of the first

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<sup>585</sup> Michelle Black Wester, "The Concentric Circles of *Dictee*: Reclaiming Women's Voices through Mothers and Daughters' Stories" *Journal of Asian American Studies* 10.2 (June 2007), 189.

part of the chapter.”<sup>586</sup> In spite of, or because of, this ambiguity, Kim suggests the passage describes “processes of adopting citizenship in ways that could be specific to these pseudo-characters as well as generalizable to any immigrant.”<sup>587</sup> Kim’s reading certainly seems feasible, and I would argue that the passage is concerned with precisely this move from the particular to the general; in other words, *Dictee* calls into question the generalizability inherent in representative acts and systems.

Priscilla Wald reads this passage, like Wester, as an articulation of the narrator’s own experience becoming a naturalized citizen. Unlike Wester, however, Wald resists the seduction to impose a reading informed by identity politics. As Wald notes, “we” is “not a word in the lexicon of *Dictee*,” and “[t]he few uses of ‘I’ are typically reserved for quoted passages and letters,” though Wald registers the exception that occurs in this naturalization passage.<sup>588</sup> In the sections that follow, however, Cha’s “narrator refuses a ‘we’ that is complicated by the whiteness and maleness of those who ‘own’ the images.”<sup>589</sup> Wald calls attention to the importance of ownership—of possession and of property, or the proper—for this naturalization scene. The claim that “someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph” initially suggests that U.S. citizenship erases and substitutes for a prior, authentic identity. Because so much

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<sup>586</sup> Sue J. Kim, “Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*” *Narrative* 16.2 (May 2008), 169.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>588</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 303.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*

of *Dictee* focuses on the colonial history of Korea and on the experience of exile, this identity replaced by a “photograph” should not be understood as authentic. For this prior identity is one of division. Each act of representation covers over loss at the same time it produces loss. As Lowe argues, *Dictee* treats “each instance of subject formation [...] as uneven and unfinished” such that every instance leaves “a variety of residues that remain uncontained by and antagonistic to the state apparatuses of domination and assimilation.”<sup>590</sup> In this way, *Dictee* proves a valuable resource for thinking against the proliferation of identity categories in electoral politics; indeed, *Dictee* points to the remainder that produces the need for ever more complicated identity formulations. Rather than try to recover an authentic identity, *Dictee* figures “the no-where, the utopia, of the native.”<sup>591</sup>

The production of division and further loss, as well as the “residues” that register such loss, become emphasized in the act of becoming a citizen, in which “They give you an American Pass port” (56). Splitting “passport” emphasizes the division produced by a document that has as its ostensible function the allowance of easy movement from nation to nation. The language here also suggests that the U.S. government possesses the identity it confers on the new citizen. As Wald writes, “The possessive pronouns rhetorically envision identity as a possession, a conditional property, which, like the documents that represent it, can be

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<sup>590</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 135.

<sup>591</sup> Cheng, 148.

expropriated.”<sup>592</sup> By receiving a U.S. identity, the immigrant subject simultaneously becomes “dispossessed.”<sup>593</sup> Wald notes, then, a negative dimension to naturalization that produces a gap between subject positions. Similarly, for Lowe, “the discrepancy between the subject and the state is exceedingly visible in this case of the female Korean immigrant, whose language, history, national origin, race, and gender are at odds with the formation offered by the promise of citizenship.”<sup>594</sup> *Dictée* therefore critiques the logic by which populations might be encouraged to act in certain ways, as in the case of electoral politics, since such encouragement will always be against the libidinal movements of the subjects constituting those populations. The democratic promise works differently for different subjects in a sociological sense, but for every subject, the democratic promise produces a structural gap or division. The differential quality of citizenship reveals the illusory nature of the equality inherent in the promise, since that equality itself produces and masks the inequality that inheres in it.

The mostly absent “we” and the minimal use of “I” registers the text’s resistance to a system of representation that organizes individual elements into a collective.<sup>595</sup> At the same time, however, the use of third-person pronouns

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<sup>592</sup> Wald, 301.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>594</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 143. For another reading of this naturalization scene, see Jennifer Cho’s “Mel-han-cholia as Political Practice in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 11.1 (2011), 36-61. For Cho, *Dictée*’s “repetitive compulsion toward remembering Japanese and American presences in the Korean past [...] performs the inassimilable and language-defying symptoms of trauma” (42).

