

**Narcissism and the Scene of Reading:
Towards a Global Politics of Local Aesthetics**

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Narcissism and the Scene of Reading: Towards a Global Politics of Local Aesthetics

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My dissertation challenges both the assertion and dismissal of identity politics in the humanities through a queer-diasporic overhaul of the concept of “narcissism.” Both the sciences and humanities usually interpret narcissism ahistorically, as a state that ignores social difference to guard the boundaries of the self. For a number of scholars in literary and queer studies, such a psychoanalytic notion of narcissistic egocentrism is what explains the “illusion” of identity politics in minority writing. These post-structuralist scholars see political and aesthetic articulations of identity as regressions into cultural essentialism and antithetical to the radical democracy offered by the mobility of linguistic and sexual desire. Arguing against post-structuralism’s delocalized approach to sexuality and signification, and by turning to ignored strands of psychoanalysis, anti-colonial polemics, Asian American and African American literature, my dissertation mounts a counter-critique of the hierarchy between “literariness” and the narcissism of identity politics. Through minoritarian readings of the relationships between psychic life, biopolitics, and literary praxis, I uncover a genealogy of literary narcissism to shed light on the material and uneven production of an ethnicized and gendered desire for political identitarianism. I contend that, instead of dismissing or celebrating identity politics, we need to see it as a differential encounter with forms of alterity produced by global capital.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, a number of post-structuralist cultural critics in the Anglo-American academy have taken a firm stance against what they see as the normativity underpinning the illusory constructs of “meaning,” “identity,” and “consciousness.” In particular, literary and queer theorists—inspired by the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan—have argued that the human ego or consciousness must be seen as the domain of narcissistic illusions and an effect of a fundamental *misrecognition*. The ego—as that which learns to say “I”—is the product of an illusory sense of mastery, identity, and, therefore, the politics of identities. Such affirmations of the self and the community of the self-same, Lacanian cultural critics argue, is also the basis of violence and intolerance towards otherness and difference. As a solution to or as a “guarantee” against the problem of the politics of egos and identities—founded on rigid distinctions between selfhood and otherness—this school of thought has offered a forceful ethical lesson: it is necessary to see that difference and otherness do not lie outside the subject but are *constitutive* of subjectivity. The conscious ego is not as stable or as masterful as it may appear to be, and its apparent stability is a product of disavowal of its internal alterity, of an *unconscious* that undergirds but remains extrinsic to the illusion of coherence. The identitarian ego is therefore to be distinguished from the Lacanian *subject* of unconscious desire that is the antithesis of egoic narcissism. The subject of the unconscious, unlike the ego, must be explored through desire that knows no object. The subject of desire must also be understood in terms of uncontrollable bodily drives that have no particular aim.

This opposition between the narcissistic politics of identitarianism and the ethics of desire and desubjectification has had a significant impact on literary and queer theory in the humanities, primarily through the popularization of Lacan’s post-structuralist theorization of language, sexuality, and signification. According to this post-structuralist view, language is a system of ungrounded differences, the realm of “Symbolic Otherness” in which meaning can never be

secured. As a “system” or a “structure,” language is to be distinguished from and privileged over specific linguistic utterances derived from and entirely dependent on that structure. Language, here, is also what reveals to the subject her/his primarily *sexual* unconscious, the mobility of desire, and the “meaninglessness” of sexed subjectivity. As a material support that is best able to demonstrate the radically non-identitarian and, indeed, nonsensical nature of desire, the non-negotiable Otherness of the linguistic signifier—“representing” the sexual unconscious—has emerged as a common post-structuralist tool to push against notions of sovereignty and autonomy of the Western subject.

Here, I should clarify what I mean by the “Symbolic” and “Symbolic Otherness.”

Feminist and queer respondents to Lacan have argued that, as the locus of patriarchal law and the phallus-as-the-transcendental-signifier, the Symbolic is the site of material oppression. Lacanians, however, have counter-argued that, although the Symbolic order structures the social, it is not reducible to the social, the cultural, and the social uses of language. The Symbolic must be conceived as an abstract and “impossible” structure of desire with no exit. It is the realm of the signifier with no signifieds, a realm that makes history possible. But the Symbolic cannot be reduced cannot be conflated with the historical conditions external to the subject or to the specific institutions that interpellate the subject. The Symbolic order therefore represents a history that is, paradoxically, non-social and without “content.”¹ It is only by acceding to the limitlessness of this order that the analysand gains an insight into unconscious subjectivity and desire, an insight that is not egocentric.

As I outline in more detail below, such a concept of the Symbolic—often representing anti-identitarian desire coming from an ultimately unknowable “Otherness”—is often mobilized in opposition to identitarian and discriminatory categories of race, ethnicity, and gender. For Lacanian literary critics who are against identity politics, then, the mobility of the non-

¹ See Charles Shepherdson, *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2000), 34-36.

identitarian signifier in the unconscious is the very stuff of “literariness.” Concomitantly, for Lacanian theorists of sexuality, the signifier is what the “sexed” subject inhabits as a “limit” in which all exclusionary demands for identity and meaning *fail*, opening the subject to non-normative relationships with alterity. As I also discuss below, for a number of psychoanalytic cultural critics—like Shoshana Felman, Christopher Lane, and Joan Copjec—the task of cultural criticism is to refuse the identitarian and semiotic attachments of the narcissistic ego and to *read* one’s way “into desire,” into the domain of lack and nonsense produced by the subject’s failure to inhabit completely the Symbolic signifier. In other words, what I identify in this particular critical approach that has emerged since the 1980s is a specific politics of reading that derives its ethical force from a binary opposition between the linguistic-sexual signifier—that defies sense and coherence—and the narcissistic ego that demands sense and autonomy. To “read” literature, culture, and sexuality is to give the ego over to or shatter the ego through the absolute alterity of language and/or the sexual unconscious, to accede to that play of differences, sexual desire, and the melody of the drives that “undo” egoic narcissism.

While acknowledging that the Lacanian distinctions between the Symbolic, the Imaginary (the realm of the ego), and the (unrepresentable) Real have been theoretically productive, the dissertation challenges this privileging of “incalculable” desire over “rigid” identitarianism in contemporary cultural criticism. If Lacanian cultural theorists turn to unconscious desire to bypass the false mastery of the narcissistic ego, I contend that this approach to subjectivity is dangerously ahistorical in its homogenizing insistence on an illusory “mastery” of the ego as well as the supposed mobility of “pure” desire untainted by imbricated social categories of difference—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality—sustaining and sustained by local forms of global capital. Arguing against post-structuralism’s delocalized approach to signification and reification of sexuality, I propose a mode of reading that does not dismiss but instead pauses both to account for and problematize the resurgence of narcissistic identity politics in our contemporary moment. The dissertation insists that globally relevant literary-queer reading

can begin only if we rethink narcissism as an inevitable and differential encounter with forms of alterity produced by transnational capital. This, I submit, is a “critical narcissism” that neither celebrates nor dismisses identity politics. The task of reading, I propose, is not to privilege uncritically “desire,” “meaninglessness,” or semiotic proliferation over “identity,” but to identify the material conditions of the uneven production of a desire for identity (that does not necessarily exempt the sexual or the erotic), a controlled proliferation of meaning that drives unequal globalization, as well as new forms of exclusion that such identitarian desires may produce.

The dissertation mounts its critique both from within psychoanalytic theory and literary studies, but specifically through a post-colonial and diasporic overhaul of post-structuralist assumptions around the relationship between language, meaning, identity, and alterity. My argument proceeds simultaneously from two directions. Firstly, by turning to intersections between ignored strands of psychoanalytic thought (Françoise Dolto) and anti-colonial polemics (Frantz Fanon), I demonstrate the limits of the concept of language as a Symbolic system of ungrounded differences and challenge the assumptions behind the binary opposition between the linguistic unconscious and the narcissistic ego. Secondly, through readings of a selection of post-colonial and diasporic writers (Assia Djebar, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chang-rae Lee, and Samuel R. Delany) who underscore the impact of racialized, ethnicized, and gendered contexts of language acquisition on their literary practice, I argue that it is politically necessary to rethink literariness in terms of a *fragmented* identitarianism or egoic narcissism. I demonstrate that these post-colonial and diasporic literary images of narcissistic fragmentation—signifying enduring effects of racism, sexism, and/or class oppression—cannot be simply conflated with or ignored through the post-structuralist notion of linguistic-sexual “splitting.” Finally, through the “trans-literary” or “intermedial” aesthetics of these writers, I argue that post-structuralist theories of reading must take into account the profound impact of visual and virtual technologies (such the cinematic mode of production and the information economy) that also generate individualistic and communal forms of identitarianism marked by commoditization, consumption, and categories

of social difference. Thus, the “critical narcissism” of these authors, I contend, also lies in their emphasis on the *forms of mediation*, on the heterogeneous impact of linguistic, visual, and virtual mediation on the subject who reads and is read by the social.

In what follows, I first outline the theoretical-cultural turn to the Lacanian Symbolic (and the Real) which, as I have noted, is also an abstraction of allied concepts like unconscious desire, the drive, and unrepresentability from consciousness, identity, and representability. My goal, here, is not to dismiss Lacanian clinical practice—indeed, I do not have the training to do so—but to get past the sedimentation and sway of certain psychoanalytic concepts in contemporary criticism, in particular the neo-imperialist colorblindness of the critical drive to transcend the narcissism of the ego to attain the Symbolic. In the second section of the introduction, I outline an alternative literary theory of narcissism that simultaneously draws on psychoanalytic, Marxist, post-colonial, and diasporic genealogies. This section lays out the framework for the dissertation’s key argument, which is that, by privileging unconscious desire over egoic identitarianism, critics risk ignoring material forms of oppression that produce identitarian narcissism, which is therefore at once individual and social. Finally, I conclude the section and the introduction with summaries of the arguments made in the dissertation’s five chapters.

The Symbolic Cure, or Reading “Otherwise”

According to Lacanian analysts, the goal of clinical analysis is to “pierce through” the analysand’s “Imaginary”—the domain of the narcissistic ego or what the ego “means” to say—to the realm of Symbolic desire—all that is revealed through the linguistic slips and cracks of the ego’s intentions.² If Imaginary relations involve aggression, rivalry, and antagonism between the ego’s self-image and similarly narcissistic egos of others, Symbolic relations entail developing a more impersonal stance toward the self as a subject of unconscious desire in a linguistic structure.

² Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 35. See also Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 246.

This movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic in the Lacanian clinic is also one that several literary critics have adopted as “analysts” of literary texts, not simply to suggest that literature mimics psychoanalytic truths but also to emphasize the *co-implication* of literature and psychoanalysis. For instance, Ehsan Azari argues that, there is a certain “literariness” that *defines* Lacan’s theory of the unconscious, given that the unconscious is *linguistic* and that several Lacanian concepts like desire, *jouissance*, and the symptom “have been articulated through the mediation of, or in direct dialogue with literature.”³ For Azari, the study of psychoanalysis is inseparable from the study of literary language, or of a certain *literariness of language* in which psychoanalysis, in fact, learns *from* literature. Indeed, Azari echoes what literary critic Shoshana Felman argues in her 1982 introduction to *Literature and Psychoanalysis*: “...in the same way that psychoanalysis points to the unconscious of literature, *literature, in its turn, is the unconscious of psychoanalysis.*”⁴ For both Felman and Azari, the literary is that which lies “repressed” or “unthought” in psychoanalytic theory.

Importantly, as the literary critic moves from the Imaginary dimensions of the text—from what the text ostensibly “means”—to the unthought literary Symbolic that illuminates both literature and psychoanalysis, the goal of literary analysis is *not* to produce a single infallible “meaning” or “truth” about the text. As the realm of unconscious desire, Symbolic Otherness itself eludes linguistic meaning. That is to say, while language belongs to the Symbolic order, *Symbolic Otherness and unconscious desire that define literariness cannot be reduced to linguistic meaning.* Thus, through her analysis of Henry James’s short story *The Turn of the Screw*, Felman argues for the value of a Symbolic reading that does not privilege a “single” meaning but the “rhetoricity” of sexuality as desire:

³ Ehsan Azari, *Lacan and the Destiny of Literature: Desire, Jouissance, and Sinthome in Shakespeare, Donne, Joyce, and Ashbery* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 2.

⁴ Shoshana Felman, “To Open the Question,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis—The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 10.

If, far from implying the simplicity of a self-present literal meaning, sexuality posits rather a multiplicity of conflicting forces, to the complexity of its own divisiveness and contradiction, its meaning can by no means be univocal or unified, but must necessarily be *ambiguous*. It is thus not rhetoric which disguises and hides sex; sexuality *is* rhetoric since it essentially consists of ambiguity; it is the coexistence of dynamically antagonistic meanings. Sexuality is the division and divisiveness of meaning; it is meaning *as* division, meaning *as* conflict.⁵

In Felman's view, literature is an exemplary medium that allows the reader to encounter Symbolic Otherness, an absolute alterity that shatters Imaginary meanings through an exploration of the ambiguity of desire in the sexual unconscious.

The political valence of this ethical move from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, as several critics note, lies in challenging the central tenets of self-presence, autonomy, and sovereignty typically associated with the Western subject. As Jane Gallop reminds us, Lacan's theory of the unconscious is his response to *American* "ego psychology" and, indeed, "the American way of life."⁶ Even though the founders of ego psychology—Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and Rudolf Loewenstein—were all newly arrived immigrants in the United States, Lacan associates ego psychology directly and entirely with American capitalism and consumerism.⁷ The dissertation will later show how the cultural and political economies of migration, diaspora, and colonialism complicate Lacan's reduction of the ego to the (false) mastery of American capitalism. Let me, here, note that, even as Lacan risks homogenizing what America "means" through his theory of the ego, his antipathy toward the narcissistic ego has inspired a number of Symbolic critiques of colonialism and imperialism. I will give two examples of such anti-colonial Symbolic "cures" from within literary and cultural analysis and then raise a few questions that are at the heart of this dissertation.

⁵ Felman, 112.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 127. For a discussion of how Lacan's theory of the unconscious is his own *Imaginary* response to the "American other," see Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 57.

⁷ Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1.

In his book, *The Ruling Passion*, Christopher Lane adopts the same unconscious/ego distinction that we find in Felman's analysis of American literature. For Lane, however, it is the larger national "text" of the British Empire that stands in for the deluded ego, and *The Ruling Passion* takes it upon itself to explore "unconscious antagonism that often erupts between national and sexual identification" in colonial authors like Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Saki.⁸ Although Lane's focus is specifically on "homosexual drives" that produce antagonism between empire and the (male) subject of desire in British colonial literature, he repeats the literary move that Felman makes, from the Imaginary (the "conservative" realm of the signified or meaning) to the Symbolic (the "radical" realm of the signifier). As he writes: "In this book, interpretation of different texts moves from conventional attention to the signified (the object of narrative representing what a text logically and conceptually "means") to that of the signifier (the element producing meaning, which is available for interpretation on several different levels)."⁹ By elevating his reading from the narcissism of the imperial ego to the Otherness of (homosexual) desire, Lane uncovers how, as a manifestation of male sexual desire, the signifier disrupts rigid meanings of masculinity and femininity and gendered and racial ideologies that drive the colonial project. In Lane's view, the writings of several male authors reveal how the British colonial subject oscillates between the narcissism of empire and "the vicissitudes of [unconscious homosexual] desire."¹⁰ Even as the (latent) homosexual desire remains caught up in misogyny and homosociality that, ultimately, reinforce the colonial project,¹¹ Lane maintains that desire remains a threat to and often "shatters" the colonial bid for mastery. Thus, the political promise of literary criticism of *Ruling Passion*, as in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, lies in

⁸ Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ For instance, see Lane's reading of Kipling's novel *The Light That Failed*. See Ibid., 21.

“hearing” the textual unconscious of sexual desire to focus on “the unreliable and asymmetrical relation between signifier and signified.”¹² It is only through such a Symbolic reading that the literary critic can expose the false mastery of the colonial ego and “shatter Britain’s colonial legacy once and for all.”¹³

Lane’s and Felman’s anti-imperialistic goals notwithstanding, what I want to emphasize in their theoretical framework is not only the psychoanalytic tendency to see sexual desire as that which can counter the identitarian demands of race and gender,¹⁴ but also a certain *position* from which sexuality can be filtered out of the social, the economic, and the historical, so that sexuality can be read as a subversive “undecidability,” as that which “shatters” identity and meaning. To examine further the philosophical and political implications of this position—from which Symbolic Otherness, desire, and the drive can be continually privileged over the narcissistic Imaginary and the social—I would like to turn to Lacanian critic Joan Copjec’s “ant-racist” reading of sexual difference.

In her essay, “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” Copjec argues against the constructionist and “historicist” approach that sees sexuality in relation to race, class, and gender. For Copjec, sex and sexual difference are neither biological nor cultural and cannot be conflated with the other categories of difference, since

...what such a reduction would remain oblivious to is the radical antagonism *between sex and sense*....Sex is the stumbling block of sense....It is only there where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning—that sex

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ This abstraction and isolation of sexuality from the social applies more generally to dominant approaches to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. For a critique of how psychoanalytic discourse has made the sexual “dispositif” into an “independent sign system” through a capitalist process of “isolation, autonomization, specialization,” see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 51.

comes to be...Sex serves no function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the realm of possible experience or pure understanding (emphasis in the original).¹⁵

Copjec's resonances with both Lane and Felman should not be missed. Like them, she sees sexuality as the site where identity and meaning falter. However, we should also note how Copjec makes clearer what is implicit in the other two critics. The "goal" of sex is to transport the subject "outside" the realm of sensible experience and hence presumably outside the "demands" of social relations of production. The "subject" of sex is therefore one "for which no signifier can account."¹⁶ It is this *gap or breach* between the signifier and the subject that fails to produce the subject as a "knowable" entity and becomes Copjec's anti-humanist weapon against the problem of racism: "This subject, radically unknowable, radically incalculable, is the only guarantee we have against racism. This is a guarantee that slips from us whenever we disregard the non-transparency of subject to signifier, whenever we make the subject coincide with the signifier rather than its misfire."¹⁷ In Copjec's view, then, this notion of the subject as a "misfire"—who or "that" is not entirely "translatable" in terms of the signifier—is vital to the guarantee against racism. Paradoxically, however, it is also through her investment in this notion of the "misfire"—a logical elaboration, I am suggesting, of what Lane calls the "asymmetrical relation between the signifier and the signified"—that Copjec lays bare her idealism, an idealism that is also implicit in Lane's and Felman's turn to the Lacanian Symbolic. For Copjec, sex not only makes meaning and identity impossible, it makes the subject "something" that is not available for experience. If racism happens each time the subject is *made* to coincide with the signifier—to become its signified—then that violence, she suggests, can be critiqued if not undone by reasoning that the subject of sex cannot be cognized or cognize itself. Indeed, such an approach to subjectivity is

¹⁵ Joan Copjec, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 18-21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

most directly suggested when Copjec reads the “universal” nature of the Symbolic order through the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s theorization of “reason.” Copjec writes:

His [Kant’s] point bears repeating—is that our reason is limited because *the procedures of our knowledge have no term, no limit. What limits reason is a lack of limit....* The possibility of a realm beyond, unlimited by our phenomenal conditions, is precisely dependent on the foreclosure of the judgment of existence.¹⁸

We can therefore say that the ethical turn to Symbolic Otherness in Felman, Lane, and Copjec relies on this possibility of a “realm beyond” that cannot be known but is nevertheless “represented” by the ineffable sublimity of sex and sexual desire. Racism and other forms of social inequity may be surmounted by reaching out for this impossible reason-as-desire that is at once limited and limitless, and that does not believe in the “existence” of things.¹⁹

But who exactly is *able* to experience such reason and/or is in a position to speak of this sublimity? Can questions of cultural, social, and economic location be completely ignored so that what gets maximal play is the sublimity of the signifier, so that the rootless and ahistorical subject can move in a programmatic fashion from the Imaginary, to the Symbolic, to the unrepresentable Real of sexual difference to emerge finally as the radically egalitarianism anti-racist?