<sup>595</sup> Another notable exception to this absent “we” occurs when Cha reproduces a letter of petition from displaced Koreans in Hawaii to President T. Roosevelt, which aims to acquire aid from the U.S. for Korea in its subjugation by Japanese

emphasizes the inevitability of a subject being interpellated by a system of representation.<sup>596</sup> “[E]very social formation” a subject enters “includes a multiplicity of social contradictions—of race, national origin, ethnicity, gender, or class—arising from heterogeneous origins and contradictions, with certain contradictions taking priority over others at particular historical moments.”<sup>597</sup> In the terms discussed earlier, the voter becoming the “X” on the ballot similarly confronts these “heterogeneous origins and contradictions.” At the end of the “Melpomene Tragedy” chapter, Cha writes, “Arrest the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own” (89). Implicitly, then, the other democracy (as opposed to “the machine that purports to employ democracy”) might be that which does not cause “the successive refraction” of its subjects into, for instance, exhaustive identity categorizations.

Cha thus introduces two intertwined forms of democracy: the consensus democracy of the police and dissensual democratic politics. This closing reference to democracy appears after Cha’s lengthy narration—framed as a letter to her

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Imperialist forces (34-6). This letter articulates from the “we” position, emphasizing the Koreans in Hawaii as representative of Koreans more generally. In “Dismantling Bellicose Identities,” Joo and Lux argue that this moment “calls attention to the US as a colonial power” and “also documents the Korean diaspora’s appeal to the US to intervene in the Japanese colonization of Korea,” which “implicates the contemporary Asian American subject—simply by virtue of citizenship—in colonialism and neo-colonialism, not just as a subject of colonialism, but as a colonizer as well” (12).

<sup>596</sup> See Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* for a reading of *Dictée* in relation to Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation (144-52). For an earlier version of this reading, see Lowe’s “Unfaithful to the Original” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (54-62).

<sup>597</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 147.

mother—that details the violence of dividing Korea, as well as the outbreak and proliferation of violence done against the people of Korea. As Lowe notes, the entirety of this section details “the incorporation of the individual into the Korean nationalist body during the Korean War.”<sup>598</sup> Given this context, the operation of “refraction” first occurs in the division of Korea: “We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate” (81). As the refraction at the end of the chapter emphasizes, this severance not only divides but also changes the direction of what it divides, which includes the people and nation. Like the lines of *Mason & Dixon*, division violently orders and regulates at the same time it proliferates more division.<sup>599</sup> Wester’s reading of this section of *Dictée* highlights that “foreign forces” perform “the severance” of Korea, “yet the naming reflects a Korean problem.”<sup>600</sup> The line of the DMZ also stresses the imbrication of “a physical and psychic wound.”<sup>601</sup> Refraction shapes both a political collectivity—the subject of the statement—and the subjects of that collective—the enunciating subjects.

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<sup>598</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 135.

<sup>599</sup> Recall in particular Zhang’s comment, “‘Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt ’em,— ’tis the first stroke.— All else will follow as if predestin’d, unto War and Devastation’” (*Mason & Dixon* 615). The discussion of God’s inaugural division also has relevance here (*Mason & Dixon* 356-61).

<sup>600</sup> Wester, 175.

<sup>601</sup> Cho, 43.

This entanglement of exterior and interior becomes more obvious as the narrative shifts to a demonstration of resistance.<sup>602</sup> During this scene, Cha meticulously negotiates between an individual voice and the indistinguishable voice(s) of a crowd:

I am in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed. I am inside the demonstration I am locked inside the crowd and carried in its movement. The voices ring shout one voice then many voices they are waves they echo I am moving in the direction the only one direction with the voices the only direction. (81)

The repetition of “same” and the comment that “nothing has changed” work to counter the progressive vision implied by Butler and by liberal theorists at the outset of this chapter. The “I” becomes “locked inside the crowd and carried in its movement,” such that the “I” no longer makes sense simply as an independent entity but, perhaps, as part of a “surging multitude.” This becomes reflected in the modulation of the following sentence, when the “voices [...] shout one voice then many voices.” Like “waves” that “echo,” the crowd modulates and shifts, such that the mass at times speaks as one and at other times speaks as a multiple. Even as the voices modulate, though, the crowd moves in “one direction,” “the only direction.” This “single motion” exists in tension with the appearance of “smoke”

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<sup>602</sup> Wester reads this as a description of the Kwang Ju Massacre, though she points out that Cha omits any direct references. During the Kwang Ju Demonstration, students protested “the South Korean military dictatorship,” and “[i]n May 1980, the Korean government authorized Korean Special Forces to stop the large-scale demonstration in Kwang Ju against Major General Chun Doo-hwan’s martial law” (Wester 175). Wester notes the continued dispute about the number of dead during this suppression of the protest, and scholars also disagree over the extent to which the U.S. participated in this state-sanctioned violence (Wester 176).

that reduces the members of the crowd “to parts [...] to separation” (82). This anticipates the forces of the police state firing at the crowd, firing “directed at anyone” (83).

With the outbreak of violence comes only more violence: “The police the soldiers anonymous they duplicate themselves, multiply in number invincible they execute their role” (84). The duplication of the police parallels the duplication of warring nations: “Nation against nation multiplied nations against nations against themselves. Own. Repels her rejects her expels her from *her* own” (88). From the civil war of Korea (nation against nation, North Korea against South Korea), the narrator envisions a global war (as in the world theater in which the Cold War plays out), which then reverts back to a civil war (the Korean nation against its people).<sup>603</sup> Cha’s description—“Repels her rejects her expels her from *her* own”—emphasizes this rejection in terms of abjection in its resemblance to Julia Kristeva’s own language: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.”<sup>604</sup> The act of division and of refraction, which structures any representative act, proliferates this process of multiplication and duplication. The negativity of division generates this movement, yet at the same time the negativity of division figures the non-representational catachresis that the system of representation disavows.

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<sup>603</sup> Drawing on the work of Nicole Loraux, Giorgia Agamben argues that *stasis* (the etymological root of “civil war”) politicizes the family or space of the home (*oikos*) and depoliticizes the city (*polis*) (*Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* 12). *Stasis*, or civil war, thus names a threshold, a zone of indistinction between politics and economics.

<sup>604</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

Here it is worth returning to the aforementioned statement on refraction: “Arrest the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own” (89). Refraction most obviously refers to the “phenomenon whereby a ray of light (or other electromagnetic radiation) is diverted or deflected from its previous course in passing from one medium into another, or in traversing a medium of varying density” (OED). Or, more simply, refraction can refer to “the action of breaking open or breaking up” (OED). Refraction works quite well, then, as a metaphor for the various diversions and deflections the subject is forced to experience by various ideological organizations, as shown in the preceding scenes. The U.S. naturalization process, for example, re-locates and re-positions the subject in a process through which national naturalization becomes the paradigm of naturalization as such. Naturalization makes natural what is unstable and contingent in its construction, and Cha’s text insists on following the logics of naturalization and the violence they invariably entail. The naturalization process breaks open that subject’s previously-imagined consistency or positionality. In each movement, the subject gets produced *as* distortion, that is, the subject is always the naturalization of a torsion that threatens to reveal the natural as a disavowed form of distortion itself. Just as Louis Althusser says that the subject is always already a subject of/to ideology, there is no subject prior to the distortions of refraction; a primary distortion or division constitutes the subject.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-86. Althusser writes that

“Refraction” also, however, possesses meaning as a rhetorical figure: *refractio*, which operates as a kind of *antanaclasis* (“reflection, bending back”) or *antistasis* (“opposition, counterplea”).<sup>606</sup> Both have similar senses, but the former refers to *refractio* as the use of one word “in two contrasting, usually comic, senses.”<sup>607</sup> The latter sense of *refractio* as *antistasis* names the “[r]epetition of a word in a different or contrary sense.”<sup>608</sup> *Antistasis* enacts the repetition that, in *antanaclasis*, is built into the first iteration. In the sentence that follows *Dictee*’s statement on refraction (and that concludes the chapter), Cha’s narrator seems to structure her statements according to *refractio*: “Suffice Melpomene, to exorcize from this mouth the name the words the memory of severance through this act by this very act to utter one, *Her* once, Her to utter at once, *She* without the separate act of uttering” (89). Though this passage could be said to depend as well on *epanorthosis*—a figure of self-correction that, like *refractio*, ends without final synthesis—refraction also appears in the successive uses of “act,” “Her,” and “utter(ing).”<sup>609</sup> The narrator calls on Melpomene to perform an exorcism of “the

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“ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*” (175-6).