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹ In her essay “Demanding the Impossible,” Tracy McNulty similarly argues for the need to see Lacan’s notion of “desire of the [Symbolic] Other” as the site for effective social change. McNulty suggests that we see desire in terms of a “voluntarist” approach to social changes that remain unthinkable. This is, however, a voluntarism that is not guided by ideals or goals. Like other Lacanians, McNulty also argues that this desire can be experienced only by rejecting the demands of the narcissistic ego. She has a quasi-theological faith in “founder” figures like Jesus and Moses, whose “desire,” she believes, changed the unconscious subjectivities of their followers. In the same essay, however, McNulty admits that this experience of desire is a rare privilege, since for the vast majority, the confrontation with the Other’s desire simply provokes repression and violence, and a reversion to the very practices that the founding fathers forbid. In other words, it remains unclear who actually has the psychic (and I would add economic) resources to benefit from this model of egoic dissolution. Furthermore, moving primarily between Lacan, Freud, the Ten Commandments, and the Gospels, McNulty’s essay has no interest in engaging with the nature or production of egoic “demands” under contemporary capitalism, in considering how economic, racial, and political processes might construct or fragment the ego and/or alleged experience of desire. Neither does she tell us how subjects who cannot be Lacanian “analysands”—or blessed disciples of the prophet-as-analyst—will circumvent the apparently generalizable Imaginary narcissism. Not surprisingly, echoing Copjec, McNulty links the experience of sublimation and the desire of (a post-Imaginary) Otherness with the Kantian sublime. In other words, there is, paradoxically, a kind of “social cleansing” at work in McNulty’s theory of desire for “social change.” In chapter five, we will see another instance of social cleansing in Tim Dean’s theory of public sex as sublime Otherness. See Tracy McNulty, “Demanding the Impossible: Desire and Social Change,” *differences* 20 (2009): 1-39.

Copjec's reliance on Kantian transcendentalism suggests otherwise. In her book, *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers a compelling critique of the ideological assumptions of Kant's theories of reason, judgment, and the sublime. If Copjec occupies Kant's position by foreclosing the judgment of existence, Spivak argues for the need to analyze "the foreclosure of the subject *whose lack of access to the position of narrator* is the condition of possibility of Kant's position" (my emphasis),²⁰ Spivak writes:

Let us note this rather special inscription of a judgment programmed in nature, but not produced by culture. It is not possible to *become* cultured in this culture, if you are *naturally* alien to it. We should read Kant's description of the desirability of this proper humanizing of the human through culture within this frame of paradox: "Without *development* of moral ideals, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime presents itself to man in the raw [*dem rohen Menschen*] merely as terrible." (CJ 105; emphasis mine). The adjective *roh* is suggestive. It is generally translated "uneducated." In fact, in Kant, the "uneducated" are specifically the child and the poor, the "naturally uneducable" is woman.²¹

The Kantian sublime, in Spivak's argument, can be experienced as such and made into a moral ideal only through access to forms of privilege that are marked by age, social and economic capital, and gender. As she demonstrates, what is strikingly absent-present in Kant's aesthetic project—the training of speculative reason to see simultaneously its own "limits" and moral reason's "boundlessness"—is the category of racial difference: "the New Hollander or the man from Tierra del Fuego *cannot* be the subject of speech or judgment in the world of the *Critique*. The [ostensibly universal] subject as such in Kant is geopolitically differentiated."²² As she further points out, the cultural and economic privileges that define Kant's philosophical project for "man" is betrayed by his own reference to the uncultured "man in the raw": "...it is clear that the raw man is reduced out of this definitive area. Conversely, the uncultivated reason of this raw

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9.

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Ibid., 26.

man cannot conceptualize *mas* as *noumenon* either.”²³ In other words, the “uncultured” subject cannot experience the sublime and the boundlessness of reason.

Following Spivak’s critique of Kantian reason, this dissertation attempts to address the blind spots of a politics of a Symbolic cure that ignores racial, social, and economic inequities to promote an ethics of absolute literary-sexual alterity. Reframing Spivak’s critique in the context of the Symbolic cure in the Euro-American humanities, I want to ask: from what *position* can the “asymmetry” between the signifier and the signified be viewed as the guarantee against racism and neo-colonialism? Can the subject, as the victim of everyday structural racism and/or sexism, for instance, easily espouse a semiotic habit that privileges the “misfire” of the Symbolic signifier over the quotidian violence of the Imaginary signified? What kinds of psychic and social *constraints* might the Imaginary ego—hailed daily in racial, gendered, sexualized, or classed terms—encounter in this programmatic journey to the colorless Symbolic and to the unknowable Real? And finally, what vocabulary can psychosocial cultural criticism develop to think through these obstacles? How can critique produce a vocabulary that is neither essentialist nor ahistorical? As its title suggests, the dissertation begins to address these questions by returning to the notion of “narcissism,” specifically to the relationship between the Imaginary ego, linguistic alterity, and forms of economic inequality and cultural (mis)recognition that define what we have come to call globalization.

Narcissism, Linguistic Mirroring, and Capitalism

As I noted above, cultural criticism that offers the Symbolic cure by asking us to turn to the literary, desire, and the drive does so by rejecting the Imaginary ego as the *bête noire*. This rejection is premised on a theorization of the Imaginary in Jacques Lacan’s 1949 essay on the

²³ Ibid., 32.

“mirror stage.”²⁴ In this essay, Lacan moves away from the (hetero) normativity of Sigmund Freud’s notion of “narcissism”²⁵ to argue that the human ego is founded on the basis of a profound misrecognition in which the child ignores his bodily impotence and jubilantly identifies with his seemingly unified and cohesive mirror image. I analyze this essay at length in the first chapter of the dissertation. For the purpose of the introduction, I will summarize key arguments that have emerged from critics’ reading of the essay.

First, the ego is an effect of the child’s narcissistic captivation by a specular image. The ego, in that sense, is a “fiction” produced by a projective identification with the ideal “*imago*.” Second, the mirror stage *precedes* the child’s entry into language and culture—that is part of a Symbolic “structure” that has no “exit”—and the child’s encounter with the Symbolic signifier. Although language precedes the subject, his encounter with language can occur only *after* the mirror stage. Third, as the site that fixes the “I,” the Imaginary is also where (the illusion of) linguistic “meaning” is produced. It is the purported unity of the Imaginary ego that anchors meaning for the Symbolic subject who would otherwise be drifting in the signifying chain. This explains why Lacanians are “anti-meaning”—supporting meaning would mean supporting the illusion that founds the ego. And fourth, although the mirror stage is a temporary phase, its effects persist and continue to bear upon the ego’s future relations with other egos. That is to say, the ego’s aggressive bid for mastery over other egos is caused by a persisting “structure” of the Imaginary, an illusion that disavows the unconscious subject’s awareness of his own *lack* of mastery and his difference from the ideal image. Thus, the narcissism of the Imaginary ego also

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 75-81.

²⁵ In his 1917 essay, “On Narcissism,” Freud defines narcissism as the “attitude” of a person who treats his own body as a sexual object. Summarizing the prevalent conclusions of sexology and criminology, Freud calls narcissism a “perversion” that has absorbed the whole of the subject’s mental life. In the same essay, however, Freud speculates on a “primary narcissism” that is an inevitable aspect of all human development: a stage when the ego is formed, lying between the stages of “autoerotism” and “object-cathexis.” See Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 67-104.

acts as a defense against the rebellious unconscious. This is the logic that we find, for instance, in Lane's analysis of British imperialism—the (British) national ego is imperialist *because* it is anxious about its founding alienation and lack and the incoherence that (homo)sexual desire will bring if the Symbolic is unhinged from the Imaginary.²⁶

In this dissertation, I challenge such an interpretation of Imaginary narcissism—and with it, the post-structuralist rejection of consciousness, identity, and meaning—for a number of reasons, some of which have been already articulated by feminist, queer, Marxist, post-colonial, and diasporic scholars. As these scholars point out, an overt emphasis on the specular formation of the ego and an Imaginary closed off from power relations in the realm of language and culture risk making the mirror stage a naïvely neutral account of subject formation outside of economic, patriarchal, and historical arrangements. For instance, in her essay “Echo,” Spivak asks: “Why, in spite of so many hard lessons to the contrary...do we cling to the rotarian epistemology of advancing from the Imaginary to the Symbolic?”²⁷ Similarly, questioning the assumption that the mirror stage occurs “outside” of social mediation, David Eng writes: “How might sexual and racial difference intersect this drama of self-discovery in the mirror stage to trouble the smooth alignment and identification of bodily ego and visual imago?”²⁸ For Spivak and Eng, then, the Lacanian dismissal of the ego is politically inadequate since it leaves little or no room to understand the relationship between forms of social oppression and subjectivity.²⁹ The dismissal of the Imaginary also fails to account for the psychic effects of gendered, racial, sexual, and/or

²⁶ See Lane, 26. There is, however, a slippage in Lane's use of Lacan's theory of the ego. The colonizer's social or “Symbolic” identification with “colonial law” cannot really be equated with the *intrapsychic* Imaginary alienation that Lacan describes in the mirror stage essay. However, as I argue in chapters one and two, by taking this blurring seriously, we can argue that the stage and structure of the mirror stage does not necessarily produce the ego as the site of (illusory) “mastery” in the colonial and post-colonial contexts.

²⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Echo,” *New Literary History* 24 (Winter, 1993): 35.

²⁸ David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2001), 115.

²⁹ For a related critique of Lacan's emphasis on the specular image, see Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 3.

class oppression on the (conscious and unconscious) subject. In other words, the Lacanian approach to the ego cannot be applied to understand the psychic and social processes that shape minority politics and cultural practices.

My dissertation is animated by the questions that Spivak and Eng raise, and it attempts to delineate a minoritarian politics of reading that is *grounded in the Imaginary*. In particular, as a response to the literariness of the Symbolic turn, I am interested in literary approaches to Imaginary narcissism that situate the Symbolic structure, language, and literariness firmly in the context of inequalities that characterize colonialism, diaspora, and post-colonialism. Such approaches, in my argument, not only tell us why minority identitarianism persists (in spite of the “misfire” that Copjec and others hold up) but also allow us to perceive identitarianism as the underside of the dominant ideologemes that dismiss it rather hastily. The dissertation argues that the literary-cultural politics of a Symbolic cure remains deeply implicated in systems of oppression and epistemic violence unless it rethinks consciousness, meaning, identity, and literariness from minoritarian perspectives.

I have said that the dissertation proposes not a Symbolic cure but an Imaginary diagnostics of reading through minoritarian experiences of literature, literary, and cultural capitalism. But if the stage and structure of the Imaginary is “pre-social,” how are we to understand it in terms of language, the congealment or failure of literary identity and meaning, and what Terry Eagleton has called the “literary mode of production”—the ensemble of social forces and relations that govern the production, consumption, and exchange of literature-as-commodity?³⁰ The dissertation suggests that we trouble the specular and resolutely anti-social approach to the Imaginary and “ego politics” from within psychoanalytic theory by returning to the oft-ignored “Lacanian” assertion that the “mirror image” is not only specular but is also linguistic, aural, and somatic. That is to say, the Imaginary mirror is also constituted by what is

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1976), 44-47.

heard, touched, and desired by the child. However, as I demonstrate in chapter one, this theory of the *non-specular mirror* comes not from Lacan's theory of the Imaginary but from his colleague Françoise Dolto's concept of "fundamental narcissism," in which the subject's encounter with language does not follow but *precedes* the specular encounter. Dolto's theories of linguistic mirroring and the resultant "unconscious body image," I argue, offer a theory of Imaginary narcissism in which the Imaginary and a socially produced linguistic-cultural unconscious are not easily separable. Dolto demonstrates that "meaning" can, in fact, be an Imaginary effect that is produced by the linguistic unconscious.

If Dolto's theory of mirroring allows us to see narcissism in terms of the linguistic and social production of meaning—and therefore undoes the "rotarian epistemology" critiqued by post-colonial, feminist, and diaspora scholars—the apparently disparate concepts of narcissism and capitalism are brought together remarkably in the work of the French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux. In his book, *Freud, Marx: Économie et Symbolique*, Goux argues for a fundamental "isomorphism" between Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and Karl Marx's account of commodity exchange. For Goux, just as Lacan's child recognizes its ego in the ideal image, so too, the commodity recognizes its own (exchange) value only when it is compared to the general equivalent form of "money." The relationship between the mirror stage and the market, between consciousness and labor power is, however, not merely one of similitude. For Goux, the Imaginary *is* the site where the subject is produced and performs *as a commodity* through the identification with the ideal image of the general equivalent. As he writes: "the subject—newly born into the commerce of humans—reflects bit by bit its value (its soul) in the body of its numerous doubles, [quoting Marx] 'the total (or developed) form of relative value puts a commodity in social relation with everything'" (my translation).³¹ In other words, for Goux, Imaginary narcissism is always-already mediated not only by language and the social (as Dolto argues) but more specifically by *social relations of production*. In chapter two, I argue that Frantz

³¹ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Freud, Marx: Économie et Symbolique* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1973), 59.

Fanon's account of racialized linguistic mirroring in the colonial Imaginary anticipates Goux's argument and echoes Dolto's theory of linguistic narcissism. Simultaneously, I contend that Fanon's anti-colonial stance problematizes Goux's narrative of a homogeneous production of value as well as Dolto's metropolitan and colorblind assumption that the linguistic-visual image is usually "healthy."

It is this reading of Fanon alongside Dolto, Lacan, and Goux that defines my use of the terms "Imaginary" and "narcissism" (used interchangeably) in the dissertation. In chapters three, four, and five, I focus on more contemporary post-colonial and diasporic literary texts to argue for relevance of Fanon's politics of the Imaginary. I suggest that, through a meta-critical engagement with a Fanonian notion of narcissism, these texts elucidate the political necessity of the ambivalent identitarianism that marks contemporary minority cultural discourses. Collectively, their "critically narcissistic" literariness suggests that, it is only by addressing material forms of oppression and economic disparity that fuel the narcissistic production of identitarianism—and, therefore, not simply by giving in to "desire"—that we can hope to be rid of its intolerance of otherness.

Here, I want to emphasize that the literary texts chosen for this dissertation do not simply "reflect" my theorization of narcissism. Rather, they resonate with, reinforce, and extend my theory of narcissism within their representations of historically specific national, transnational, and mediated minoritarian Imaginaries. My choice of these texts is strategic. As the following chapters will demonstrate, all three literary texts explored at some length in the dissertation—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* (1982), Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), and Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984)—explore the continuities and discontinuities between reading literature and being read by social relations of power. All three texts reflexively negotiate the tension between the desire for racial/ethnic recognition—which can also be interpreted as a desire for meaning, identity, and cohesion—and post-structuralist literariness that emphasize "play," "deferral," and "shattering." But one of my main arguments is

this: the tension between minoritarian narcissism and post-structuralism in these texts is not identical to the opposition between the deluded imperial ego and the rebellious unconscious encountered in the discourse of the Symbolic cure. As I hope to establish in chapters three, four, and five, the narcissistic mirrors of language (or mediation, more generally) theorized by these texts should be seen as historically specific instances where social relations of production constitute identities as always-already unstable and internally heterogeneous, an aspect overlooked by critics who root for psychic de-centering as the final goal of ethico-political practice. As I demonstrate in my analysis of Cha's *DICTEE* (chapter three) and Lee's *Native Speaker* (chapter four), literary and cultural politics shaped by experiences of post-colonial bilingualism and diasporic multilingualism are grounded firmly in Imaginary relations fractured by racial, gendered, and classed inequalities. In my analysis, Cha's and Lee's narcissistic approaches to reading and globalization reveal material injustices originating from immaterial perceptions of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital," perceptions that are completely ignored by discourses of cultural "hybridity" as well as the ideologeme of the Symbolic cure.

Alongside critiquing the Euro-American idealization of language-as-structure, the dissertation also uses this selection of texts to suggest that, as an analysis of forms of mediation and relations of production that shape the inevitably narcissistic subject-object of capitalism, reading cannot be confined to the literary or a conventional understanding of the "linguistic signifier." Thus, chapter three also analyzes Cha's *DICTEE* as an "image-text" that explores Imaginary reading as a simultaneously literary and *cinematic* negotiation with political and cultural imperialism. Chapter five goes a step further through Delany novel *Stars in My Pocket*, suggesting that, under late capitalism, to read is to confront the Imaginary racial inequities that subtend the fantasy of an egalitarian "digital unconscious."

Finally, in response to the privileged treatment of sexuality by the "queer" camp of the Symbolic cure, the dissertation also examines how, critically narcissistic post-colonial and diasporic literary politics is reluctant to treat the "erotic" as the solution to structural racism and

sexism. For, the narcissistic Imaginary, as I argue through Lee and Delany, is also the site of production of an “erotic inequality,” the creation of primarily economic divisions between those who can (over)invest in the promiscuity of desire and those who cannot, between those who are able to isolate (ostensibly) desire from racism and those who are unable to do so. In my reading of Lee’s novel in chapter four, sex fails to produce the Kantian sublime of non-sense. Instead, it turns into a mirror of interracial violence. And in my analysis of Delany’s novel in chapter five, erotic promiscuity reveals itself as a fetishization of racial otherness whose Imaginary production and consumption are controlled by the information economy. In other words, Lee’s and Delany’s reflections of the Imaginary production and regulation of erotic desire also deconstruct the desire/identity opposition sustaining the Symbolic cure.

My formulations of the shifting Imaginary relationships between language, image, desire, and capitalism occur in distinct combinations in the following chapters. Chapter one argues for a reinterpretation of Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in light of interventions of the pediatric psychoanalyst and Lacan’s contemporary Françoise Dolto. While analyzing the shifts in Lacan’s own thinking on Imaginary narcissism, I draw on Dolto’s critique of Lacan and her theory of the “unconscious linguistic body image” to challenge the popular idea that the specular Imaginary precedes the formation of the linguistic subject. Dolto’s qualification of the specularity of Lacan’s mirror stage, her observations on the specular functions of and interdependence between the linguistic and the somatic, I further argue, resurface as unacknowledged debts in Lacan’s later reflections on the presence of the signifier *in* the mirror stage. This chapter therefore unsettles the author-function of “Lacan” through a feminist historiography and reconstitution of the psychoanalytic archive even as it follows developments and mutations in Lacan’s reflections on the relationship between Imaginary otherness and Symbolic Otherness.

In chapter two, I insist on the inseparability of the psychic Imaginary and the social Imaginary in the colonial context through a reading of Fanon’s *Black White Skin White Masks*. Fanon’s turn to and implicit critique of Lacan’s mirror stage, I contend, is also his attempt to

move beyond the notion of intrapsychic alienation and to theorize the production of racial difference in the colonial Imaginary. Although reflecting on the Imaginary with very different objectives, both Dolto and Fanon, in my analysis, underscore the somatic, linguistic, and social structuration of a “wounded” unconscious. However, Fanon’s attention to linguistic wounds—generated, for instance, by the racialized word “nègre”—makes the “normal” colonial Imaginary neither a site of illusory plenitude (as in Lacan) nor a “healthy” unconscious body image (as in Dolto) but a socially produced, differential, and conscious experience of psychic, bodily, and linguistic fragmentation.

In chapter three, I suggest that these “old” linguistic wounds persist in the literary politics of more contemporary and “perfectly” bilingual post-colonial and diasporic writers. If proponents of the Symbolic cure—including post-structuralists like Paul de Man and Roland Barthes—define literariness as the annihilation of consciousness and meaning, I demonstrate that bilingual writers addressing deep-set hierarchies between “global” and “local” languages recurrently perform distinct forms of literary narcissism in which questions of meaning, identity, community, and referentiality cannot be done away with. Drawing on Rey Chow’s theory of “ethnic narcissism,” the second half of the chapter offers a reading of Cha’s experimental *DICTEE* as a text whose aesthetics of fragmentation, I suggest, is haunted by these post-colonial and diasporic concerns around identity and referentiality, as it simultaneously invokes and critiques post-structuralist and avant-garde theories of language and the displacement of meaning.