<sup>606</sup> Richard A. Lanham, *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12, 15. See also Flore Chevaillier, “The Body of Writing,” *The Body of Writing: An Erotics of Contemporary American Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 80-99. Chevaillier notes the way in which Cha insists throughout *Dictee* that every word potentially includes a “play on sameness and difference” (90).

<sup>607</sup> Lanham, 12.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. Lanham draws on Shakespeare’s *Richard II* for an example: “I wasted time and now doth time waste me” (qtd. in Lanham 16).

<sup>609</sup> See Audrey Wasser’s reading of Samuel Beckett’s “trilogy” in *The Work of Difference* for the ways in which *epanorthosis* works through differential

name the words the memory of severance.” “[T]his mouth” may refer to the narrator or to the maternal figure of this section, but in any case, the content of this exorcism seems to be the entire system through which Korea and its subjects come to be divided by the violence of U.S. imperialism, as well as Japanese colonialism. Mayumo Inoue reads this repetition of “unique utterances” as an interruption of “the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own.”<sup>610</sup> In other words, the repetition performs a political interruption of the police order from within this order.

Understanding this repetition—rather than taking it simply as a positive corrective to state-sanctioned violence—requires noting that the means of exorcism occurs “through this act by this very act to utter one.” The shift from “through” to “by” (indicative of the self-corrective figure, *epanorthosis*) changes the sense of what follows quite drastically. If exorcism occurs “through this act [...] to utter,” the subject achieves exorcism by moving from the beginning of the act of uttering to the completion of the act of uttering. In other words, a linear narrative of progression seems to be the logic. In contrast, if exorcism occurs “by this very act to utter,” the subject seems exorcised in the act of uttering itself,

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repetition (94-116). Wasser shows that *epanorthosis* avoids the implicit synthesis and totality of reflection in its “self-differentiation in repetition” and “endless generation and displacement of an obligation coded as ‘originary’” (115). While Wasser focuses on the “productive” aspects of *epanorthosis*, she also stresses the differential negativity that constitutes its productivity.

<sup>610</sup> Mayumo Inoue, “Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s ‘Phantomnation’: Cinematic Specters and Spectral Collectivity in *Dictée* and *Apparatus*,” *Criticism* 56.1 (Winter 2014), 82.

rather than in the completion of the act. This privileges enunciation over the enunciated statement. The difficulty of this sentence increases with the “one” that closes this phrase, before the rest of the sentence (“*Her* once, Her to utter at once, *She* without the separate act of uttering”). Read differently, though, the implication might be one of dissolution, following Jacques Lacan’s notion of *passage à l’acte*, in which the subject exits the Symbolic scene—as described in chapter three—and becomes an object.<sup>611</sup>

The *passage à l’acte* refers to “an impulsive departure from the symbolic order that would render further analysis [or interpretation] impossible” and occurs because the subject is “unable to symbolize.”<sup>612</sup> “*She* without the separate act of uttering” refers, perhaps, to the “she” as an object, rather than to the “she” as a subject of the statement, and therefore of the Symbolic order. The subject fails to articulate itself through Symbolic representation against the “successive refraction” it experiences. As Renata Salecl suggests, *passage à l’acte* names “an act of self-annihilation of the subject, which does not try to incite a response from the Other.”<sup>613</sup> The “*She*” of *Dictée* no longer locates the promise of democracy in the police order, and with this divergence, she articulates the *refractio* of the void, both within and against the refraction of the hierarchical police order. The “[p]assage à l’acte is the leap into the void [...] the identification with an object *a* and the simultaneous condemnation of this identification by the subject whose

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<sup>611</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 114-130.

<sup>612</sup> William J. Hurst, “Some Reflections, Perhaps a Meditation, on Lacan and the Psychoanalytic Experience,” *Modern Psychoanalysis* 35.1 (2010), 100.

<sup>613</sup> Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

desire was in fact thought to be provoked by this identification.”<sup>614</sup> Though Lacan treats the *objet a* differently throughout his *oeuvre*, the *a* generally designates the remainder that “function[s] at the level that is articulated [...] as surplus *jouissance*,”<sup>615</sup> which Slavoj Žižek describes as the “surplus-enjoyment [...] of the symbolic space.”<sup>616</sup> The *passage à l’acte* operates as “a blind outburst,”<sup>617</sup> a meaningless gesture that “can’t be translated into speech or thought.”<sup>618</sup> A “*She* without the separate act of uttering” cannot be comprehended as a “she” at all, for she exists outside of the sense-making of language as a Symbolic order.

Cha critiques one form of refraction yet then performs another act of refraction, in which the possessive pronoun “Her” gives way to “She.” That is, the subject who can possess becomes the subject of the sentence, which is dispossessed and objectified. Rather than the subject, then, “She” as the subject of the sentence becomes the object. From this position, the dispossessed “She” articulates a negative force against the logic of subjectivity, with its correlative notions of identity and possession. The grammar of these phrases gestures to the

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<sup>614</sup> Gilbert Diatkine, “A Review of Lacan’s Seminar on Anxiety,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 87 (2006), 1055. As Richard Boothby suggests, “When the *objet a* is no longer locatable in the other, the frame of the fantasy that sustains desire collapses” (“The Lost Cause of Mourning” 218).

<sup>615</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Seminar XVII. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 20.

<sup>616</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 19.

<sup>617</sup> Zahi Zalloua, “Betting on *Ressentiment*: Žižek with Nietzsche,” *Symplokē* 20.1-2 (2012), 57.

<sup>618</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 76. Žižek continues to say that this act “carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration” (76). Citing this passage, Zalloua proceeds to read the way in which Žižek paradoxically interprets and politicizes the act’s non-meaning (57).

repetition, the *refractio*, of the Symbolic order and the chain of signification. Yet the Real and the death drive structure this Symbolic such that the movement along the chain of signification always risks failure; that is, the risk of encountering the negativity of the Real that threatens to annihilate all Symbolic functions. The *passage à l'acte* names the negative interruption of the Symbolic, an interruption that can never be legible from the perspective of the Symbolic order. This differs, for Lacan, from acting out, which names the way a subject remains within the scene, within the Symbolic (similar, perhaps, to what Althusser considers the actions of a “bad subject” of ideology). In contrast, in the *passage à l'acte*, “The subject moves in the direction of an escape from the scene.”<sup>619</sup> The figure of *refractio* constitutes the democratic politics that both resists and generates the police logic of representation, of refraction as violent re-ordering in the name of power. In other words, *refractio* leaves itself open to the negativity that threatens any ordering of the Symbolic and of language. Cha’s focus on the act of uttering thereby names a focus on that which threatens the subject as such. For every representative gesture necessarily fails; some kernel of the subject always escapes representation.<sup>620</sup> This results from the fact that the accounting logic of representation can never include or resolve the miscount expressed by/as the subject. In contrast to “the dialectical logic that undertakes to make something out

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<sup>619</sup> Lacan, *Anxiety*, 115.

<sup>620</sup> Though his concerns differ from mine, Eric Hayot has noted that “*Dictée* shows failure to be the fundamental intermediary of all representation, all communication” (615). See Eric Hayot, “Immigrating Fictions: Unfailing Mediation in *Dictée* and *Becoming Madame Mao*,” *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (Winter 2006), 601-635.

of nothing, to turn a profit on negativity,” as in the logic that transforms social/ontological exclusions into “the substantial status” of identity, this dissolution of the subject in *refractio* refuses to be easily subsumed by the Symbolic order.<sup>621</sup>

Earlier, I noted that this chapter of *Dictee* frames itself as a discussion of the Korean War that is framed in turn by a letter to the narrator’s mother. Yet before this letter, Cha presents a page-long passage opposite a map of Korea featuring the line marked “DMZ” that serves as one subject of the chapter. In the preface to the letter—if one can read it as a preface—the narrator describes a “She” figure in an abstracted space (78-79). Though this figure never gains any spatial specificity, the narrator does say, “The submission is complete,” which articulates a thematic of the section to follow (79). A commentary then follows that anticipates the descriptions of protest and violence later in the chapter:

Relinquishes even the vision to immobility. Abandons all protests to that which will appear to the sight. About to appear. Forecast. Break. Break, by all means. The illusion that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible. The expulsion is immediate. Not one second is lost to the replication of the totality. Total severance of the seen. Incision. (79).