If the ego is shaped not just shaped by the specular image but also by language in the form of racialized cultural capital, how do we gauge the impact of linguistic assimilation on the diasporic and/or immigrant ego? What are the psychic and social consequences of the hegemonic injunction to “mute” one’s “ethnic” accent to assimilate linguistically? And what are the consequences of *not* having the economic or the cultural wherewithal to undergo this linguistic transformation? What happens when the ethnic subject is asked to assimilate into the nation and simultaneously encouraged to perform some kind of “authentic” ethnic cultural identity? Chapter

four addresses these questions and further complicates the notion of Imaginary linguistic mirroring through an examination of diasporic polyglottism in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. I argue that, like Cha's text, Lee's novel draws on the topos of language acquisition not to bypass the Imaginary—the egotistical space of action and (misre)cognition—but to confront, in the locus of minority politics in multiracial America, the *production* of a linguistic Imaginary—or, more accurately, multiple wounded minority linguistic Imaginaries. Here, linguistic capital and fluctuating relations between (dominant) American English and immigrant subjects' native languages constitute not merely *a mirror* of racial antagonism but, in fact, *multiple mirrors* producing intra-ethnic divides, fragmented class spheres, gender inequality, as well as the impossibility of an interracial (sexual) relationship. Reading *Native Speaker* alongside the theory of polyglottic “splitting” proposed by Italian psychoanalysts Amati-Mehler et al, I suggest that, in order to assess the effects of transnational capital on minority linguistic and literary practice, we need to move away from both the liberal multiculturalism that celebrates the “hybrid” ego and the post-structuralist negativity that rejects the ego.

In the fifth and final chapter, I contend that literariness, the unconscious, and erotic desire can no longer be the reified bases of a radical cultural politics at a time when subjectivation and desubjectivation are so thoroughly enmeshed in the Imaginary production and consumption of the commodity form, one that is increasingly mediated through the profit motives of an “information economy.” To make my case, I turn to the work of Delany's *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*. Focusing on Delany's prescient representation of the digital economy, its “information underclass,” and its Imaginary regulation of desire, I show how the novel's hopes for an unfettered Symbolic—represented by the apparently erotic (and, therefore, racial) egalitarianism of a cybernetic culture—is throttled by its own post-colonial appraisal of the ultimately all pervasive presence and repressively narcissistic logic of information-as-capital. I read Delany's treatment as an allegory of (the failure) of the Symbolic cure, whose celebration in a “post-industrial” economy, it turns out, also feeds off of the International Division of Labor.

CHAPTER ONE: Between Language and Image: The Other in the Mirrors of Dolto and Lacan

In any case, I consider it to be an urgent task to isolate, in concepts that are being deadened by routine use, the meaning they recover when we reexamine their history and reflect on their subjective foundations. That no doubt, is the teacher's function—the function on which all others depend—and the one in which the value of experience figures best.

—Jacques Lacan³²

If Lacanian literary and cultural criticism argue for the need to move away from an Imaginary politics of the ego and identification to a Symbolic ethics of desubjectification by acceding to the absolute alterity of language and the unconscious, this chapter argues that a historicization of the psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage will compel us to be more attentive to the complexity of Imaginary narcissism, specifically the Symbolic constitution of the Imaginary. Critiquing the moral hierarchy implicit in the binary often constructed between a Symbolic reading and an Imaginary reading, Jane Gallop writes:

Inasmuch as anyone would be “for” the symbolic and “against” the imaginary, he would be operating in the imaginary. Ironically, the ethical imperative to accede to the symbolic and vigilantly resist the imaginary is itself mired in the imaginary. Which is not to dismiss the value of the ethic. To give a reading of Lacan that is faithful to the ethic means that the reading must not always side “with” Lacan, that it must be suspicious of the imaginary (egotistical or adversarial) dimension of his work.³³

Gallop's observation that there is, in fact, a narcissism that underlies an ostensibly “purely” Symbolic reading is crucial to my argument in this chapter and in the dissertation as a whole. Following Gallop, this chapter suggests that the Imaginary cannot be dismissed *tout court*, precisely because it is, in part, constituted by the Symbolic signifier and also produces the “ground” from within the Symbolic is accessed. In order to offer a more nuanced interpretation of Imaginary narcissism—one that does not simply reject narcissism as the site of anti-social specular (mis)recognition—this chapter makes two related moves. In the first section, I track

³² Lacan, *Écrits*, 199-200.

³³ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 60.

contradictions in Lacan's own theorization of the mirror stage to suggest that the "image" available for narcissistic identification is not merely a specular image but also an effect of a non-specular "linguistic mirroring." I show that, although Lacan emphasizes *specularity* and the *intrapsychic* nature of specular identification in his 1949 account of the mirror stage, his earlier and later formulations suggest that the Imaginary is, in fact, structured by both *language* and *intersubjectivity*.

In other words, I identify moments where Lacan himself contradicts the Imaginary/Symbolic or image/language distinction. In subsequent chapters, I show how this "blurring" unsettles fundamental post-structuralist assumptions around "literariness," sexuality, and subjectivity and, furthermore, allows cultural criticism to acknowledge and respond to psychic and social incommensurabilities brought into view by post-colonial and diasporic literary politics. In the second section of this chapter, I follow and trouble the evolution of the "Lacanian" mirror stage by turning to the clinical contributions of Lacan's oft-ignored colleague Françoise Dolto. This section offers a close reading of Dolto's reflections on her "flower doll" experiments to challenge, once again, the dominant idea that specular Imaginary illusion precedes the formation of the linguistic subject. Dolto's critique of the specular bias of Lacan's 1949 mirror stage essay, her observations on the role of language in the "fundamental narcissism" that shapes the "unconscious body image," I further argue, resurface as unacknowledged debts in Lacan's later reflections on the presence of the Symbolic *in* the stage and structure of the mirror stage. In this way, I show how egoic narcissism is not just a matter of specular (mis)recognition—a "selfish" attachment to the image—but an unavoidable structure of insidious "readability," one where the ego's embodied acts of semiosis and (mis)reading are, in fact, facilitated by the presence of the Symbolic Other *in* the Imaginary. I end this chapter pointing out similarities between Dolto's theory of a "wounded" linguistic unconscious body image and Lacan's enigmatic reference to "Symbolic lesions in the Imaginary"—concepts that become useful for my analysis of Fanon's somato-linguistic narcissism in chapter two.

The mirror and/as the other

Borrowing from psychologist Henri Wallon's "mirror test"³⁴ Lacan uses the term "mirror stage" to describe the process by which the human child, comparatively premature at birth, learns to ignore his motor impotence through a projective identification with his mirror image.³⁵ For Lacan, this primary, specular identification is also the process of the constitution of the human ego; but it is one that rests on a moment of profound *misrecognition*. The human ego, he argues, has a "fictional" basis precisely because the child overlooks the difference between its muscular incoordination and the stability of his specular image. In his 1949 essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," Lacan writes:

For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it.³⁶

This perfect form as the "ideal-I," in a sense, *precedes* the ego that it, paradoxically, simultaneously constitutes and is [mis]recognized by. And the ego, anticipating the stability that the child's body lacks, can lay its "undue" claims over the image only by disregarding the externality and otherness of the gestalt, by "becoming" other.

However, that is not to say that the appropriation of this otherness leaves the ego

³⁴ In 1934, Henri Wallon had developed a version of the mirror test where a child gradually learns to comprehend his mirror image as his own. See Henri Wallon, *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant: Les préludes du sentiment de personnalité* (Paris: PUF, 1983). Elizabeth Roudinesco notes that Lacan never really mentions his debt to Wallon. However, Lacan may have become familiar with Wallon through Merleau-Ponty's explicit reference to his work on the mirror image. See Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 143. In her discussion of the 1949 mirror stage essay, Kaja Silverman argues that Lacan distances himself from Wallon by defining the mirror stage as a "misrecognition," and by moving away from Wallon's notion of a "proprioceptive ego" that is not dependent on the visual image. I will come back to this notion of "proprioceptivity" and the non-visual in early Lacan. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 14-15.

³⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, 75-81.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

unaffected. Indeed, what interests Lacan is not so much the [illusory] autonomy of the human ego and consciousness as the *effect* this misrecognition has on the psyche of the subject:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an *identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term, “*imago*.”³⁷

The consequences of primary identification, Lacan suggests, can be understood through the psychoanalytic notion of the *imago*. A brief outline of Lacan’s earlier use of the concept of the “*imago*” will be helpful in this context.

Here, I want to emphasize that, contrary to what many critics suggest, it is by no means clear that what Lacan calls the *imago* is an entirely “pre-social” or an exclusively “specular” image. In his 1938 essay “La Famille,”³⁸ Lacan defines the *imago* as an “unconscious representation” inextricably tied to the “complex” and to a “cultural” concept of the “family.”

The four *imagos* that Lacan names in the essay are the *imago* of the maternal breast, connected to the “weaning complex;” the *imago* of the double, connected to the subject’s own body; the *imago* of the *semblable* or the other, connected to the mirror stage; and finally the paternal *imago*, connected to the Oedipus complex. Lacan’s search, in this essay, for the most “stable” and “typical” complexes suggests that the *imago* is not a “pre-social” formation but a sort of perceptual *social* stereotype,³⁹ through which the unconscious reacts to the social other. That is to say, there is, by definition, a conflict between the “visible” image of the other and the *imago* as the unconscious’s impression of the other. While it is not pre-social, the *imago* is also not

³⁷ Ibid., 76.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2001), 23-84. This essay first appeared under the section “La famille” in Henri Wallon’s *L’Encyclopédie française*, tome VII (March 1938). My translations are from the online version: “La Famille.” Accessed on Jan 11, 2011. <http://colblog.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/01/15/jacques-lacan-la-famille/>.

³⁹ Elizabeth Roudinesco also emphasizes the “familial” as well as “social” aspects of the *imago*. See Roudinesco, 143.

necessarily the reflection of the “real world” but more of an affective reaction to it.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the maternal imago, “that dominates the whole life of man,” Lacan suggests, is not formed by a visual impression of the mother or her breast, but rather by non-visual “proprioceptive sensations” linked to sucking and experienced by the child before, during, and after the process of weaning: “This imago is given its contents by sensations proper to early infancy” (my translation).⁴¹ Both sucking and weaning, here, are to be understood as processes mediated by the familial and the social.

In contrast, in the 1949 essay on the mirror stage, Lacan moves away from his earlier emphasis on the weaning complex, and from the social and cultural importance of the family as the site of complexes. Instead, he focuses on the mirror stage as a moment of constitution of the ego before the subject is initiated into language. Although Lacan does not define the concept of the *imago* in this discussion, he seems to use the term to mean something that is produced by but not reducible to the complete form and clarity of the specular image apprehended by the ego⁴²:

Indeed, for imagos—whose veiled faces we analysts see merge in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic effectiveness—the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world, if we take into account the mirrored disposition of the *imago of one’s own body* in hallucinations and dreams, whether it involves one’s individual features, or even one’s infirmities or object projections.... This fragmented body... is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of

⁴⁰ Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis emphasize this disjunction and note that the *imago* should be looked upon “as an acquired imaginary set rather than an image.... Feelings and behavior, for example, are just as likely to be the concrete expressions of the imago as are mental images. Nor, it may be added, should the imago be understood as a reflection of the real world, even in a more or less distorted form: the imago of a terrifying father, for instance, may perfectly well be met with in a subject whose real father is unassertive.” See Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Daniel Lagache (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 211.

⁴¹ In her discussion of Wallon’s mirror test, Silverman associates proprioceptivity with bodily sensations, specifically with a “nonvisual mapping of the body’s form.” See Silverman, 16.

⁴² Here, I disagree with readings that reduce the imago of the body to the specular image. See for instance, Shuli Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 66.

disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions.⁴³

In this passage, the specular image emerges as the “limit” of what is “visible”⁴⁴ to consciousness as Lacan’s clinical practice explores the fragmentary nature of the shadowy, broken “*imago of one’s own body*” (the imago of the double from 1938) that otherwise remains “invisible” and only appears in his patients’ dreams, delusions, and fantasies.

In other words, as the obverse of the specular image, the imago as the fragmented body runs counter to the ego’s fictional approximation of the image as the “ideal-I.” It reacts to the otherness of the image denied by the ego, but only as the “manifest content” whose antagonism toward the otherness and the ego’s “deception” must be uncovered through an analysis of the patient’s unconscious. This *broken* imago is therefore a rebellious betrayal of the heterogeneity or nonconformity that the ego is loath to register or remember. In other words, if the ego asserts itself by dispensing with the alterity of the specular image, there are times when the unconscious responds to this alterity through the broken imago, reminding the ego of its baseless unity with the mirror image.

Dylan Evans notes that the term “imago” almost completely disappears from Lacan’s theoretical vocabulary after 1950.⁴⁵ However, it is an important concept if we have to gather Lacan’s thoughts on the unconscious before his turn to language, an unconscious that is represented by the body-in-pieces and Imaginary in its origin. This broken imago as an *unconscious and socially mediated perception* thus complicates the distinction that some critics want to maintain between the Imaginary and the unconscious registers, the former typically

⁴³ Lacan, *Écrits*, 77-78.

⁴⁴ By “visible,” Lacan does not only mean the state of being available to “sight,” but rather the condition enabled by sight, where the child is able to “establish a relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates – namely, the child’s own body, and the persons and even things around him.” In other words, in 1949, Lacan seems to suggest that this relationship is forged entirely through the visual image. *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁵ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 86.

associated with the self-deluding ego and the latter associated with a “pure” Symbolic, subjectivity, and desire.⁴⁶

Furthermore, Lacan’s emphasis on the visual impact of the “mirror image” notwithstanding, his writing demonstrates a striking ambiguity around what he means by the term. For the “image,” one could argue, need not be the reflection of the child’s own image in a mirror, but *any external gestalt* that resembles the “human form” and whose “power [*prégnance*] should be considered linked to the species.”⁴⁷ A particularly telling passage appears in the middle of the 1949 essay where Lacan extends the example of the effect of the gestalt to the animal kingdom. Lacan first cites the example of the female pigeon, where the gestalt that the pigeon needs to see for gonad maturation could be either “another member of its species” or its own reflection in the mirror. In the second well-known example with the migratory locust, the definition of the “image” seems to be equally flexible: all that the locust needs to see is a certain “resemblance” between itself, its own species, and its “image.”⁴⁸ Thus, there is a *careful imprecision* around the meaning of “image” in the 1949 essay. For the human child too then, the “image” need not be the actual mirror image of the child and can be any other being that “resembles” or “mirrors” the subject’s “humanness.”⁴⁹

Since Lacan otherwise wants to maintain the distinct “human” quality of the constitution of the ego,⁵⁰ the general principle that a gestalt can bring about a transformation (physical and/or

⁴⁶ For instance, see Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 39.

⁴⁷ Lacan, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁹ Other critics like Jean Laplanche and Samuel Weber do not analyze this particular passage from the 1949 essay, but makes the same point. See Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12-13. See Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 81.

⁵⁰ The animal, Lacan argues, enjoys an organic and complete relationship with its *umwelt*, but man does not, since his relationship with nature is “altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor uncoordination of the neo-natal months.”

psychic) in the organism has important implications for the human mirror stage. For this confusion between the organism and its “image” also translates into a blurring between the subject’s ego and the other. The “image” as the visually apprehended other of the same species, can also be the “mirror” or a reflecting surface in whom the child sees *himself*, and *not the other*. That is to say, in the 1949 essay, Lacan seems to suggest that even as the child visually encounters the other (and the emphasis is on the *visual nature* of the encounter), he does not “understand” the other as the other, since no distinction is initially made between the actual mirror-image and a fellow human being. In other words, *primary identification in the mirror stage* is not an intersubjective or a social process, but rather an instance of *intrapsychic* alienation primarily facilitated by the specular image and/or the sight (without recognition) of the *semblable*.

In 1949, Lacan makes a clear distinction between the primary identification with the “mirror image” and subsequent secondary identifications, between the “specular *I*” and the “social *I*.”

This moment at which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one’s semblable and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the Charlotte Buhler school in the cases of transitivity in children), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.⁵¹

The chronology in this passage should be taken as the thrust of Lacan’s argument: the intrapsychic founding of the ego and “transitivity” (as an instance of the first intersubjective relations with the social other) seem to be linked, but they are two distinct moments in the 1949 essay. Transitivity, as the ego’s temporary inability to distinguish between “me and *not me*” seems to be a point of conjunction between the narcissistic *moi* and the social *je*, a temporary state when the ego confuses itself with the other in social situations. It seems to be an effect of, a spilling-over of the alienating structure of the mirror stage. The aggressiveness demonstrated

The other main distinction, of course, is that animals, unlike psychically mature humans, are confined to their “mirror stage” without an access to [human] language and to the Symbolic. See Lacan, 78.

⁵¹ Ibid., 79.

toward the social other is therefore to be connected to the initial ambivalence provoked in the child by the sight of his specular image. In other words, in 1949, Lacan seems to suggest that *imaginary relations are marked by aggressiveness not because of the nature of social ties, but rather because of the alienating nature of primary identification of the mirror stage*. The mirror stage essay thus insists on the primacy of identification with the specular image without any recognition of the social, and on a particular moment of deflection when the “specular *I*” becomes “the social *I*.”

Evidently, this definition of primary identification purely in terms of the intrapsychic is at odds with the social approach of 1938. The other major difference between the 1949 and 1938 versions hinges on the issue of chronology. In 1938, Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage is part of a larger section in which he discusses what he calls the “intrusion complex.” Here, too, he notes the importance of the specular image and the “predominance of the visual” in the mirror stage, a moment that “constructs the reality of the subject.” He describes how the ego denies the intrusion of the alterity of the image: the narcissistic structure of *moi* “does not contain the other,” and this “specular satisfaction” is disrupted only when the child senses the presence of a “third” object as the other. Yet, given the way Lacan structures his discussion, the sequence of events is far less clear in this essay: transitivity and specular identification seem to be occurring at the same time (beginning when the child is six months old) and are less distinguishable as different stages. Unlike in the 1949 essay, it is difficult to mark off the stage at which the other is recognized *as* the other. Furthermore, identification is not just specular: there seems to be an “affective” or “emotional” dimension that is carried over from the weaning complex to the mirror stage as well as the intrusion complex in general.

Lacan begins the section on the intrusion complex not with the specular image, but rather with the subject’s *emotional responses* at the sight of the counterpart, the sibling, or the recognized playmate in a familial context. He then moves on to a discussion of transitivity

observed in children, which he links both to primary identification and to social relations. Let me quote at length from the essay to show this articulation:

The intrusion complex represents the experience of an immature subject especially *when he sees one or several of his own kind participating with him in a domestic relationship*, in other words, when he meets his siblings....Infantile jealousy has long struck observers: “I myself have seen,” said Saint Augustine, “and observed an infant in the grip of jealousy: he was still not talking and he could not look at the bitter spectacle of his foster brother without turning pale.” (Confessions, I, VII)....Let us say that the critical point revealed by these studies is that jealousy, basically, represents not a vital rivalry *but a mental identification*.... Let us examine the most common: [the phenomena] of display, seduction and despotism. Although there are two partners who figure here, the relationship that characterizes each one of them reveals itself on observation, not as a conflict between two individuals, but within each subject, as a conflict between two opposed and complimentary attitudes, and this bipolar attitude is constitutive of the very situation. To understand this structure, we should stop for a moment to watch the child who displays himself and the child who follows him with his gaze: who is more of a spectator? Or we should observe a child who tries really hard to charm the other: who is the charmer? Here is the paradox: that each partner confuses the part of the other with his own and identifies with him; but that he can maintain this relationship through a really insignificant participation of the other and live this situation all by himself, as is manifested by the total mismatch between their behaviors. *That is to say that identification, dependent on social behaviors, at this stage, founds itself on a feeling of otherness that we can only misrecognize in a correct conception of its completely imaginary value*....The appearance of jealousy in relation to nourishment, according to the classic theme illustrated above by a quotation from Saint Augustine, must therefore be prudently interpreted. In fact, the jealousy can manifest itself in cases where the subject, long weaned, is no longer in a very competitive situation with his brother. *The phenomenon therefore appears to make necessary as preliminary a certain identification with the state of the brother* (my translation and emphasis).

As this passage demonstrates, Lacan begins his definition of the intrusion complex in this 1938 essay (in contrast to the 1949 mirror stage account) with reference to the social and the familial: the child “recognizes” not only the “similarity” between him and his brothers, but also senses the “domestic” nature of his relationship with them. It is not at all clear if the “feeling of otherness” upon which identification is founded is generated *ex novo* from the sight (and similarity) of the *semblable* or if it is to be connected to earlier responses that characterize the weaning period. However, given Lacan’s focus on the maternal imago and early non-visual sensations in this

essay,⁵² it would not be a stretch to claim that this “feeling” of domesticity is triggered by but not entirely dependent on the specular. Thus it is possible here to speak of the presence of an *affective relationship*, a link that is both social and biological and that seems to precede (or at least that exists independent of) the *sight* of the *semblable*. If the 1949 mirror stage essay is interested in isolating the mirroring function of the Imaginary, the 1938 notion of the intrusion complex locates that complex amongst other familial complexes and in particular the child’s biological proximity with the mother.⁵³ The emphasis on the “familial” and the “social” continues in Lacan’s description of transitivity in children: “identification,” he notes, is contingent on the “social” and is premised, not just on sight, but a “feeling” of otherness.⁵⁴ Similarly, Lacan’s notion of “identification” with the “state” of the brother (in his interpretation of Augustine’s account) is significant precisely because it does not unambiguously privilege the visual over the affective.⁵⁵ Indeed, the term “affective,” used frequently in the essay, is not entirely contingent on the acts of “seeing” or “sight”: “affective adaptation” and “affective fusion” are both associated with the weaning complex. “Affect,” we might suggest, precedes the sight of the brother and is triggered by it.

It is therefore remarkable that, in his 1938 discussion of the mirror stage (which ends the

⁵² In 1938, Lacan explicitly suggests that the contents of the maternal imago influence *all* future psychic development. It is this structure that “rests at the base of mental development” (my translation).

⁵³ Barzilai has shown how Lacan moves away from his explicit emphasis on the maternal after 1938. See Barzilai, 119-124.

⁵⁴ In contrast, in “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” written in 1948, Lacan notes that it is specular identification rather than “understanding,” “feeling” or “empathy” that marks the relationship between the infant and his semblable: “It is this capture by the imago of the human form—rather than *Einfühlung*, the absence of which is abundantly clear in childhood—that dominates the whole of the child’s behavior in the presence of his semblable between six months and two and a half years of age.” See Lacan, *Écrits*, 92.

⁵⁵ It is interesting that, in 1938, Lacan does not emphasize the link between the infant’s (specular) observation of his brother and his aggressiveness. Ten years later, however, in “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” he eliminates the ambiguous notion of identification with the “state” of the brother, and makes a clear connection between specular identification and primordial jealousy: “Thus Augustine forever ties the situation of spectacular absorption (the child observed), the emotional reaction (pale), and the reactivation of images of primordial frustration...” See Lacan, 93.

section on the intrusion complex), Lacan spells out the child's response to the specular image in terms of the "affective":

If the search for his *affective unity* promotes in the subject the forms in which he represents his identity, the most intuitive form is given, at this stage, by the specular image. *What the subject welcomes in the image is its inherent mental unity. What he recognizes in it is the ideal of the imago of the double.* What he hails in it is the triumph of its salutary power (my translation and emphasis).

What is striking in this formulation is the subject's preexistent desire for "affective unity" that finds its "intuitive" response or counterpart in the unity of the mirror image. Again, that the image corresponds to the "ideal" of the "imago of the double" recognized by the subject also suggests that the apprehension of the image is tinged by a pre-mirror stage, a non-visual and "proprioceptive" perception of otherness as an ideal. The search for the imago of the double is fuelled by a quest for affective unity whose origins are not only specular. This description of Imaginary identification, at once visual and non-visual, cannot therefore be fully accommodated within Lacan's later formulation of the Imaginary/specular constitution of the ego. But what exactly is this non-visual affective modality of Imaginary narcissism in early Lacan? How are we to explain its presence and disappearance in Lacan, who has, in fact, been critiqued for excising "affect," "biology," and "the body" from psychoanalysis by turning to "language" and "representation," and signification?⁵⁶

In his analysis of the 1938 essay, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen argues that Freud's theories of identification can help explain Lacan's temporary turn to the affective.⁵⁷ Drawing on Freud's definition of identification as the "original form of emotional tie with an object" and as something that is not necessarily connected to the visible image, Borch-Jacobsen writes:

⁵⁶ It would not be useful to provide an exhaustive list here. Two different strands of the critique of the poststructuralist and Lacanian emphasis on language can be found in notions of "bodily affect" theorized by Sylvan S. Tomkins and Brian Massumi. See Sylvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 2 vols. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1962–63). See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991).

Identification, if we take Freud seriously, escapes from the mirror stage at the very moment when it makes this “stage” possible. It presupposes some ante-specular apprehension of the other (and of the) ego... If there is a specular identification (and who would deny it?), it cannot really be produced elsewhere than on the (abyssal, non – “subjectal”) ground for a preliminary *affection*, by the “other” than “I” *am* “myself” prior to any perception, any representation, any posing-before.⁵⁸

In Borch-Jacobsen’s reading, the affective is this ineffable domain that Lacan subsequently abandons to speak of identification and otherness only in terms of the visual and the representable. Barzilai provides a comparable reading in which affection is, to begin with, tied to the non-visual, primary, and biological apprehensions at the maternal breast. She also points out that all references to the mother are dropped in the specular version of the mirror stage: “The birth of the ego takes place in and through the looking glass. In Lacan’s view, the mirror is the mother of the ego. But the mother is not in the mirror.”⁵⁹ In other words, both Borch-Jacobsen and Barzilai see Lacan to be finally privileging the specular model of Imaginary narcissism over the earlier version with the non-specular, affective, and/or maternal component.

However, it is important to remember that the mirror stage and Lacan’s notions of the Imaginary and otherness undergo further changes, particularly after his turn to structuralist linguistics. In what follows, I will argue that Lacan is unable to dismiss the affective and the non-visual *tout court*, and that they return in a different form when Lacan formulates the role of language *in* the Imaginary. I will suggest that the attention initially given to non-visual sensations and proprioceptivity is later replaced by an interest in the role of the linguistic and bodily signifier in the construction of desire. I will dwell on the implications of the transformation of the unconscious imago into the linguistic signifier.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Borch-Jacobsen, 66.

⁵⁹ See Barzilai, 88. Judith Butler also makes a similar argument. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 71.

⁶⁰ Although he does not take on the issue of appearance, disappearance, and reappearance bodily affect, Lacan’s translator and son-in-law Jacques Alain-Miller reaches a similar conclusion: “What fills the role of the signifier, and it only approaches it, and does not enable one to mark the difference with the object, is the concept of the [unconscious] *imago*.” Jacques Alain-Miller, “A Critical Reading of Jacques Lacan’s *Les*

As I have already pointed out, the 1949 essay emphasizes specular identification to mark off the Imaginary as a specific realm important to the psychic constitution of the subject. Lacan's aim, here, is really two-fold: on the one hand, he wishes to argue that, as a "structure," the mirror-stage never really "ends," since it gives rise to an "inexhaustible squaring of the ego's audits,"⁶¹ in which the ego incessantly attempts (and fails) to match up to the "ideal-ego." On the other hand, it is a distinct "stage" insofar as it precedes the subject's entry into language as well as his identification with the Imaginary other.⁶² That is to say, for Lacan, the Imaginary (associated with the mirror stage) and the Symbolic (associated with language) may be inseparable in the psychic life of the adult, but each has a distinct moment of commencement in the life of the infant. Lacan writes:

The jubilant assumption [*assomption*] of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form *prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject* (my emphasis).⁶³

If a formulation of the Symbolic is entirely absent in the 1938 essay, the 1949 version of the mirror stage begins to associate it with language. Indeed, this passage contains Lacan's only explicit reference to language in the essay. But it is a significant moment that anticipates his later thinking.

Clearly, Lacan wishes to argue that the mirror stage *precedes* the subject's formal entry into language and the Symbolic: hence his use of the preposition "before." However, it is intriguing that Lacan uses the verb "restores" to describe the *effect* that language has on the

complexes familiaux," trans. Thomas Slovos. Accessed on May 14, 2011.
<http://www.lacan.com/jamfam.htm>.

⁶¹ Lacan, 78.

⁶² For a discussion on the mirror stage as a distinct "phase" (that lasts for a specific duration) as well as a repeatable "structure" (internal to the subject's psychic life), see Weber, 14. For a discussion of the influence of Melanie Klein's notion of "position" on Lacan's "phase," see Roudinesco, 29.

⁶³ Lacan, 76.

subject of the Symbolic. What language seems to “restore,” specifically, is the specular *I*’s “function as subject.” If the Imaginary *I* assumes or anticipates an autonomy that the ego does not yet and never will actually possess, Lacan seems to suggest that language (the ability to say “I”) completes or furthers this illusory position of mastery and “subjectivity.”⁶⁴ But does “restoration” also not imply the “reinstatement” of a former state, of what once *was*? If the ego is constituted in the mirror stage, and linguistic “subjectivity” subsequently enforces the ego’s “*I* function,” what is it that language “makes good” or “returns” to Lacan’s subject “in the universal”? Is language *equally* universal for all subjects in the Symbolic? There is a problem of temporality here: *language* “restores” or “completes” something that is anticipated in the Imaginary but is not there yet. Is it perhaps the fully “developed” fragmented Lacanian subject who encounters (or will have encountered *Spaltung*) and splits (or will have split) between the enunciation and the enounced, the “I” who speaks and the “I” who is spoken?

In his analysis of the mirror stage, Samuel Weber emphasizes the need to take into account the modal implications of *the future anterior* tense while reading Lacan’s texts.⁶⁵ Weber argues that in opposition to the “(present) perfect tense” that is so typical of the “certainty” of the Hegelian *Geist*, the future anterior in Lacan’s discourse marks both the instability of his own theoretical movement as well as the split temporality of his subject of the unconscious. Weber thus draws our attention to a certain “this-will-have-been” quality of Lacan’s language that evokes a notion of disjointed time as well as a process of enunciation that can simultaneously accommodate multiple formulations belonging to two different temporalities.⁶⁶

From such a perspective, the word “restores” in the passage above could also become a

⁶⁴ Lacan, here, echoes Émile Benveniste’s definition of subjectivity as a function of language: “‘I’ designates the one who speaks.” For a discussion of Benveniste’s influence on Lacan, see Borch-Jacobsen, 263.

⁶⁵ See Weber, 9-12.

⁶⁶ Lacan himself remarks on his early writings: “I thus find myself situating these texts in a future perfect: they will have anticipated my insertion of the unconscious into language.” See Lacan, 56.

node that allows Lacan's "meaning" not to get fixed and his linguistic unconscious to perform its own slippage. We have already seen how Lacan's dual emphasis on the affective and the specular in 1938 is lost or pared down to a focus on only the specular in 1949. Additionally, drawing on Weber's reflections, we could argue something like the following: the suggestion that language reconstitutes something in the ego's function as subject is finally meta-discursive, in that the word "restores" alludes to a "loss" in Lacan's own theoretical development in 1949, and simultaneously anticipates his reformulation of the relationship between the mirror stage and language in the 1950s. That is to say, a symptomatic reading of the passage "reveals" what the specular *I* of the Lacan of 1939 has "lost" in 1949: the earlier emphasis on the link between the "cultural" and the "affective." But this loss, diligent readers could insist, is "foundational" since Lacan's anticipatory rhetoric also performs a prediction about what the function of Symbolic Otherness *will have become* in the late 1950s and early 1960s in essays like "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious" and "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire." That is to say, the older emphasis on the biological-social *will have been* later reconfigured through an explication of the role of the signifier in the formation of the Imaginary. After all, even as Lacan separates the Imaginary from the Symbolic in 1949, he does provide us with the image of the *I* being "precipitated" or "consolidated" in the "symbolic matrix." In other words, even though Lacan's subject is in the Imaginary, the Symbolic (even in its unclear formulation) has already begun to influence the constitution of the specular *I*.

This reading practice, however, of locating the "germ" of later or "mature" Lacan in "early" Lacan is not without its problems. As Barzilai reminds us, although Lacan "returns" to Freud to discover what has "always" been there in psychoanalysis, there are moments when Lacan himself protests against investing too much in theory in the future anterior. Barzilai writes:

...to exclude the diachronic dimension of Lacan's work would seem to countermand his own instructions. Lacan thus cautions his eager readers in 1966: "It happens that our students delude themselves into finding 'already there' [*déjà là*'] in our writings that to which our teaching has since brought us. Is it not enough that what is there has not barred

the way [*ce qui est là n'en ai pas barré le chemin*]?" (*Écrits*, 67) He...resists the implications of an already-thereness, of a synecdochic reading of his writings that makes every part correspond with or adequate to the whole.⁶⁷

If we are to follow the Lacan that Barzilai quotes (instead of the Lacan to whom Weber turns), the 1949 essay neither contradicts nor anticipates Lacan's later thoughts on the Symbolic. The stylistic and rhetorical uncertainty in the conception of Imaginary narcissism, the notion of the mirror, and the role of language is not a marker of Lacan's sophistication but reflects the uncertainty of a theory-in-construction.

While I do not discount the astute observations of Weber and Barzilai, I want to suggest that neither a synecdochic nor a diachronic approach can sufficiently account for or contextualize the shifting formulations of the mirror stage if the discussion is confined to Lacan's writings. In the following section of this chapter, I propose a third possibility that moves away from the dominant reading strategies of proving consistency or contradiction in Lacan. Instead, I seek to analyze a broader context within which the "drama" and the intricacies of the mirror stage unfold over two decades. I argue that Lacan's wavering references to the structuring presence of affect, the body, and language in the mirror stage also need to be seen in relation to the clinical work of his colleague and interlocutor Françoise Dolto.

Language, Narcissism, and "the Unconscious Body Image"

Although extremely well known in France for her clinical work with children, Dolto has not had much of an impact on critical theory in the Anglo-American academy. Most of her writings are yet to be translated into English, and hers is not the first name remembered when the mirror stage is invoked, taught, or written about in clinical circles or in the humanities.⁶⁸ Several

⁶⁷ Barzilai, 72.

⁶⁸ *Theory and Practice in Child Psychoanalysis*, the first English-language book to deal exclusively with Dolto's theory and practice, was published in 2009. Although her work has been translated into a number of languages, only two of Dolto's numerous books have been translated into English: *Dominique: Analysis of an Adolescent*, trans. Ivan Kats, (New York: Outerbridge & Lazard, 1973) and *When Parents Separate*, trans. Dominique Callimanopulos (Lincoln, MA: David R. Godine, 1995). For a discussion of how Dolto's religious faith and her populist self-presentation may have caused Anglo-American intellectuals to ignore

comparative analyses have traced unacknowledged debts of the mirror stage to prominent philosophers like Hegel and Alexandre Kojève, to scientists like Henri Wallon and Louis Bolk, and to the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.⁶⁹ As Barzilai notes, the mirror stage, much like its resultant fragmentary imago, is a kind of “body-in-pieces, a dream composed of diverse concepts.”⁷⁰ Yet, while these influences are repeatedly remembered (even Luce Irigaray’s feminist “speculum”⁷¹ is often invoked as an important later intervention in the 70s), Dolto’s explicit references to and emendations of the concept of the “mirror”—and thus her reconceptualization of the relations between language and image, and between the self and the other—in the late 1940s are seldom included in these critical appraisals.⁷² This section therefore traces the silent incorporation of Dolto’s reflections into the complexity of “Lacanian” thought.

Working at the intersection of pediatrics and psychoanalysis, Dolto encountered Lacan’s “intrusion complex” in 1938 in the essay “La famille.” Lacan and Dolto were later colleagues at the Société Psychanalytique de Paris (SPP). Dolto was, in fact, one of the few psychoanalysts who supported Lacan’s unorthodox teaching and analytic practice when he broke away from the SPP to form the Société Française de Psychanalyse in 1953 and the Ecole Freudienne de Paris in 1964. However, she stood firmly against Lacan when he decided to dissolve the Ecole in

her work, see Juliet Mitchell’s preface in *Theory and Practice in Child Psychoanalysis: An Introduction to the Work of Françoise Dolto*, ed. Guy Hall, Françoise Hivernel, and Sian Morgan (London: Karnac Books, 2009), xv-xviii.

⁶⁹For a discussion of the differences between Wallon’s and Lacan’s mirror stages, see Silverman 14-31. For a discussion on the influence of Hegel in Lacan’s conception of Imaginary aggression, see Van Pelt 25-28. For a discussion of Lacan’s debt to Klein, see Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 226.

⁷⁰ Barzilai, 89.

⁷¹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Hill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁷² Barzilai is an important exception: she does include Dolto’s take on the mirror stage while critiquing Lacan’s preoccupation with the specular in 1949. However, her reading sets up an absolute opposition between Dolto and Lacan that I wish to argue against.

1980.⁷³ As Roudinesco and others have noted, Dolto was more of a clinician than a theorist: while Lacan theorized by drawing extensively on psychology, continental philosophy, and literature, Dolto's concepts were mainly derived from her Freudian commitments and the methods that she used in sessions with children and psychotics.⁷⁴ However, I would argue that the complexities of narcissistic mirroring, the mirror stage, and the Imaginary are obscured by the "spectacle" of specularity without a theoretical and historical assessment of Dolto's clinical observations on the functions of language and on what she calls *l'image inconsciente du corps* or the "unconscious body image."

At around the same time that Lacan was reaching out for the specular image, Dolto was developing her own concept of a *linguistic* unconscious body image, an idea that she stayed with and continued to theorize until she died in the late eighties. Dolto's unconscious body image, we might say, is comparable to what Lacan (in 1938) calls "the maternal imago." Both Dolto's and Lacan's concepts denote unconscious perceptions that arise from the child's proximity with the mother. Both the maternal imago and the unconscious body image point toward unconscious identifications that are independent of the mirror stage. These commonalities are also what distinguish these two concepts from the fragmentary imago of 1949, which is a retroactive and post-mirror stage formation. At the same time, as I explain below, Dolto's emphasis on the "linguistic" nature of this image also distinguishes the concept from Lacan's maternal imago.

The term "body image" was first used by the neurologist and psychiatrist Jean Lhermitte in his monograph *L'Image de notre corps*.⁷⁵ Dolto, however, stands apart from both Lhermitte's concept and Lacan's maternal imago in her clinical redefinition. For Lhermitte, the tri-dimensional body image lies at the fringe of human consciousness and is a product of several

⁷³ Roudinesco provides us with glimpses of this relentless infighting in the French psychoanalytic community. See Roudinesco, 223-267.

⁷⁴ See Roudinesco, 156. See Barzilai, 130-132.

⁷⁵ Jean Lhermitte, *L'Image de notre corps* (Paris: Nouvelle Review Critique, 1939).

perceptive elements, including vision and the vestibular sense.⁷⁶ For Lacan, the maternal imago is unconscious but the result of a primarily biological intimacy, being linked to the child's bodily experiences at the mother's breast. Neither Lhermitte nor Lacan (at this point) has much to say about the role of language in the formation of these images.⁷⁷ In contrast, for Dolto (even in 1949), "the body image," "affect," and "language" are not that easily separable. According to her, the body image is the result of a number of pre-mirror stage sensory experiences of the infant body—a "fundamental narcissism" that is always-already *linguistic and social*. Here, the mother or the caregiver is an important mediating figure, but her various "roles"—such as feeding, touching, and talking to and around the child—do not translate into a simply biological, "natural," or a purely "pre-Symbolic" experience for the child.

In the previous section, we noted how Lacan's 1949 essay emphasizes (although not without ambiguity) the chronological movement of the subject from the Imaginary (the realm of the specular image) to the Symbolic (the realm of language). By the early 1950s, Lacan had developed his theory of the "linguistic unconscious" that would become the basis of Lacanian clinical practice: the goal of therapy would be to move past the patient's Imaginary ego and to reach for his unconscious Symbolic relations. For instance, in his well-known talk circulated in Rome in 1953, Lacan protests the "growing devaluation" of speech in object relations theory that remains preoccupied with the patient's ego. The subject of the unconscious, Lacan insists, is to be found in "concrete discourse" of language and not in the silence and/or gestures of the narcissistic and Imaginary ego: "...it is to be hoped that a better appreciation of the functions of the Logos

⁷⁶ See Lhermitte, 177. For a discussion of the differences between Lhermitte and Dolto, see, Yves Rossetti et al, "Implicit Body Representations in Action," *Body Image and Body Schema: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Body*, ed. Helena de Preester and Veroniek Knockaert (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 112.