This passage stresses the problem of appearance. Because so many of these sentences appear without a subject, the text produces a profound ambiguity. For example, the text does not specify whether the aforementioned “she” ought to be read as the subject of “Relinquishes even the vision to immobility. Abandons all protests to that which will appear to the sight.” Bracketing these difficulties, I do

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<sup>621</sup> Edelman, “Learning Nothing,” 133-4, 133.

want to emphasize how this passage might be read with the close of the chapter. In this opening, the narrator calls it an “illusion” to think “that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible.” Viewing, as a passive mode of reception, seems able only to receive; that is, viewing cannot alter what is viewed (except, perhaps, in the viewer’s own consciousness). Hee-Jung Serenity Joo and Christina Lux note that *Dictee* “is suspicious of the visual image, suggesting a fundamental disjuncture between the act of viewing and that which is seen.”<sup>622</sup> Indeed, this passage exemplifies “the text’s resistance to its own visibility: the oblique relation it takes toward itself as an object of revelation.”<sup>623</sup> Interestingly, this passage from the text moves from “the replication of the totality” to the “Total severance of the seen. Incision.” This “severance” and “[i]ncision” may refer to the “DMZ” line that severs what one sees by imposing an arbitrary and imaginary line across the land. This “incision,” however, can also be read as the incision against which the utterance at the close of the chapter positions itself. In *refractio*, the subject can go over, again, the incision of totality and fantasy to produce another kind of incision—that which incises “nothing in reality”<sup>624</sup>—generated from the Real that inheres in the subject of subjection rather than from the act of subjection or from the subject itself. Put schematically, if much of the chapter draws on the limits of acting out (as in the protest sequence), the end of the chapter turns to the *passage à l’acte*. The closing phrases of the chapter mark “the moment at which the

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<sup>622</sup> Joo and Lux, 10.

<sup>623</sup> Cheng, 142.

<sup>624</sup> Edelman, “Learning Nothing,” 125.

symbolic, so to speak, falls into the real.”<sup>625</sup> It is not a matter, then, of refraction *and refractio*; instead, as in the interruption of politics within the police order that politics simultaneously figures and disfigures, *refractio* emerges out of refraction. *Refractio* embeds itself within every operation of refraction.

*Refractio* figures the failure of correspondence that Lowe describes as “one of the aims of literary representation.”<sup>626</sup> The *refractio* that concludes Cha’s section on tragedy registers the “anxious traces of the fundamental conditions of unmimetic irresolution” that ground the system of literary representation and mimesis.<sup>627</sup> With *refractio*, there can be no resolution or “reconciliation.”<sup>628</sup> It also figures the failure of any identity politics to achieve its desired categorization. *Refractio* points to the fantasmatic construction of the refraction of consensus democracy, in which subjects are severed and categorized endlessly. Writing on the formation of race, Cheng notes, “Racial ‘identity,’ as one of the most powerful forms of collective fantasy, secured at the conjunction of the macro and micro [...], fails—indeed, cannot afford—to recognize the conditions of its own inception, its own fantasmatic beginnings.”<sup>629</sup> *Refractio* repeats in a way that points to these fantasmatic beginnings. Indeed, *refractio* in *Dictee* might be read, following Stuart Hall, as one of those “mechanisms [...] by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the ‘positions’ to which

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<sup>625</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>626</sup> Lowe, “Unfaithful to the Original,” 62.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid.

<sup>629</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 168.

they are summoned”—by, for example, the refraction of democracy—“as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and ‘perform’ these positions.”<sup>630</sup> Crucially, Hall emphasizes that these positions can never be performed “completely, for once and all time”; instead, the subject persists “in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves.”<sup>631</sup> *Refractio* figures, then, the subject’s expressive response to the refraction of the representative regime that characterizes the police order. Against the totalizing synthesis of identity that depends on a logic of accounting (“all identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects”),<sup>632</sup> *refractio* remains faithful to an anti-identitarian anti-synthesis. In this way, the figure of *refractio* follows “the principle of unbinding” of “the death drive.”<sup>633</sup> This negativity of the figure, its “anti-synthesis,” aligns *refractio* with the nothingness of utopia.<sup>634</sup>

The first form of refraction names the method through which division gets deployed in the name of a system of representation (of the police order), as in the case of citizenship or identity politics. In my introduction, I claim that democracy divides and negates. In Cha’s passage, there are two versions of this negative

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<sup>630</sup> Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996): 13-14.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>633</sup> Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 355.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*

operation: that of the police (consensus democracy) and that of politics (democracy as dissensus). The DMZ works toward the division of the world according to the logic of the Cold War, a division meant to impose order and hierarchy. The second form of refraction, that figured by *refractio*, moves away from this representative regime, which depends on “order and hierarchy,” to the disordering “anarchy” of the aesthetic or expressive regime.<sup>635</sup> Within and against synthesis—the totality toward which the police order and consensus democracy strive—the negative democratic impulse repeats, bending back in an endless movement along the chain of signification, each time opening itself and the system of signification to dissolution.

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<sup>635</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 43, 51.

## Coda:

“qui ne se parle pas”<sup>636</sup>

Unlike consensus democracy, the negative democratic impulse makes no promises. Instead, the negative democratic impulse inheres in the democratic promise as its structuring and destructuring drive. Just as it grounds every promise, the negative democratic impulse also undermines every promise, thereby refusing the logic of democracy as a “horizon of inclusivity.” In this way, the negative democratic impulse resists what Eva Cherniavsky describes as “the lure and the fiction of democracy: that ruler and ruled are the same.”<sup>637</sup> The interruptive force of the negative democratic impulse makes explicit how the relationships within consensus democracy always remain asymmetric and proliferate inequality.

Todd McGowan’s conclusion to *Enjoying What We Don’t Have*, subtitled, “A Society of the Death Drive,” offers a useful counter to the position that I have articulated throughout *Against Form*. McGowan begins by claiming, “There is no path leading from the death drive to utopia. The death drive undermines every attempt to construct a utopia; it is the enemy of the good society.”<sup>638</sup> Despite this insight, McGowan then argues, “It is possible to conceive of a positive politics of the death drive” by imagining “a society founded on a recognition of the death

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<sup>636</sup> This translates to “that which is not spoken” and appears in Jean-François Lyotard’s *Lectures d’enfance* (9).

<sup>637</sup> Eva Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 136.

<sup>638</sup> Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don’t Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 283.

drive.”<sup>639</sup> For McGowan, “A society centered around the death drive would not be a better society, nor would it entail less suffering”; instead, “[a] society centered around the death drive would allow us to recognize that we enjoy the lost object only insofar as it remains lost.”<sup>640</sup> Yet as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the negative democratic impulse, as democracy’s death drive, is profoundly anti-social. Indeed, the social order proliferates the logic of the police, from which politics appears to dispute. The death drive cannot be made to guarantee any recognition of the form described by McGowan.

Counter McGowan, I argued in chapter four that the attention to the non-representational aspect of the figural does name a utopian drive, but a utopia very distinct from what that term commonly designates. Fredric Jameson, for example, distinguishes different varieties of utopia in *Archaeologies of the Future*, yet in each iteration of the utopian, Jameson locates some image or ideal that orients the future movement.<sup>641</sup> For Jameson, utopia has to do with a guiding form, rather than with a disruptive figural movement. After discussing utopia in terms of totality—“this combination of closure and system, in the name of autonomy and self-sufficiency and which is ultimately the source of that otherness or radical, even alien, difference”—Jameson notes, “it is precisely this category of totality

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>641</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction* (New York: Verso, 2005). See especially the first chapter, “Varieties of the Utopian” (1-9). Jameson’s *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* attempts the speculative project of imagining a utopian society to come by drawing on the model of the U.S. military.

that presides over the forms of Utopian realization.”<sup>642</sup> The utopian of the figural, in contrast, opposes what Jameson describes: not totality, but anti-totality or anti-synthesis; utopia not as the fantasmatic image of wholeness, but as the force of the nothing constitutive of—and constituted by—such an image.