⁷⁷ Barzilai also comments on Lacan's emphasis on these "kinaesthetic sensations" in 1938, sensations that produce conflicted feelings in the child, swinging between the desire to devour and to be devoured by the breast. See Barzilai, 121.

will dissipate the mysteries of our fantastic charismata.”⁷⁸ The narcissistic Imaginary ego, obsessed with its specular image, is an obstacle that must be bypassed to accede to the linguistic unconscious and to the movement of the linguistic signifier.

It is this opposition between the narcissism of the image and the linguistic unconscious that Dolto undoes through her theory of the linguistic body image. She insists on maintaining a complex pre-mirror stage reticular structure of the child’s sensations, his unconscious body image, as well as the emotions and language of the mother or the caregiver. As she writes in *L’Image inconsciente du corps*⁷⁹:

The body image therefore elaborates itself as a network of linguistic security with the mother. This network personalizes the experiences of the child, with regard to olfaction, sight, hearing, the modalities of touching, according to the specific rhythms of the maternal habitus. *But the unconscious body image does not individualize the child with regard to his body*; because the spatial limits of his linguistic perceptions are blurred: he is also his mother, his mother is also him; since it is her, her peace, her pain or her joy (my translation).⁸⁰

It is this multi-sensorial care-giving presence (and not “just” the experience at the maternal breast or “just” the linguistic signifier) that provides a psycho-somatic connection between the child and his mother. We might say that the unconscious body image is the “impression” or “history” of this ur-egoic linguistic, emotional, and somatic “network” that precedes the motor integration by the subject of his own body through the mirror stage. In other words, Dolto does not deny the importance of specular identification. However, from her own clinical perspective, she is critical of the valorization of the scopic dimension at the expense of other non-specular and linguistic relational experiences.⁸¹

There is then, for Dolto, a fundamental relationship between the body, the linguistic, and the (not necessarily conscious) “labor” that goes into “making sense” of language and the social.

⁷⁸ Lacan, 218.

⁷⁹ Françoise Dolto, *L’Image inconsciente du corps* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1992).

⁸⁰ Dolto, 150.

⁸¹ Ibid., 148.

As Claude Boukobza notes in her analysis of Dolto's theory of the bodily and linguistic unconscious:

true language that conveys meaning for the subject—is always closely connected with the body. Understanding a word depends both on the body schema and on the unconscious body image of the body linked to the real exchanges that accompanied the assimilation of that word. “To have meaning, words must first be embodied,” as Dolto once wrote.⁸²

Although Dolto does not deny the importance of the corporeal schema or its distinction from the unconscious body image,⁸³ her clinico-theoretical observations suggest that the “embodiment” of language begins with the birth of the unconscious image before (and continues after) the ego is formed. This unconscious linguistic image is inflected by the familial and social matrix from which the “healthy”⁸⁴ or socially acceptable meanings of words, sounds, expressions, and gestures arise.

Through her insistence on the embodied production of “meaning” (and its effects on the psychic and social lives of her patients), Dolto also departs from Lacan's injunction to “banish” meaning. The linguistic unconscious, for Lacan, is the register where meaning is constantly deferred. As he makes clear in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” language is not to be confused with the “various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject.”⁸⁵ What interests him [more] is the notion of linguistic unconscious as a “material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language,”⁸⁶ one where it is not the

⁸² Claude Boukobza, “The Unconscious Image of the Body,” *Theory and Practice*, 88.

⁸³ The corporeal schema is another name for Lhermitte's “body image.” As I have suggested above, this schema directs the actual body in space and in its immediate experience. It is independent of language and can be unconscious, conscious or pre-conscious. The schema can also change over time and according to space but is usually the same for all individuals of the same age and in the same climate. In contrast, the unconscious body image is tied to the history of the individual subject and hence to its individual language experiences. The body image is always unconscious and acts as the fundamental support for narcissism. Dolto also argues that it is the “crossing” of the corporeal schema and the unconscious body image that makes human communication possible. See Dolto, 17-24.

⁸⁴ The word that Dolto uses is *sain*.

⁸⁵ Lacan, 413.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

[Imaginary] fixity of meaning but the “incessant [Symbolic and unconscious] sliding of the signified under the signifier”⁸⁷ that holds sway.

In contrast, Dolto is interested in the unconscious production and endurance of linguistic meaning effected through a “narcissistic” (and in that sense Imaginary) embodiment of language. It is this early structuration of the unconscious through a non-specular “linguistic mirroring” that Dolto also calls “fundamental narcissism.” Unlike the (1949 version of) narcissism of the mirror stage, Dolto’s fundamental narcissism is not reliant on the specular image; indeed it begins in the intra-uterine life of the child, and it is related to the mother’s familial and social environment. Consequently, even as Dolto lists several physiological functions that constitute fundamental narcissism (or the unconscious body image) such as breathing and cardio-vascular circulation, she keeps language as an important presence in the intra-uterine setting.⁸⁸ In *Tout est langage*, Dolto argues, “even when the child is a four-month-old fetus, he is impacted by the voices it hears outside” (my translation, modified).⁸⁹ In other words, for Dolto, it is not just the amniotic fluid but language that “greet” and nourishes the child and engenders his fundamental narcissism in early infancy. This is also a “narcissistic” stage insofar as the infant cannot distinguish between himself and the social and external forces by which he is stimulated. He may not fully comprehend the signifiers from the social either, but his unconscious begins to be founded on the basis of her partial comprehension. The social and the cultural then are the basis of what Dolto

⁸⁷ Ibid., 419.

⁸⁸ Raul Moncayo argues that Dolto’s fundamental narcissism can also be linked to André Green’s “narcissism of sleep” and Freud’s “absolute primary narcissism.” However, I would argue that it is Dolto’s additional emphasis on language that makes her concept more complex. Unsurprisingly, although Moncayo discusses Lacan’s notion of *lalangue*, he makes no reference to Dolto’s theory of language. See Raul Moncayo, *Evolving Lacanian Perspectives for Clinical Psychoanalysis: On Narcissism, Sexuation, and the Phases/Faces of Analysis in Contemporary Culture* (London: Karnac Books, 2008) 8-9, 160-164.

⁸⁹ Françoise Dolto, *Tout est langage* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 15. Dolto’s remark here echoes contemporary and later research in prenatal psychology. I have my friend Bonnie Lau to thank to point me to this literature. See, for instance, David B. Chamberlain, “The Fetal Senses: A Classical View.” Accessed on April 20, 2011, <http://birthpsychology.com/lifebefore/fetalsense.html>. Chamberlain reviews a significant body of scholarship that argues that voices from the outside reach and stimulate the womb in spite of the noise created by the mother and the placenta.

calls fundamental narcissism and the unconscious body image.⁹⁰

In this connection, it is important to note that for Dolto, the linguistic, the somatic, and the physiological inform each other. There is no particular isolatable “moment” when the subject “enters” language:

With or without words, there is language...an infant, a few months old...expresses his contentment with responsive and meaningful noises....And if the mother mimics the same sound, echoing him, the infant receives and considers it. This exchange, this language...is a creative language which enables the infant to structure its sensations...which enables him to develop not into a mere digestive system but into a human being.⁹¹

In Dolto’s analysis, it is not as if language and culture are “added” to an “animal” digestive system to produce the “human.” Instead, the social and the physiological “inhabit” and “produce” each other. On the one hand, human physiology is not independent of language—the infant’s sensations and his “perception” of his digestive system are partly determined by her cultural and linguistic milieu. On the other hand, the “contented” physiological and perceiving body also partially determines the “creative language” uttered by the child. If Lacan left the concept of proprioceptivity out of his 1949 account of the mirror stage and in his 1950s theory of the Symbolic, Dolto brings it back through her emphasis on the child’s “sensations.” However, as Dolto’s response suggests, proprioception, here, is also tied to the child’s semiotic exchanges with her environment—a process that linguist and semiotician Waldir Beividas has more recently and speculatively called “semioception.”⁹² By stressing the semiotic dimensions of “noises” made

⁹⁰ Here, Dolto is close to Fanon’s notion of “sociogenesis” (to which I return in the second chapter) as well as Laplanche’s notion of “enigmatic signifiers.” Laplanche argues that the signifiers addressed to and received by the child are not fully meaningful. Neither can the signifying adult be in complete control of the meaning grasped by the child. The signifiers (in the form of words, phrases, and gestures) addressed to and/or received by the child are “enigmatic” because they reveal the unconscious of the adult and found that of the child. Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (London: Basil-Blackwell, 1989), 45-128.

⁹¹ Sian Morgan, “Françoise Dolto: A Biography,” *Theory and Practice*, 20.

⁹² In an unpublished conference presentation, Beividas notes that “semioception” may be a tentative but useful way of thinking beyond the impasses created by differences between phenomenology and semiotics. “Semioception,” Beividas argues, “is better placed to ensure the status of ‘immanence’ of the macro-semiotics of the human world, of the micro-semiotics of the body, and finally, of the grammar of affects” (my translation) (16). Waldir Beividas, “Sémiotique du vécu (l’affect): phénoménologie ou sémiologie,”

by the infant, Dolto also moves beyond the limits generally imposed on the “linguistic signifier.” These noises do not necessarily make a meaningful “word” or a “sentence” that articulates a concept or a proposition, but they, nevertheless, constitute a “language” to which the mother or the caregiver can partially respond. Simultaneously, it is also a language that cannot be made sense of without taking the child’s and the caregiver’s bodies and gestures into consideration. Dolto’s semioceptive formulation comes close to what Julia Kristeva would later call “*pre-meaning* and *pre-sign* (or *trans-meaning*, *trans-sign*)”: operations that “bring us back to processes of division in the living matter of an organism subject to biological considerations as well as social norms.”⁹³ However, unlike Kristeva, Dolto does not create a separate category like the “semiotic *chora*”⁹⁴—for her, the ineffable and the pre-verbal, although outside the purview of both objectivist and cognitive semantics,⁹⁵ do not necessarily precede the Symbolic. Neither are the boundaries clear between an Imaginary “pre-verbal semiotic state” and language as a sign system. In this way, Dolto provides offers a theory of the Imaginary-Symbolic relationship that is more complex and less dyadic than is usually admitted by Lacan, his followers, and/or his critics. As an Imaginary “recording” of this early (intrauterine and infantile) Symbolic exchange, the unconscious body image joins emergent semiotic capacities to the pre-verbal, maternal, and

Annual Conference of the International Society of Psychoanalysis and Philosophy Conference. São Paulo, November 2010.

⁹³ Julia Kristeva, “The System and the Speaking Subject,” *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 29.

⁹⁴ The *chora*, for Kristeva, is a modality of significance and ordering that precedes and underlies language as a sign system. It is analogous to vocal and kinetic rhythm, associated with the maternal presence, and is outside the Symbolic law. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁹⁵ These are not terms that Dolto uses in her work. She also does not explicitly comment on her relationship with structuralist linguistics. What I mean here is that “meaning,” for her, is not based on some “purely” mental or biological process of cognition. Neither is it produced by some notion of “objective” truth. It is simultaneously a bodily, social, and psychic production.

proprioceptive labors of the body.⁹⁶ Concurrently, the theory of the unconscious image pushes us to think of a linguistic narcissistic “Imaginary” that is not founded on the visual image but in relation to all that the child receives as language. Dolto’s theory of fundamental narcissism thus provides a broader intersubjective arena to examine the Imaginary without discounting the possible forms of specular encounter.

It is important to remember that although her theories of language, fundamental narcissism, and the body image appear in publication in the eighties⁹⁷—that is to say, *after* Lacan’s formulation of the Symbolic in the fifties and Kristeva’s *chora* in the seventies⁹⁸—the genesis of Dolto’s concepts explicitly dates back to her clinical work in the late 1940s. There is sufficient documentary evidence to support this claim. In a conference organized by the SPP in 1949 (whose proceedings are recorded in the same issue of *Revue française de Psychanalyse* that contains Lacan’s essay on the mirror stage),⁹⁹ Dolto is the only analyst who speaks of the need to recognize the “ineffable language” to be found in the speech of the narcissistic ego:

...the subject [of narcissism]...is difficult to analyze in depth because of our own narcissism that is constituted by emotions that escape intelligent speech. The question of language is intimately related to the communication that we have with each other. Language is one of the forms of human connection, but it seems to me that the *fundamentals of narcissism occur outside of language....And yet, if we touch upon the problem of narcissism in children, we tackle at the same time the problem of language and its psychological conditions....* Today, I wanted to speak to you—about these difficulties of language—the connections *between language and Narcissism*, and all that

⁹⁶ Whether the fetus actually “feels” emotions has been a matter of serious discussion, particularly since the development of scanning technology that is now able to capture the expressions of babies twenty-six weeks after conception. For instance, obstetrician Stuart Campbell asks in an article written in 2003, “Does the foetus smile because it is happy or cry because it has been disturbed by some event in the womb? Why does a baby blink when we assume it is dark inside the uterus?” See James Meikle, “Foetuses May Express Emotion in the Womb,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (14 September 2003). Accessed on 26 June, 2011. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/09/13/1063341820977.html?from=storyrhs>.

⁹⁷ *L’Image inconsciente du corps* was first published in 1984.

⁹⁸ *Revolution in Poetic Language* was published in 1974.

⁹⁹ Françoise Dolto, “XII^e Conférence des Psychanalystes de langue française (Paris, 4 et 5 juin 1949),” *Revue française de psychanalyse* (N^o 4 -Octobre-Décembre 1949) 527-568. Accessed on 20 May, 2011. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k54444473/f81.tableDesMatières>.

through the case studies of children cured by the intermediary of transference onto a flower-doll (my translation and emphasis).¹⁰⁰

Already, in 1949, Dolto is formulating her notions of that which lies outside “meaningful” or “intelligent” speech, that which does not necessarily obey the rules of structuralist linguistics, but is language nevertheless insofar as it structures the unconscious body image. Speaking as an analyst of autistic children, Dolto argues that the difficulties of the maladjusted patient cannot be addressed unless the “extimacy”¹⁰¹ of autistic speech—its position both inside and outside language—is acknowledged. Although she does not provide her interlocutors with a fully-formed “theory” of the narcissistic child’s exceptional relationship with language—the cause behind its “wounded” unconscious body image¹⁰²—at this conference, she does discuss her clinical experience, specifically her success with a transferential object that she devised and called *la poupée-fleur* or the “flower doll.”

I want to pause on this transferential object because I see it as the site of an important exchange between Lacan and Dolto—an exchange that has to do with the mirror stage and the notion of “mirroring”—whose chiasmic implications have been completely ignored by Anglo-American readings of Lacan in literary, film, and/or media and cultural studies. Dolto first used the flower doll to treat her young patient Bernadette in 1947. SymThe idea of the flower doll comes to Dolto during a session when Bernadette’s mother tells her that her daughter shows no fondness for her stuffed animals and dolls. In the same account, Dolto also notes why she thought of giving the doll the head of a *marguerite* or a “daisy” instead of a human head. Drawings made during sessions by her earlier patients had suggested to her that the daisy was often the (1940s French) child’s means to represent his/her own unconscious libido:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 546.

¹⁰¹ This is a term that Lacan coins later in the 50s to indicate a position that is both external and intimate, inside and outside.

¹⁰² This, according to Dolto, is an instance where the unconscious body image is fundamentally not *sain* but *blesé* (“wounded”).

...as for the daisies, they are the first floral representations of all the children, girls as well as boys. They appear to symbolize a libido of a subject who is not yet conscious of or is repressing the conscious articulation of his/her genital type. So I tell the mother [of Bernadette] to make a doll that, instead of having a face, hands and legs of the color of flesh, would be entirely covered with green cloth. The lump of a head, also green, without [a] face, would be crowned with an artificial daisy. And this doll would be dressed both like a girl and a boy... (my translation, modified).¹⁰³

Once this flower doll of an indeterminate sex and gender is made and given to her, Bernadette returns to tell Dolto how “naughty” her flower doll is at home and that she needs to be “treated.”

The rest of Dolto’s account in this *Revue* article meticulously records how, through the verbalization of the flower doll’s “feelings,” Bernadette learns to be cognizant of her own emotions and finally move past her aggressivity and maladjustment, as well as her digestive difficulties.¹⁰⁴ After another similar case where the therapy with the flower doll proved to be effective,¹⁰⁵ Dolto comes to the conclusion that both these children are able to work through their psychosomatic symptoms by way of a projective identification with the transferential object.

Bernadette can articulate her own emotions only as the emotions “felt” by the flower-doll. In other words, if the flower doll’s feelings are also her feelings, then it is simultaneously “the self” and the “other”: “Bernadette’s behavior with her environment changed from the moment that she projected into the scapegoat of a flower doll all that she had suffered in her lived experiences” (my translation, modified).¹⁰⁶ Dolto’s use of the figure of the “scapegoat” permits us to speculate on the reflexive function at work in Bernadette’s temporary projective identification with the flower doll. As a “scapegoat,” the transferential object seems to “stands in” for Bernadette and becomes a “mirror” of sorts, a mirror in which she can finally “see” her own emotions. But what kind of a mirror is it if its “image” brings together language, figuration, affect, and the (sexed) body? Is it the same as the mirror in Lacan’s account?

¹⁰³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 57-64.

¹⁰⁵ This is the case of the five-year-old Nicole, also recorded in “Cure psychanalytique,” 64-69.

¹⁰⁶ Françoise Dolto, “A propos des poupée-fleurs (*suite*)” *Revue française de psychanalyse* (N° 1-Janvier-Mars 1950), 20-21. This is the second and follow-up article on the flower doll.

In one of the few published exchanges between Lacan and Dolto, Lacan appears to be rather keen to include Dolto's clinical success into the fold of his 1949 theoretical account. This exchange from October 18, 1949, first recorded by the October-December issue of *Revue*¹⁰⁷ is part of a larger conversation between Dolto, Lacan, and other psychoanalysts like Sacha Nacht, Serge Lebovici, and René Held, presumably held at the end of Dolto's presentation. Here is the journal's summary of Lacan's comments after Dolto's exposé:

Dr. Lacan has the strong impression that Madame Dolto's flower-doll fits in with his own research on the *imago* of the body, the mirror stage, and the fragmented body. He considers it significant that the flower-doll has no mouth and, after having noted that it is a sexual symbol and that it hides the human face, concludes by saying that he hopes one day to come up with a theoretical commentary on Madame Dolto's contribution (my translation, modified).¹⁰⁸

Since this is all that summary mentions about the flower doll, the connections it makes are both provocative and enigmatic: how does the flower doll "fit in" with the mirror stage? Is Dolto's transitional object the mirror, the body image, or the fragmented body? What is the significance of the fact that the flower doll does *not* fully resemble the human form, being half-human and half-vegetal? Is it a "sexual" symbol *because* it "hides" the human face or *in spite of* its semi-human nature? The ambiguity may be an effect of the transcription (readers will never know what Lacan "actually" said). But it is also true that the same issue of the journal also includes a succinct and wry response to "Dr" Lacan from "Madame" Dolto, who was a practicing pediatrician and analyst in 1949.

Dolto "agrees" with Lacan's comment on the flower doll and with his attempt to "accommodate" her clinical account, but not without adding a crucial qualification:

¹⁰⁷ See footnote #49. The exchange can also be found in the following texts: Barzilai, 130; Françoise Dolto and J.D. Nasio, *L'enfant du miroir*, (Paris: Rivages, 1987), 56-58; Françoise Dolto, "The Mirror's Child," *Freud's Tracks: Conversations from the Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, ed. Sergio Benvenuto and Anthony Molino (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 185-186. Roudinesco reports Lacan's comment at this conference, but she does not mention Dolto's qualifying remark. See Roudinesco, 266. In Barzilai's analysis and in the Nasio-Dolto discussion, this exchange testifies to the differences between Lacan's and Dolto's approaches to the mirror stage. In contrast, I argue that this exchange becomes crucial while examining Lacan's subsequent revisions of the Imaginary-Symbolic relationship.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 566.