For this articulation of utopia, I draw on Jean-François Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure*, in which for Lyotard, “the principle of figurality that is also the principle of unbinding (the baffle) is the death drive.”<sup>643</sup> The death drive’s “absolute anti-synthesis” names, for Lyotard, “Utopia.”<sup>644</sup> In her commentary on Lyotard’s text, Mary Lydon remarks that one might place “*figure* on the side of the death drive, so that *figure* points at once to the fulfillment of desire, and the disruption, the delay, the deferral of discourse, the dismembering of the ego and the silencing of speech.”<sup>645</sup> Lyotard’s interest lies in “the utopian space of the unconscious, the space of *enfance* [speechlessness].”<sup>646</sup> It is this utopian space that representation seeks to elide through its positive process of substantialization, of making something out of nothing. Utopia as figurality, as anti-synthesis, names the political dissensus that disturbs the police order’s consensus democracy and its many utopian forms.

Recent work in black studies, such as that associated with Afro-Pessimism, has offered some of the most sustained critiques of the police order

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<sup>642</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 5.

<sup>643</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 355.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>645</sup> Mary Lydon, “Veduta on ‘Discourse, figure’” in *Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgment*, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 99 (2001), 24.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

and its substantialization of nothing through accounting practices. Afro-Pessimism in particular responds to the police order's annihilating logic, in which black subjects do not exist as part of the population that counts. Calvin Warren, for instance, proposes black nihilism as that which "resists emancipatory rhetoric that assumes it is possible to purge the Political of anti-black violence and advances *political apostasy* as the only 'ethical' response to black suffering."<sup>647</sup> For Warren, "the logic of the Political—linear temporality, biopolitical futurity, betterment, and redress—sustains black suffering."<sup>648</sup> The negative democratic impulse severs and interrupts the linear temporality of consensus democracy; though a structuring principle, it antagonizes the future as much as it antagonizes the past. Warren proceeds to trace the irrationality of black participation in, for example, the electoral processes that sustain the political in his sense of the term. No expansion of the Political (police) can erase its constitutive violence and exclusion of black subjects. Apostasy thus names one's renunciation of faith in an order grounded on one's own annihilation.

Warren offers a strong critique of liberal humanism in his work, but one danger of his avowal of "political apostasy" lies in its potential to absolutize a position of negation. Warren, like Ralph Ellison's anonymous protagonist of *Invisible Man*, seems to posit the black subject as "a walking personification of the Negative."<sup>649</sup> Apostasy must be understood as a repetition compulsion; like

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<sup>647</sup> Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (Spring 2015), 218.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

<sup>649</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 94.

the negative democratic impulse, the renouncing subject must persist in the political act of refusing the Political (police). Yet no apostasy can be so total as to erase the Political order governed by a police logic. Instead, such an act is bound to repeat itself, in a movement of infinite finitude: moving not toward some transcendental negativity, but toward the impossibility of overcoming the negative interruption produced by and out of the police order.

The negative democratic impulse insists on an anti-humanism against the violence of consensus democracy's conception of humanism, a conception that depends on the exclusion and regulation of certain bodies and populations—queers, blacks, immigrants, trans men and women, and many others—for its sense of who counts as human. Such an insistence remains more relevant than ever today, for as Claire Colebrook argues, in an age when climate change and threats of mass annihilation proliferate, “The possibility of an actual end of ‘man’ has led to man’s resurgence and justification both at the level of popular culture [...] and in what sometimes passes for theory and philosophy: it is no longer possible to question the human, or even reality, once the species and its planet are threatened.”<sup>650</sup> “For all the talk about the post-human, and about cultural and historical relativism,” Colebrook continues, “the present has imposed a brutal universal recognition.”<sup>651</sup> The negative democratic impulse aims to maintain a critical, questioning function against the violence of this universality, which operates as a conceptual articulation of the police. The negative democratic

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<sup>650</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Cinemas and Worlds,” *diacritics* 45.1 (2017), 40.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*

impulse refuses the consensus of the police order, the promise of inclusion with all of its corresponding violence, the logic of accounting that privileges a mind-numbing rationality, and the whole order of sense that divests itself of the libidinal. The negative democratic promises nothing; that is, as the death drive of democracy, the democratic impulse promises to repeat its insistent interruptions of the police order's systematicity. Far from "closing off" democracy, as in the case of consensus, the dissensus produced by the negative democratic impulse "enforces the repetition of its aberration."<sup>652</sup> The negative democratic impulse punctures and constitutes democracy; it figures the drive of equality, with all of its errancy, that democracy disavows.

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<sup>652</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 301.

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