Yes, the flower-doll relates to the effects of the mirror stage, but one needs to understand the concept of the mirror as an object of reflection—not only of the visible, but also the audible, sensible, and intentional worlds. The doll has no face, hands, or feet, no front, back, joints or neck (my translation, modified).¹⁰⁹

This 1949 response is an important moment in the history of the mirror stage, since here Dolto explicitly critiques the primarily specular logic of identification in Lacan's theory, which is again demonstrated when he links the flower doll to primary narcissism. Dolto's theory involves not only the specular image but also affective-linguistic attachments that contribute to the process of mirroring. She reminds Lacan that what is special about the flower doll is its difference from the "fullness" of the mirror image. Unlike the specular image, the flower doll is devoid of some of the key anatomical features that Lacan's child [mis]recognizes as his own in his mirror image. It is therefore not merely the "sight" of the flower doll that facilitates Bernadette's projective identification. The process begins with, as Dolto notes, a socio-linguistic familiarity demonstrated by Bernadette when the object is mentioned for the first time: "At that moment Bernadette jumped in excitement and joy: 'Yes, yes, a flower doll, yes, yes...'"¹¹⁰ Bernadette expresses her desire for the signified through a language that she does not fully understand and even before she fully knows what the referent would look like.

Although Dolto does not tell us why Bernadette is attracted to the signifier "flower doll," this linguistic attraction need not be understood as "universal," ahistorical, or outside of popular cultural imagery. In fact, a more plausible conclusion would be that through her jubilant response to the signifier, Bernadette demonstrates her familiarity with the mythical¹¹¹ and contradictory associations in place in French society by the mid-twentieth century, between flowers, children, and, particularly feminine sexuality. On the one hand, "innocent" floral imagery and flower

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 567.

¹¹⁰ See Dolto, "Cure Psychanalytique," 58.

¹¹¹ I mean "myth" in Roland Barthes's sense of the term. As a "myth," the ambiguous and naturalized signification of "flower-child" (connoting innocence, purity, naturalness etc.) is not just the product of an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified but of an ideological motivation that simultaneously sustains both the second-order "myth" and first-order "meaning." See generally, Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

poems, which were often illustrated by images of half-child and half-flower figures, were common in Europe and America from the early twentieth century.¹¹² On the other hand, as Beverly Seaton has argued, the ascription of sexual and feminine connotations to floral imagery was also naturalized in the West through the “language of flowers” that originated in sentimental flower books and almanacs in 18th century France.¹¹³ The flower was thus marked as both “innocent” and sexualized. In fact, the diverging opinions of Lacan (who sees the flower doll as a “sexual symbol”) and Dolto (who thinks of it as representing an “asexual libido”) collectively mirror this contradictory ideological terrain of the myth attached to the signifier. Simultaneously, Dolto’s emendation of Lacan extends the metaphorical possibilities of the mirror to a non-specular, linguistic, and ideological field.

For, what Bernadette hears, touches, and desires (in addition to and before seeing the referent) follows from a partial understanding (and, in Dolto’s terms, an “embodiment”) of this myth present in the French language and culture that facilitates her attraction to the (non-neutral) signifier or “sound-image” of the flower doll, which in turn prepares the grounds of her projection. These grounds are a social production mediated by the maternal figure(s) around the child. In her reading of Bernadette’s attachment to the flower doll, Barzilai argues that the main difference between Lacan and Dolto lies in their approaches to the role of the mother:

Dolto is arguing then, with Lacan’s position on maternal agency....That the liberating object was in each case a doll fashioned by the girls’ mother, after a design recommended by the analyst (who herself was a mother of young children, as both girls knew), is also

¹¹² For instance, in his 1904 book, J. Miller Maxwell identifies the daisy according to a maxim –as that which ““weathers every sky’,” and as the “earliest playmate of the little ones.” See J. Miller Maxwell, *Children’s Wild Flowers: Their Legends and Stories* (London: David Douglas, 1904), 5. Similarly, Elizabeth Gordon’s book, published in 1910, is a collection of illustrated poems where each illustration is half-flower and half-child. In her foreword, Gordon writes, “A flower is the mystical counterpart of a child. To the understanding heart, a child is a flower and a flower is a child....In preparing this book the author and artist have attempted to show the kinship of children and flowers...” See Elizabeth Gordon, foreword to *Flower Children: The Little Cousins of the Field and Garden* (Chicago: P. F. Volland and Company, 1910).

¹¹³ See Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 61-66.

arguably important for the identificatory processes leading to the successful outcome of the treatment.¹¹⁴

In this interpretation, the fact that Bernadette receives the suggestion of the flower doll from the maternal Dolto (and the actual flower doll from her own mother) plays a key role in the creation of this metaphorical mirror in the object. For Barzilai, Lacan's emphasis on the visual is thus countered by Dolto's emphasis on "maternal involvement."¹¹⁵ If Lacan believes in the importance of the maternal (imago) in 1938 but then excludes the mother from the 1949 mirror stage, Barzilai's Dolto reinstates the mother in her account of maternal mirroring.

Yet, while this point about maternal presence is an important one, I would argue against the opposition that Barzilai constructs between the specular image and maternal "agency." For, even as Dolto recognizes the importance of maternal suggestion and the maternal gift—insofar as the Bernadette returns to Dolto to describe the flower doll's "behavior" in the same language that her mother describes her—her subsequent clinical account also emphasizes the *distance* that Bernadette achieves from maternal involvement *through* the flower doll. As Dolto notes in "A propos des poupée-fleurs":

Bernadette at first actually scotomized my presence. The being [sic] with whom she started to really express herself was the flower-doll, or rather, as the following will show, herself projected in the flower-doll, in the course of the mimed and mute "exchange" from the mouth to the petals, from the petals to the ears. The child translated the instinctive emotions freed from the feeling of guilt. In this way, in this conversation with herself, she forgave her ego for having been the theater of maladjusted emotions (my translation, modified).¹¹⁶

Encountering the flower doll first through a language that simultaneously makes it sexual and asexual, Bernadette also seems to identify *visually* with the doll's "imperfectness" and its "inability" to be human. She establishes a connection between her own psychosomatic difficulties and the "non-human" and semi-vegetal status of the flower doll. This process of linguistic-visual

¹¹⁴ Barzilai, 132.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Dolto, "A Propos," 20.

identification is thus the opposite of what Lacan emphasizes in the mirror stage in 1949. Unlike the child who chooses the perfect mirror image to disavow its bodily discord, Bernadette identifies with an object that she perceives to be mirroring her bodily and psychic discomfort. The flower doll thus becomes both the “embodied” and the projected form of her body image, and it can “feel” what Bernadette feels precisely because it does not “respond” in a manner that she associates with the human or social environment. The object’s lifelessness and its availability as a material support (both linguistic and visual) are therefore necessary preconditions for the formation of Bernadette’s “scapegoat.” Its status as a *tabula rasa* allows Bernadette to have that “conversation with herself” so that she can (re)join the social. This conversation with the flower-doll is therefore also an “image” in that it triggers off the “mental reflection” of the child’s ego, “concerning [her] own self, linked to the experience of the image that the mirror reflected.”¹¹⁷ Yet, it is not an “image” that is fully separable from language. Indeed, it is a mental (and I would argue Imaginary) reflection *through language* (and the relatively muted and transitional presence of specular mirroring) that alter Bernadette’s relationship to her body image and hence to the social, to the extent that the flower doll’s material support is no longer necessary.

For Dolto then, “mirroring” is a relational process that necessarily involves language and does not rely solely on the specular, as is demonstrated by her clinical work. Through her use of the flower-dolls in the 1940s, Dolto isolates the process of a reflexive linguistic mirroring that is also essential for the foundation of a stable and socially functional ego. In his discussion with Dolto in *L’Enfant du miroir*, Juan-David Nasio emphasizes what he sees as the main difference between Dolto and Lacan:

The first difference is that in Lacan, the mirror is a plane and visually reflecting surface, in contrast with the omnireflecting psychic surface of every sentient form as a mirror in Dolto. Of course you also speak of the plane mirror, but to relativize it immediately as

¹¹⁷ Dolto, *L’Image*, 56.

one instrument among others contributing to individualize the body in general (my translation).¹¹⁸

This distinction between Dolto's complex visual and linguistic mirror and Lacan's specular mirror certainly holds if we confine Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage to the 1949 essay, in which Lacan is reticent about elaborating his view of what precedes the ego's formation through and encounter with the specular image. Dolto, though, does have a specific theory of the pre-specular. Indeed, by the 1980s, Dolto is more specific about the relationship between her own clinical concept of the Symbolic and Lacan's theory of the Imaginary. In *L'image inconsciente du corps*, she argues that the encounter with the specular image inevitably leads to the repression of the (older) unconscious body image. While this specular encounter is necessary (insofar as it allows the child to individualize and then socialize herself), it can also produce what Dolto describes as a "Symbolic hole": an effect of the maladjustment between the linguistic image and the specular image. It is here that language from the care-giving adult soothes the child and makes the [mis]recognition of the specular image a smoother process:

The expressive, gestural, and affective language that the infant has established with the ambient world does not [automatically] bring him a response to his image that he meets in the mirror, [which is] contrary to all the experiences that he has of the other. That is why, if the mother, or a known person, is not close to the child, in his space, there is the risk that, because of the mirror, his body image might disappear without the scopic image having a meaning for him (my translation, modified).¹¹⁹

In 1949, Dolto had observed that the shape and form of the fundamental narcissism (or unconscious body image) acquired by the child depends on her relationship with language. In 1982, she adds to that observation by including Lacan's account of specular primary narcissism. But she still holds on to her theory of non-specular linguistic mirroring: for primary narcissism to be "meaningful" and non-traumatic, Dolto insists, the child's appropriation of the mirror image also has to pass through the *comforting* non-specular Symbolic mirror "held up" by the

¹¹⁸ Dolto and Nasio, 60.

¹¹⁹ Dolto, *L'Image*, 151.

caregiver's presence, "the mirror of the subject's being reflected in the other."¹²⁰ Here, Dolto anticipates what Kaja Silverman would later call a maternal "acoustic mirror" in her reading of the mirror stage.¹²¹

Ironically, these differences between Lacan and Dolto seem to be less watertight if we turn to both the interpretation of Lacan's work (specifically his 1949 essay) in the Anglo-American academy in the early 80s and simultaneously follow his own developing thinking on the mirror stage into the 50s and 60s. For instance, in her introduction to *Feminine Sexuality* Jacqueline Rose unquestioningly attributes the notion of non-specular mirroring to "Lacan." Having introduced the mirror stage as being "central to Lacan's account of subjectivity," Rose writes: Lacan is careful to stress, however, that his point is not restricted to the field of the visible alone: 'the idea of the mirror should be understood as an object which reflects—*not just the visible, but also what is heard, touched and willed by the child* (Lacan, 1949, p. 567) (my emphasis).¹²²

I quote Rose to make her appropriation and/or oversight obvious: not only does she attribute the psycho-linguistic mirror to Lacan; she puts Dolto's qualification at the conference in 1949 into Lacan's mouth. The multi-faceted nature of the mirror and the sophistication of Lacan's thinking are thus established through the erasure of Dolto's voice. Rose's oversight is inexplicable and all the more curious since she includes the name of Dolto's presentation ("Cure psychanalytique à l'aide de la poupée-fleur") as well as the exact *Revue* page number in her bibliography. The elision is particularly ironic given that it is precisely a theory of the importance of the maternal voice that is at stake in erasing Dolto's voice. This elision also mirrors those of other critics who evoke the complexity of the mirror stage and the theory of the Symbolic without

¹²⁰ Dolto, *L'enfant du miroir*, 188.

¹²¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 80.

¹²² Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1985), 30.

acknowledging Dolto's work or her highly probable influence on Lacan.¹²³

I say "highly probable" because Lacan did not provide his readers with that promised "theoretical commentary on Madame Dolto's contribution." In her introduction to Dolto's book *When Parents Separate*, Sherry Turkle writes: "there is a much-repeated account of a conversation between Lacan and Dolto in which she protested being labeled a Lacanian: 'I don't understand what you write,' and he responded: 'But I simply try to write as you already do'."¹²⁴ Whether Lacan actually said this or not, this reported confession is not entirely untrue. Although Lacan does not spell out how or whether he reaches Dolto's conclusions from his own insistence on specular identification, it is clear that his later references to the mirror stage pay more attention to the role of language and the social during primary narcissism.

Thus, even though the specular remains central to Lacan's account of ego formation, from the 1950s, the Symbolic begins to influence the constitution of the specular *I* in ways that Dolto suggested in 1949. In "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation," written in 1960, Lacan explicitly theorizes the effect of the Symbolic on the Imaginary. He writes:

It would be a mistake to think that the Other (with a capital *O*) of discourse can be absent from any distance that the subject achieves in his relationship with the other, the other (with a lower case *o*) of the imaginary dyad....For the Other where discourse is situated, which is always latent in the triangulation that consecrates this distance, is not latent as long as it extends all the way to the purest moment of the specular relation: to the gesture by which the child at the mirror turns toward the person who is carrying him and appeals with a look to this witness; the latter decants the child's recognition of the image, by verifying it, from the jubilant assumption in which *it* [elle] certainly *already was*.¹²⁵

Here, Lacan locates the Symbolic Other—the language *that speaks* the subject—in "the gesture" that makes the child at the mirror turn to the care-giver for some kind of ratification. But who does this "gesture" belong to? Does it belong to the child or to the witness who corroborates the

¹²³ See, for instance, Tamise Van Pelt, *The Other Side of Desire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

¹²⁴ Sherry Turkle, "Tough Love: An Introduction to Francoise Dolto's *When Parents Separate*." Accessed on 20 May, 2011. <http://www.psicomundo.org/dolto/textos/turkle.htm>.

¹²⁵ Lacan, 568.

child's jubilation? The grammatical ambiguity in the phrase "the gesture *by which*" makes the gesture almost untraceable, something that is shared "between" the child and his surroundings, in particular his caregiver. Simultaneously, Lacan suggests that as the untraceable gesture, the Other can gain significance only through a mediating gesture of endorsement from the caregiver. This moment of "decantation" of the child's recognition of its image by the caregiver—and hence of the gesture of the Other—is an important revision of the 1949 mirror stage (where there is no such instrumental figure), and again, close to Dolto's later formulation of the role of the caregiver in front of the mirror. Although Lacan does not tell us what "decantation" entails, it would be safe to argue that he is close to Dolto's emphasis on the impact of the caregiver's language on the child's experience of his mirror image. Lacanian analyst Bruce Fink, for instance, notes that

the mirror image takes on such importance as a result of the parent's recognition, acknowledgement, or approval—expressed in a nodding gesture...or in such expressions as "Yes, baby, that's you!" often uttered by ecstatic, admiring, or simply bemused parents.¹²⁶

In Fink's reading of Lacan's mirror stage, the subject's experience of the gesture of the Other is inseparable from the gesture of the decanting caregiver. As suggested by Dolto, Imaginary narcissism is, in a sense, "impossible" without the mediating force of language.

This "sticking of language to the subject's imaginary,"¹²⁷ however, begs the following questions: *how* is the signifier lodged in the evolving Imaginary? Does the signifier always produce (more) jubilation in the child? What if the signifier *fails* to support or buttress the child's identification with the ideal-ego? Lacan himself seems to hint at such a moment of "imaginarization" of the Symbolic in a 1953 lecture. Lacan writes, "...language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is. Words are caught up in all the body images that captivate the subject....Furthermore, words themselves can suffer *symbolic lesions and accomplish imaginary*

¹²⁶ Fink, 88.

¹²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 1: Freud's Paper's on Technique 1953-54*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 85.

acts whose victim is the subject”(my emphases).¹²⁸ Lacan does not tell us how and why words—instead of propping up the Imaginary as they are supposed to—become “lesions” in the Imaginary. But, again, this intimate connection between language and the body image is strongly reminiscent of the ideologically-charged “narcissistic wounds” that Dolto describes in her patients.¹²⁹ Here, Lacan seems to suggest that the Symbolic is “trapped” in the Imaginary, and the subject cannot “advance” from the Imaginary to the “free” Symbolic.

Conclusion

In the next chapter, I turn to Fanon’s anti-colonial appropriation of the mirror stage to offer a “case study” where language is thoroughly “trapped” in the Imaginary, or rather language *produces* the Imaginary as a structure with “no exits.” To conclude this chapter, let me recapitulate my argument so far: what I have identified through my historiography of the mirror stage is a peculiar (and somewhat undertheorized) intimacy between language and the narcissistic Imaginary. I have suggested that the lineaments of a hitherto unexamined Dolto-Lacan exchange should prompt us to rethink Imaginary narcissism in terms of language, affective gestures, and the socially hailed body. This chiasmus between Lacan and Dolto, however, does not change the fact that Dolto and Lacan have very different approaches to analysis. As I suggested above, for Lacan, analysis can cure the patient’s neurosis only if the Symbolic, the “genuine Other,” is unhinged from the Imaginary through “free speech” in the clinical setting. In contrast, for Dolto, the cure seems to be possible *in* the Imaginary, but only if the patient is able to externalize and reflect on her fundamental narcissism. These differences notwithstanding, what I have isolated from within psychoanalytic thinking is the possibility of socially produced signification in the stage and structure of the narcissistic Imaginary. In particular, I have isolated a form of a linguistic

¹²⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, 248.

¹²⁹ Historically, this quote is also interesting if we note that Lacan had apparently asked Dolto “Why do you call it [the linguistic body image] an image of the *body*?” See Dolto, *L’Enfant du miroir*, 14-15 (my translation).

“wounding” *that is simultaneously Imaginary and unconscious*. Against popular injunctions of seeing narcissism as an anti-social envelope, I have suggested that Dolto’s theory of linguistic narcissism also prompts us to see the Imaginary as a space of reading and being read by the social. The political implications of such a conceptualization of the Imaginary—as a contradictory space of reading and interpellation that is at once individual and social will be explored at length in the following chapters. However, let us note that it is precisely this contradiction that defines Louis Althusser’s concept of “ideology.” In his 1969 essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser argues that ideology is a form of (linguistic) “interpellation” (“Hey, you there!”)¹³⁰—and therefore comparable to the “Yes, baby, that’s you!” uttered by the caregiver—as well as a “‘Representation’ of the Imaginary relations of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence.”¹³¹ Instead of accusing Althusser of “confusing” the distinct registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary,¹³² it may be more productive to think of ideology as the Symbolic-Imaginary “lesion” that Lacan mentions in passing but does not theorize. To think through practices of reading and being read that produce interpellation and make interpellations effective and enduring is therefore also to think through the psychic-social chiasmus that determines the construction and operation of the narcissistic Imaginary.

Here, we should note that while Dolto recognizes and Lacan offhandedly mentions the possible impact of the cultural and the social in the mirror stage, neither of them adequately theorizes particular Imaginary/ideological forms taken by “universal” language. If language and speech are insidiously present in Imaginary mirroring, and if the mirror is also “what is heard, touched and willed by the child,” it follows that the alienation of the ego cannot remain a intrapsychic or entirely outside the culture, politics, and power differentials that also shape the

¹³⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³² See Joseph Valente, “Lacan’s Marxism, Marxism’s Lacan (From Žižek to Althusser),” *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 166.

subject's relationship to the universal. If, as Lacan concedes, "culture...may well be reduced to language,"¹³³ then a theory of the Imaginary cannot afford to ignore rivalry, aggression, and difference between two or more such "languages" positioned as competing and/or antagonistic ideologies.¹³⁴ With the theory of linguistic mirroring offered by Dolto (and Lacan), we are now in a position to re-pose David Eng's insightful question from within a psycho-social account of narcissism: how might categories of difference (such as race, class, and/or gender) intersect with or trouble the narrative of the subject's smooth assumption of the mirror image? Could we see interrelated "languages" of race, class, and/or gender as "Symbolic lesions" that impinge upon or "read" the narcissistic and identitarian ego to impact or interfere with Symbolic reading practices? I begin to answer these questions in the following chapter by examining the dynamics of racial dis/identification in Fanon's rethinking of Imaginary narcissism.

¹³³ Lacan, 414.

¹³⁴ This contradicts the popular Lacanian assertion that "culture" is a distinctly "un-Lacanian" concept and cannot be reduced to the Symbolic. For instance, see Van Pelt, 10.

CHAPTER TWO:

Language, Race, and the (Maternal) Other in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*

In the last chapter, I argued that the mirror stage is not the site of anti-social specular misrecognition but as a psycho-social structure marked by a dynamic exchange between the specular and the linguistic. But what is the shape and form of “language” here? Is it the “non-sense” of Symbolic Otherness that analysis or reading “should” yield? Dolto’s (and Lacan’s later) emphasis on the impact of the caregiver’s language on the child at the mirror would suggest otherwise. It is language (or the signifier) that typically conveys the “sense” of “Yes, baby, that’s you!” when the child appeals to the caregiver. We may even say that what is producing this sense of endorsement is essentially the Imaginary dimension of language, since the signifier comes in the form of the mother’s egoic utterance. However, neither Dolto nor Lacan seems to doubt that language always endorses the ego’s (mis)recognition of its ideal image. In other words, there is no disagreement between what the image represents and what the Imaginary signifier conveys to the child.

In this chapter, I read Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*¹³⁵ alongside Goux’s Marxist-reconceptualization of the psychoanalytic Imaginary to offer a different scenario. I show how, in Fanon’s colonial Imaginary, narcissistic mirroring produces a manifest racialized conflict between self-image and the imaginized signifier that, in this case, also represents linguistic capital. Thus, I argue that Fanon’s text anticipates Lacan’s undertheorized notion of “Symbolic lesions in the Imaginary” and that the narcissistic Imaginary for the colonized is not even “fictionally” marked by a generalizable “plenitude” or an illusion of identity. Instead, the colonial Imaginary is disrupted *ab initio* by racialized bodily and linguistic alienation under colonial capitalism. Finally, acknowledging fundamental differences between the two thinkers, I show how Fanon unknowingly echoes and rethinks Dolto’s theory of linguistic narcissism in the colonial context. Narcissism, in *Black Skin White Masks*, is not “one” individualizable moment

¹³⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

but a structure that determines the colonized ethnic subject's affective and intellectual responses, as soon as her "traits" begin to be "read" by the agents of the colonial Symbolic order.

Critical reception of the psychoanalytic strand in the work of Frantz Fanon has been mixed. For some, including, for instance, a critic like Homi Bhabha, Fanon's continual references to the overwhelming incursions of the "Other" provides the perfect occasion for a rapprochement between diasporic-post-structuralist notion of "hybridity" and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In *The Location of Culture*,¹³⁶ Bhabha defines Lacan's (Symbolic) Other as "the necessary negation of a primordial identity...that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the cultural to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, and historic reality."¹³⁷ In the same discussion, a few pages earlier, Bhabha grafts (Lacan's notion of) Symbolic Otherness onto Fanon's experience under the colonial gaze:

The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification, as we have inferred...is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes. For Fanon, like Lacan, the primary moments of such a repetition of the self lie in the desire of the look and the limits of language.¹³⁸

For Bhabha, Fanon's experiences of demand, desire, and language in colonial Antilles verifies or perhaps exemplifies what psychoanalysis and post-structuralism have already proved beyond doubt— "identity" is a dream that "language" continually shatters. The Other is not a subject with an identity but rather a raceless and colorless "place" where both the colonizer and the colonized undergo a "split" and can potentially switch places. Paradoxically, even as Bhabha suggests that Fanon's and Lacan's notions of "splitting" are comparable, he accuses Fanon of not being "Lacanian" enough: "The place of the Other must not be imaged, as Fanon sometimes suggests as a fixed phenomenological point opposed to the self, that represents a culturally alien

¹³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹³⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 64.

consciousness.”¹³⁹ In his attempt to privilege a literary formalism that shows how misled identity politics is, Bhabha eschews any discussion of this “phenomenological” Fanon’s views on language as well as the latter’s explicit references to Lacan. Little attention is paid to Fanon’s recursive turn to the psycho-linguistic processes by which racial identity is simultaneously manufactured, assaulted, and sustained by language under colonial capitalism. In other words, what Bhabha’s eloquent analysis lacks is a psychoanalytic reading of the racialized subject’s position in the Symbolic order and, indeed, Fanon’s necessarily Imaginary perception of that position.

If Bhabha finds his solution in the “doubling” and “splitting” of the subject in the Symbolic, critics like David Macey and Frank Wilderson III stand at the opposite pole and emphasize the uneasy relationship that Fanon, as a practicing psychiatrist, had with psychoanalysis as a theory. In contrast with Bhabha, they argue that Fanon’s theory of “absolute” violence and the “wound” of colonialism cannot be theorized within the confines of the Lacanian Symbolic. For instance, in his essay “The Recall of the Real,” Macey accuses Fanon of an “eclecticism” that reveals that he was “anxious to assimilate the modernism of the immediate postwar period.”¹⁴⁰ Macey contends that although Fanon occasionally and “inaccurately” turned to psychoanalysis, it was really phenomenology and psychiatry that suited his anti-colonial politics. Although Macey notes Fanon’s interest in language and specifically the importance of the Martinican linguistic context, he sees only it in phenomenological terms: “speaking means existing for the other in an absolute sense, and the study of ‘The Black man and language’ will help to reveal ‘the *for-others* dimension of the man of color’.”¹⁴¹ Macey’s historical analysis of Fanon’s text thus firmly stands against the Kantian universalism of Freud and Lacan.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴⁰ David Macey, “The Recall of the Real: Frantz Fanon and Psychoanalysis,” *Constellation* 6 (March 1999): 97.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

Similarly, in his book *Red, Black and White*, Frank B. Wilderson argues for a theory of Black political ontology that refuses to pander to a Humanism which “has as its foundation [psychoanalytic] alienation and [Marxist] exploitation as a grammar of suffering, when what is needed (for the Black, who is always already a Slave) is an ensemble of ontological questions that has its foundation accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering.”¹⁴² The ontology of the (White) Human, in Wilderson’s argument, is founded on the exclusion of the concept of “gratuitous” violence that is *outside language* and that structures the (non)ontology of the exchangeable and commoditized Slave. Thus, the language of relationality, psychic, and social alienation deployed by both Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the author contends, forecloses an exploration of the peculiar non-relational consciousness of the Black/Slave. In contrast with the (white) Human, who can forge relations with other Humans and can wield discursive weapons in the Symbolic order, “the Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity. As an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated object, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is his or her cultural ‘production’.”¹⁴³

Arguing that (Lacan’s theory of) Symbolic alienation is silent in the face of this violence of accumulation and exchangeability, Wilderson proposes that we turn away from theories of language and towards the ‘sentient’ Black body produced by absolute violence:

...we need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror. The explanatory power of Humanist discourse is bankrupt in the face of the Black. It is inadequate and inessential to, as well as parasitic on, the ensemble of questions which the dead but sentient thing, the Black, struggles to articulate in a world of living subjects.¹⁴⁴

It is in the context of this anti-humanist and new “language” of the violence of the Slave that

Wilderson turns to the work of Frantz Fanon and his account of the subjectivity of the colonized:

¹⁴² Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, Black, and White: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 55.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

“Whereas Lacan was aware of how language ‘precedes and exceeds us’ (Silverman 2000: 157), he did not have Fanon’s awareness of how violence also precedes and exceeds Blacks.”¹⁴⁵ For Wilderson, Fanon’s theorization of (absolute) violence is antithetical to and incommensurable with the curative effects of the Symbolic order (which he equates with Lacan’s notion of “full speech”). Violence, in Fanon, is not a product of the Symbolic because it translates into mute Black suffering that is bodily and “is on the level of the Real.”¹⁴⁶

In Wilderson’s analysis, then, Fanon’s theory of (Real) violence is outside the Symbolic and is more concerned with the Black-body-as-property than with an “analytic encounter” with language which is, in fact, *founded* on Black flesh. What (white) Humanism calls “language,” “socius,” and “subjectivity” are all maintained through the “nether region” of the always-already desubjectified body and “bare life” of the Slave.¹⁴⁷ For Wilderson, the Imaginary narcissism of Lacan’s presumably white analysand (whose perception of the Symbolic order can be “dis-imaginarized”¹⁴⁸ through the talking cure in analysis) does not apply to the Black subject, who is desubjectified through Real and bodily violence. As Wilderson writes:

What I am asking is: how are we to trust a Lacanian assessment of Black narcissism? Half of this contradiction would be solved if we simply re-named full speech “White speech” (or Human speech) and attached to the analyst’s shingle *Blacks need not apply*. But coupled with this gesture of full-disclosure regarding full-speech, we would have to acknowledge that...even after the labor through which the analysand has rediscovered his/her fundamental alienation, there will be a nigger in the woodpile (original emphasis).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴⁸ This is a term that Jacques Alain-Miller uses to indicate that the analysand’s Imaginary aggression has to be dealt with and surmounted in analysis so that, through speech, he can move more towards the mobility of desire in the Symbolic. In contrast with Wilderson, I am going to suggest that “disalienation” in Fanon is, to begin with, a form of “dis-imaginarization” that includes a more complex view of Symbolic/linguistic involvement. See Jacques Alain-Miller, “The *Sinthome*, a Mixture of Symptom and Fantasy,” *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 5 (2001): 27.

¹⁴⁹ Wilderson, 85.

Following the logic of Wilderson's argument, the narcissism of Fanon's "Black" has nothing to do with language or speech. It is lived entirely through the vulnerability of the captive Black body.

Wilderson offers an important critique of a Symbolic "cure" that expresses little or no concern about structural racism and racist violence. His staging of the disparity between the Lacanian analysand and the dispossessed black subject is also a powerful invective against Symbolic reading practices that I outlined in my introduction. However, here are my reservations about his theorization of a structure of "Black" political ontology: if the concept of political ontology is useful only because of a constitutive tension between the historico-political and the timeless-philosophical,¹⁵⁰ it is a "timeless" Slave/Black ontology that gains the upper hand in Wilderson's analysis of Fanon. It is unclear who or what the "Slave" is as "an archaic persistence," subtending Whiteness as well as other non-Black and non-White racial categories. The referents of "Black," "Slaves," and "Black folks" seem to be interchangeable, transhistorical, and global constants that exist as an "outside" that makes it "possible for White and [other] non-White (i.e. Asians and Latinos) positions to exist."¹⁵¹ As a supplement that structures "all other" races, "Slave" or "Black," for Wilderson, is therefore not a shifting position of subalternity but reserved as an inheritance of "Black folk" whose "being," irrespective of their place in history and geography, is constituted outside Symbolic expression and by gratuitous "violence in the ontological first instance."¹⁵² My disagreement with Wilderson thus stems from his abstract formulation of the non-relational, bodily, sentient narcissism of the "Black" that is purportedly excluded from the Symbolic, which in turn is defined solely in terms of the "full speech" of Lacan's analysands. Wilderson's criticism of the alleged "freedom" to be found through a

¹⁵⁰ Carsten Strathausen, "Introduction: Thinking Outside In," *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁵¹ Wilderson., 65.

¹⁵² Ibid., 67.

movement from Imaginary rivalry to Symbolic interpretation/analysis is legitimate and has also been leveled at Lacanian criticism by Marxist, post-colonial, and diasporic critics.¹⁵³ However, as I have tried to indicate in chapter one through the work of Dolto and later Lacan, the body, psyche, and language need not be seen as separate and historyless entities in psychoanalysis.

More specifically, in this chapter, I want to argue against both Wilderson's and Macey's¹⁵⁴ tendencies of reading "absolute violence" in Fanon as being completely severed from linguistic and cultural interpellation. At the same time, I want to protest Bhabha's assertion that the logic of linguistic supplementarity in Fanon, in its "repetition and doubling," produces a (psychoanalytic) "historylessness."¹⁵⁵ Instead, I want to suggest that, Fanon's text echoes and extends Dolto's emphasis on language (and predates later Lacan) through its concerns about the possible effects of historically and materially constituted Symbolic violence on the narcissistic Imaginary and the cultural unconscious. In my argument, all three critics—Bhabha, Macey, and Wilderson—fail to register how *Black Skin White Masks* points to the makings of an Imaginary that is somato-linguistic in nature and an effect of the colonial Symbolic. In other words, rather than either banishing psychoanalysis from Fanon or making Fanon into a "black Lacan,"¹⁵⁶ I am interested in reading Fanon as an important figure within and beyond this theoretical terrain whose work compels us to rethink both uncritical (Bhabha) and vilifying approaches (Wilderson) to psychoanalysis. To that end, I will examine Fanon's turn to the mirror stage and the role that the French language plays in the Imaginary of the sentient (but historically moored) body of the colonized.

¹⁵³ I have mentioned the critiques of Spivak, and Eng in my introduction.

¹⁵⁴ Although Macey and Wilderson share common ground—both see psychoanalysis as an unhelpful framework to read Fanon—the latter does not share the former's attention to Fanon's political and cultural context.

¹⁵⁵ Bhabha, 82.

¹⁵⁶ Kobena Mercer, "Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Frantz Fanon's Sexual Politics," in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Institute of International Visual Arts, 1996), 124.

Written in France where Fanon encountered blatant forms of racial discrimination while training to be a psychiatrist, *Black Skin White Masks* attempts to analyze the colonial Imaginary, by examining how “race” in the Antilles becomes the determining factor for the development of individual as well as collective identity. If Lacan’s 1938 encyclopedia entry begins with an emphasis on the (patriarchal) family as the site of all complexes, Fanon critiques the premise of psychoanalytic theory by arguing that the family is not where conflict begins in the colony: “...it would be relatively easy for me to show that in the French Antilles 97 per cent of the families cannot produce one Oedipal neurosis.”¹⁵⁷ Unable to make a distinction between racialized self-awareness and racism in the context of the colonial Antilles, Fanon notes that it is contact with dominant ideology that creates neuroses: “A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world.”¹⁵⁸ The irony here should not go unnoticed—what or who is the “normal” Negro? Under what utopian conditions can the colonized avoid the “slightest contact” with the colonizing culture and “return” to this so-called pre-colonial moment of purity and normality? Given Fanon’s opening emphasis that his conclusions “are valid only for the [colonial] Antilles”¹⁵⁹ and often specifically Martinique,¹⁶⁰ what can this “normal” mean other than an impossibility, something that is, paradoxically, the very *opposite* of the racist “norm” of colonial capitalism?

Fanon therefore draws our attention to a counterintuitive intimacy between the French

¹⁵⁷ Fanon, 152. Lacan himself would not disagree with the tenor of Fanon’s argument. As he later admits in “The Topic of the Imaginary”: “When we study a mythology, for example one that might perhaps appear with respect to a Sudanese population, we discover that the Oedipus complex is just rather a thin joke. It is a very tiny detail within an immense myth. The myth allows the cataloguing of a set of relations between subjects of a wealth and complexity besides which the Oedipus complex seems to be so abridged an edition that in the end it cannot always be used.” See Lacan, *Ecrits*, 86.

¹⁵⁸ Fanon, 143.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Unlike other French colonies (such as West Africa or Algeria), Martinique has no precolonial history to which it can return. French plantation owners exterminated the Caribs in the 17th century and populated the island first with slaves and then with indentured laborers. For a discussion of the history of Martinique, see David Macey, “Adieu fouldard. Adieu madras...,” in *Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 20-21.

“norm” and the “abnormal” affects it generates in the colonized: “The black man is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.”¹⁶¹ Later, Fanon continues: « Affect is exacerbated in the Negro, he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity.”¹⁶² For Fanon, the origins of these “normally abnormal” and violent affects are not primarily bodily or biological as they seem to be in Lacan’s early theory of affective identification influenced by the maternal imago. Neither does this violence seem to be “gratuitous” in the way that Wilderson contends. Instead, echoing Dolto and anticipating later Lacan, Fanon emphasizes the linguistic and social generation of aberrant affect. For Fanon, Imaginary affect cannot be separated from the language of colonial capitalism. The narcissistic “insularity” that Fanon mentions, we shall see, is an “affection” created by the ideational representatives of racial and cultural capital through the subject’s relationship with the French language and Symbolic system. In other words, the usual or “healthy” linguistic-affective image that Dolto speaks of would be, in Fanon’s view, always-already abnormal or “wounded” for subjects at the receiving end of colonial exploitation. In this reading, the varying degrees of wounded affects of the colonized are an integral part of the “reason” of the colonial apparatus.

An important difference between Lacan and Fanon should be noted in their attitude to language of and as the unconscious. Even as (in theory) Lacan mentions the burden of Symbolic “lesions” in the Imaginary, Lacanian practice, as I noted in the introduction, entails urging the patient to bypass Imaginary otherness and access the potential mobility of desire through a supposedly unfettered Symbolic Otherness. It would be fair to say that Lacan is not immediately or directly interested in social change but in his patient’s capacity to fathom the “truth” of desire. In contrast, *Black Skin White Masks* prompts us to pause on and theorize the nature of these Symbolic wounds that endure in the narcissistic Imaginary and produce what Fanon calls the

¹⁶¹ Fanon, 8.

¹⁶² Ibid., 50.

“collective unconscious.”¹⁶³ A theoretical understanding of how language is imaginized, “affected,” and rendered narcissistic in the colony would therefore be a necessary step toward the psychic disalienation and the social overhaul that Fanon desires.

It is in the context of describing the effects of these socially inflicted psychic wounds that Fanon prompts us to see “narcissism” as a multivalent pivot point. On the one hand, by “narcissism,” Fanon *does* mean Western capitalism’s self-absorption that produces “Man” at the expense of other non-Western “primitives.” Here, Fanon echoes the anti-humanist critique of sovereign man. As he writes: “The only possibility of regaining one’s balance is to face the whole problem...to make man admit that he is absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he rules in order to imagine that he is different from other ‘animals’.”¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, Fanon also alerts us to a kind of racialized narcissism that is a fallout of the first and that Fanon wants to understand so as to move beyond its ideological confines. In this vein, then, he writes: “I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism.”¹⁶⁵ This is Fanon’s reflection on his own affectively charged self-assertion, a “symptom” of racial marginalization and repression that Rey Chow has called “ethnic narcissism”¹⁶⁶ whose linguistic and literary implications I explore in chapter three. Indeed, one could argue that *Black Skin White Masks* is this very self-contradictory exercise, “grasping” black narcissism on the one hand and pointing to its limits on the other.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Fanon borrows the notion of the “collective unconscious” from the psychiatrist Carl Gustave Jung, but insists that it is a cultural and historical construction and not an “eternal” archetype. See Fanon, 188.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁶ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 128-152.

¹⁶⁷ Macey and others have correctly pointed that Fanon’s formulation of “black” is an abstraction of a more variegated and complex racial system in the Antilles and France. Not only were “blacks” seen to be different from the “reds” (a light-skinned black man) and “browns” (Indians) in the islands, these appellations also changed according to geographic location as the man of color moved from the colony to the metropole. However, Fanon’s abstraction in *Black Skin White Masks* should not be understood as a

However, it is equally necessary to examine what the text's explicit turn to Lacan's scene of Imaginary narcissism reveals for psychoanalytic cultural criticism in hindsight, and to recognize how the universal mirror stage takes a specific form for Fanon. As the bibliographic information in Fanon's footnote reveals, *Black Skin White Masks* draws on Lacan's theory of the mirror stage not from the 1949 essay, but from Lacan's 1938 entry in Wallon's encyclopedia.¹⁶⁸ Describing white "Negrophobia" at the "instinctual, biological level," Fanon writes in a long footnote:

It would indeed be interesting, on the basis of Lacan's theory of the *mirror period*, to investigate the extent to which the *imago* of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro. When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man, as we have shown, historical and economic realities come into the picture.¹⁶⁹

The "imago of his fellow" (or his semblable), we will recall, with reference to Lacan in 1949, is a representation of similarity between the child and his Imaginary other that the child develops *after* he has identified with his own specular image. Transitivity, aggression, and jealousy at this stage follow from (secondary) identifications with the other, and hearken back to the moment of primary identification. But as I have argued in the previous chapter, in the 1938 text, this

strategy to privilege a "universal" black ontology over other subjugated non-white races: "My black is not the wrapping of specific values" (227). "Black," as several scholars like Jim House and Max Silverman note, enables Fanon to analyze intra-Black diversity in the Antilles, be aware of what separates him from the working class, and yet argue for a certain commonality of experience of the economically and culturally oppressed. Although Fanon's gender and sexual politics could not be further from that of Spivak, I would argue there is a certain similarity between the self-contradictory ethico-political shuttles of Fanon's "Black" and Spivak's "Narcissus." Both imply "structures of reading" with variables and are marked by an oscillation between self-knowledge and self-dissolution. See Jim House, "Colonial Racisms in the 'Métropole': Reading *Peaux Noires Masques Blancs* in Context," 46-73, and Max Silverman, "Introduction," in *Frantz Fanon's Black Skin White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 1-11.

¹⁶⁸ I do not mean to suggest that Fanon was not aware of the 1949 essay. Indeed, as Diana Fuss points out, the expression "*Umwelt* of Martinique," appearing early on in *Black Skin White Masks*, could easily be an allusion to the 1949 mirror in Lacan that establishes the relation "between the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*." However, it is all the more interesting that Fanon *chooses* to cite from the 1938 essay when the time comes to quote Lacan on the mirror stage—a point that Fuss overlooks. See Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *diacritics* 24 (Summer-Autumn, 1994): 23.

¹⁶⁹ Fanon, 161.

distinction between primary and secondary identification is blurred by Lacan's incorporation of the mirror stage within a larger intrusion complex. Fanon's references to the "imago of his fellow" and to the intruding black man repeat this blurring. What Fanon also borrows from Lacan is the notion of the apparent smoothness with which the child assumes his mirror image (when there is apparently no otherness) and the concomitant aggression he feels when "another" other appears as a "third object." For Fanon, however, the identity of the ego is not grounded in specularity alone, but inextricably tied to an ideological awareness of the "black body" marked by difference, phenotypically,¹⁷⁰ linguistically, and culturally.

Indeed, the reference to Lacan appears in the context of Fanon's discussion of the "closing of the postural schema of the white man" in reaction to the intrusive entry of the black body.¹⁷¹ Now, it is true that what Lacan stresses is the difference between the fragmented body (the-body-in -pieces) and the cohesion and unity of the image it appropriates. For Lacan, the boundary of the cohesive body or its differentiation from its environment is the necessary condition of its possibility. However, what remains implicit (and what Fanon picks up on) is that Lacan's child needs a visual image that *necessarily* possesses "the human form," a specificity that allows the child to distinguish it from other species. The assumption of the image therefore is also an act of differentiation and exclusion based on a visible similarity between the body and the image. It is an act of "seeing" or at least sensing the visible difference between what one wishes to accept and think of as one's "own," and as "human;" and what one wishes to reject as *not* human and *not* one's own.

If Lacan (following empirical evidence from experimental psychology) confines this

¹⁷⁰ Following the logic of Fanon's argument, this awareness would be fostered because the black subject (unlike Lacan's hypothetical child) cannot "jubilantly" assume the (dominant white) image: the image reminds the black subject of his *visible* alterity and returns his ego to his body. In her analysis of the mirror stage, Silverman also notes how specular identification in Lacan relies entirely on the insistence of the image as the "self-same" body. See Silverman, 24.

¹⁷¹ Borrowing Wallon's notion of proprioceptivity, Silverman also argues for a body that is "sensationally" and posturally marked by gender, race, and sexual preference. See Silverman, 16.

difference and specificity to the *general shape* of the human body recognized by the child in the metropolis, Fanon sees this implicitly anthropocentric (and hence ideological) mark of “chosenness” as taking more virulent forms in the colony and cross-racial encounters. Here the image that one “inevitably” finds is not just human, but takes on the visible attributes of a *particular kind* of body—specifically, a body that is co-constituted by certain phenotypes (skin, hair, eye color, and bone structure) culturally and ideologically coded as “white.” In Lacan’s 1949 essay, the encounter with the specular image is “inevitable,” marking the “threshold,” or the contours of privileged gestalts of a “visible world” with whom alone “identification” can happen. In retrospect, Fanon’s footnote anticipates and questions this inevitability in Lacan, and he extends the mirror encounter to the field of cultural and historical construction of the black body in opposition to the normative white body.¹⁷² Here the mirror image is not inevitably found—it is an image that the colonized, paradoxically, must aspire to be and can never fully be.

Fanon’s always-already intersubjective account of narcissism and narcissistic aggression therefore prompt a rethinking of the standard Lacanian narrative of identity and difference. If aggression toward the Imaginary other in Lacan is a result of identification with the other, it is because there is no possibility of a true “different” other at this stage: the other is viewed as a semblable, as an “equal.” In contrast, Fanon’s medical experiences with his patients compel him to treat racism as a form of Imaginary aggression where no such resemblance or feeling of equality is perceived between the colonizer and the colonized. Thus, if Lacan turns to the hysteric who dreams of the dismembered body, Fanon turns to cases where the (presumably white) patient dreams of the chastised and excluded black body image intruding “in the guise of a satyr or a

¹⁷² Françoise Vergès makes a similar point in her reading of Fanon’s turn to the mirror stage. She shows how Fanon borrows this logic of opposition from Sartre’s famous affirmation “It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew...” in his *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Vergès, however, does not examine the role of language in the mirror stage scenarios that Fanon presents in *Black Skin White Masks* beyond the footnote. See Françoise Vergès “Creole Skin, Black Mask: Fanon and Disavowal,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997): 583-587.

murderer.”¹⁷³ Fanon’s black Other is therefore a special type of intrusive Imaginary *enfant terrible* whose “body image” does not conform to the [whiteness] of the specular image. Given this difference between Lacan and Fanon, Homi Bhabha’s easy conflation of Lacan’s Symbolic Other with Fanon’s Other is therefore problematic.¹⁷⁴ A more persuasive argument would be that by the “the Other” or “the other” (used interchangeably in the text) Fanon really means the Imaginary other. In fact, the texts to which Fanon refers (from 1938 and possibly 1949) had not fleshed out the separate register and the workings of Symbolic Otherness, and further, Lacan’s theory of “full speech” does not appear until 1952. Additionally, Lacan is not the only thinker that Fanon is in dialogue with in. Writing in 1951, Fanon is not only borrowing from the “intruding” other in Lacan’s 1938 text, but also from Jean Paul Sartre’s existential notion of the Other as the awareness of an intervening consciousness. According to Sartre, it is not the conscious subject who objectifies the Other. Rather, it is the Other who objectifies the subject through its “look” and confirms its existence:

...if the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject.¹⁷⁵

For Sartre, it is the Other’s “look” on the subject’s body and flesh that produces his awareness of himself and of the Other as a (rival) consciousness. This too, however, is not Fanon’s view. For Fanon, consciousness itself is divided along the lines of race, and the (white) subject appears to be similarly affected by the “look” or mere presence of the (black) Other.¹⁷⁶ This black

¹⁷³ Fanon, 161.

¹⁷⁴ Diana Fuss also “Lacanises” Fanon’s Other without a historical justification in her otherwise landmark analysis of the (ideological) Other in *Black Skin White Masks*. See Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” *diacritics* 24 (Summer-Autumn, 1994): 21.

¹⁷⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 314-315.

¹⁷⁶ Ranjana Khanna also alerts us to the presence of Sartre in Fanon and early Lacan. She, however, does

body/image is considered to be “inappropriate” for the purposes of identification, and it is ignored just as the *actual* body is by the child in Lacan, on the grounds of its “motor uncoordination.”

Simply put, in Fanon’s reformulation, the mirror stage (as a “structure”) is a fundamentally different experience for white subjects and those of color. The white colonizer sees himself not just in a concrete mirror, but also in the social speculum and consequently sees the colonized black subject as the absolute other with whom he cannot possibly identify. Conversely, the colonized black subject is confronted with the otherness of the image-as-norm when he looks into a “white” mirror. However, unlike the white subject who refuses to identify with the other, the subject of color, in Fanon’s view, is more conflicted and ambivalent about making that choice. For the man of color, “historical and economic realities” intervene to constitute him as a split subject. As he looks into a mirror that is not his own, he does not see himself but the dominant representation of his otherness. Simultaneously, he desires to assume the (white) image-as-norm.

Additionally, for the colonized subject in the Antilles, this alienation is of a different kind. The Antillean, Fanon argues, distances himself from blackness to the extent that he thinks of himself as a white man:

It may perhaps be objected that if the white man is subject to the elaboration of the imago of his peer, an analogous phenomenon should occur in the Antillean, visual perception being the sketch for such an elaboration. But to say this is to forget that *in the Antilles perception always occurs on the level of the imaginary*. It is in white terms that one perceives one’s fellows....Let me point out once more that every Antillean expects all the others to perceive him in terms of the essence of the white man (my emphasis).¹⁷⁷

The difference between the Antillean and blacks elsewhere is therefore crucial for Fanon. Unlike the black subject elsewhere who is aware of his difference from the image, the Antillean is a

not see the similarities between Fanon and later Lacan in their approach to the Imaginary. See Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 171, 224.

¹⁷⁷ Fanon, 163.

special case because he is alienated from his own blackness.¹⁷⁸ Again, Fanon's footnote appears to be developing a version of the mirror stage that Lacan did not really elaborate on in 1938. Just as the ego (in Lacan in 1949) takes on the otherness of the image as its own, so too the Antillean ego in Fanon tries to approximate the (ideal) whiteness of its alter ego and ignores its phenotypic difference from the colonizers. For Fanon, the Antillean's "mirror hallucination"¹⁷⁹ thus testifies to his inability to identify with or psychically inhabit his own blackness:

I contend that for the Antillean the mirror hallucination is always neutral. When Antilleans tell me that they have experienced it, I always ask the same question: "What color were you?" Invariably they reply: "I had no color." It is not I as a Negro who acts, thinks and is praised to the skies.¹⁸⁰

Although the Antillean is alienated from his blackness, in his moment of hallucination, he sees himself as neither fully black nor fully white, but trapped in a nether zone of "neutrality." That is to say, this neutral, self-eroding *imago* reminds the Antillean of whiteness as the unattainable norm as well as of the corporeal blackness that his ego separates itself from and begins to see as other.

Black Skin White Masks thus laments the estrangement of the egos of Antillean children who represent themselves with "rosy cheeks" in school essays. Fanon himself, as a Martinican, admits to being fascinated by the "violent" otherness and "red scarfs and belts" of Senegalese soldiers passing through the city when he was a teenager. He also confesses to being curious about the "remarkable" blackness of a philosophy teacher on the island in a school where he was

¹⁷⁸ For a discussion of the enduring perception that Martinique "both *is* and *is not* French" as a "*département*" of France, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity in Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press), 396-397.

¹⁷⁹ Fanon does not clarify what he means by a "mirror hallucination." He seems to imply a hallucinatory moment where the subject identifies with the threatening racial other. The white subject, in his "mirror hallucination" therefore sees the black subject he has entirely banished from his ego. In that sense, the "mirror hallucination" seems to be analogous to Lacan's description of the appearance of the fragmented *imago*. Again, the Antillean is a special case because his mirror hallucination is "neutral," somewhere in between.

¹⁸⁰ Fanon, 162.

a Baccalaureate candidate.¹⁸¹ “Black,” “white,” “red,” “neutral”—these are therefore not merely phenotypes and/or “freely” imagined psychic states but come with inescapable ideological baggage and structural constraints that precede the subject. The color(s) that the subject “is” as well as the color(s) that he desires and shuns are effects of his peculiar position(s) in the colonial Symbolic.¹⁸²

I have argued that Bhabha does not really have a textual and historical basis to equate Fanon’s visually prominent “Other” with Lacan’s later notion of Symbolic Otherness. I will finally suggest that Fanon does come close to theorizing the Symbolic Other, but in places and forms that do not seem to interest Bhabha. To recapitulate what I have argued in the previous chapter: There is, in Lacan’s later formulation, both an attempt to distinguish between and relate Imaginary otherness (the other as the *semblable*, the double, or the image itself) to Symbolic Otherness as the realm of the signifier. The image as the ideal-ego forms the basis of primary identification and the constitution of the ego. However, the Symbolic Other (through the moment of “witnessing” and the “gesture”) supplies the signifier to form the ego-ideal: the ego begins to see itself as language sees it, as the “gaze” of language¹⁸³ begins to manipulate and control the

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 162-164.

¹⁸² Here I differ with Penelope Ingram’s analysis of the “colorlessness” of the Antillean. Ingram makes the basic mistake of separating the (“liberating”) Imaginary from the (“oppressive”) Symbolic and argues that the experience of neutrality that Fanon describes represents a bodily signifying capacity outside representation and dominant ideology. Penelope Ingram, *The Signifying Body: Toward an Ethics of Sexual and Racial Difference* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 23-28.

¹⁸³ Here I am going to risk digression in the context of the “gaze,” a concept that has been central to debates on the use of psychoanalysis in film theory. Several scholars like Jacqueline Rose and Joan Copjec have pointed out that the “gaze” in Lacan does not belong to the ego, and that the gaze is, in fact, “behind” the image perceived by the ego. But few have ventured an analysis of the relationship between language-as-ideology and the gaze as its psychic effect. It will be useful to recall here the famous instance of the “gaze” of the sardine can which (as Lacan recounts) he experienced when was out on a boat with some fishermen in his early twenties. As Copjec points out, the gaze of the sardine can (as the Other) does not bolster Lacan’s Imaginary ego but provokes anxiety and makes it unstable. However, what Copjec does not mention is that the gaze, as it were, also “comes into being” through the *speech of the fisherman* Petit-Jean who points out the “indifference” of the can towards Lacan in the first place. As Lacan’s narration of this event in his discussion of the gaze makes amply clear, the destabilization effected by the gaze is preceded by his uncertain awareness of his class position, his difference from the fishermen, and last but not least, the discomfort experienced by him when *Petit-Jean* singles him out: “*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!*” Here, I will venture to ask: are Petit-Jean’s dialect, gesture, posture, and

ego's perception of itself.

Let us now turn to Fanon's reflections on the linguistic gaze. It is crucial to remember that *Black Skin White Masks* opens with Fanon impressing upon his readers the gravity of linguistic colonialism:

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of the other. For it is implicit that to speak is *to exist absolutely for the other*....To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to *assume a culture*, to support the weight of a civilization....Every colonized people...finds itself *face to face with the language* of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (emphases mine).¹⁸⁴

Like Dolto, Fanon sees language as the cornerstone of a "fundamental" narcissism that, paradoxically, makes the subject "exist absolutely for the other." Echoing Dolto more than Lacan at this point, Fanon invites us to think through a mirroring situation where the subject is "face to face" with language and its underlying ideology while undertaking a particular form of labor to "assume" and embody the "morphology" of that language privileged by the social.

Fanon's critics also seem to have not noticed the moment where Dolto and Fanon speak "together" in *Black Skin White Masks*.¹⁸⁵ Like Dolto, Fanon argues for the need to theorize a body

intonation not responsible for the guilt and anxiety it provokes in Lacan? Is the gaze not an effect of the linguistic and bodily discomfiture and ideological hostility projected onto the can and that is otherwise masked by this instance of "friendship" between Lacan and the fishermen? See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981) 95-96. See Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁸⁴ Fanon, 17-18.

¹⁸⁵ Macey narrates an intriguing incident from Dolto's letters, to show how both Dolto (in France) and Fanon (in Martinique) had had similar reactions to a Senegalese soldier as children. Macey's focus, however, is only on Dolto's (arguably problematic) fascination with the black soldier and not on her later clinical-theoretical contribution to psychoanalysis. In the same essay, Macey suggestively speaks of the possibility of reading a "wounded narcissism or symbolic castration" in Fanon, "Had Fanon had been a psychoanalyst" (36). But he stays with the phenomenological *Erlebnis* and does not elaborate on this connection between narcissism and the Symbolic either in Dolto or in Fanon's work. This is a missed opportunity that I take advantage of in this chapter. See David Macey, "Fanon, Phenomenology, Race," in

image that is not reducible to the corporeal schema. Speaking of the limited applicability of the notion of the corporeal schema in anti-colonial critique, Fanon writes:

Below a corporeal schema, I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by “residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,”¹ but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.¹⁸⁶

Like Dolto, Fanon is interested in a linguistic-historical impression that lies “under” the conscious body schema. The fact that Fanon also calls this underlying impression the “epidermal” schema should not make us conclude that it is a given or that is fostered merely through the hypervisibility of the non-white body. The “crumbling” of Fanon’s corporeal schema and his awareness of the deeper body schema are both catalyzed by linguistic assaults, several of which come from children who are not conscious of their racism: “Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!”¹⁸⁷ Like Dolto, Fanon is not entirely satisfied with biological theories of touch, sensation, and vision while attempting to theorize the relationship between the psyche and the soma. And remarkably enough, the very writer that Fanon disagrees with while quoting the theory of “residual sensations and perceptions” is none other than Jean Lhermitte¹⁸⁸—the neurologist and psychiatrist from whom Dolto also differed in her approach to the body image. Thus, I would argue that Fanon’s deceptively simple “historico-racial schema,” woven out of “anecdotes and stories” which de/construct the narcissism of the Antillean, is the anti-colonial cousin of Dolto’s linguistic image. Both concepts exceed the conscious and primarily biological corporeal schema

Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity, ed. Peter Osborne and Stella Sandford (London and New York: 2002), 29-39.

¹⁸⁶ Fanon, 111.

¹⁸⁷ See Fanon, 112. In her reading of Fanon’s notion of “epidermalization,” Mary Ann Doane writes: “The black *is* the body, *is* the biological.” However, I am suggesting that we should not ignore the linguistic foundations of the overvisibility of “black” as the “body.” After all, the crumbling of the corporeal schema and Fanon’s consciousness of his epidermal schema are both effects of speech like that of the little girl. See Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 215-227.

¹⁸⁸ Fanon’s footnote “¹” cites Lhermitte’s monograph *L’Image de notre corps*.

to incorporate ideology and history into the Imaginary and the cultural unconscious of the subject.

Fanon's schema and his desire to "grasp" his own narcissism, however, move far beyond Dolto's clinical scope (recall Bernadette's "conversation with herself") as well as the standard Lacanian "talking cure" through his interest in the general somato-linguistic structure of the Imaginary in the Antilles.¹⁸⁹ As Fanon points out, the dominance of the French language and its establishment as linguistic capital in the colonial Imaginary are also accompanied by the repression of every "dialect" that deviates from the "image" of "white" French: "The Negro arriving in France will react against the myth of the R-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it, and he will go to war against it....he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours—desperately determined to learn *diction*." ¹⁹⁰ The effort to assume and embody the "image" of French "diction" is a concrete moment where the Imaginary labors of the French-educated colonized and the Symbolic "lesion" of linguistic capital mutually reinforce each other within the context of the colony-as-market.¹⁹¹

It is equally if not more interesting to read this moment in Fanon alongside Goux's reading of the mirror stage as a structure that mirrors Marx's theory of commodity formation. Goux writes, combining Marx and Lacan:

We know [that] this identification with the image of one's double, [is] the foundation of the formation of the ego. We know that [quoting Lacan] "the subject identifies from its own point of view with the image of the other;" and also that "it is in the other that the subject identifies and experiences himself first." Likewise, just as [quoting Marx] "no commodity can attain its exchange value from its use value" but that it has to "necessarily take as equivalent another commodity whose use value serves it in the form of [exchange] value," similarly, the entire and form and formation of the ego can only pass "through an erotic relation where the individual (human subject) fixates on an image

¹⁸⁹ Fuss discusses Fanon's reservations about a "talking cure" that does not take that political context and cultural inflection into account. See Fuss, 36-37.

¹⁹⁰ Fanon, 21.

¹⁹¹ "Linguistic capital" is an expression that Pierre Bourdieu coins much later in the 1990s. But Fanon suggests something very similar in his description of "French French" as constituted by a certain amount of "competence" defined through sanction and censorship in the Antilles. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power: The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges*, translated by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

which alienates him.” The self does not have an existence, as such, outside this specular relation of identification (my translation).¹⁹²

Like Lacan, Goux suggests that the identification is a relatively smooth process insofar as the ego can see itself, however illusorily, in terms of its ideal image. The “erotic” relation between the ego and the image results in an alienation because the identification “works”—the ego acquires recognition or value through its *misrecognition* of the ideal image.

The colonial image that Fanon offers both resembles and departs from Goux’s image of the production of value. Like Goux, Fanon suggests that the (colonized) subject attempts to acquire value through identification with the equivalent—in this case the language of the colonized. But the success of this identification—realized, presumably, in the production of a linguistic ego in the image of the colonizer’s “diction”—cannot be guaranteed. The colonized can try, but he may easily fail to embody “proper” diction, and his consciousness may, in fact, be continually haunted by the possibility of failing to live up to the image of diction. In other words, what Fanon alerts us to are the socially produced discontinuities, gaps, and fissures in the production of value, labor power, and consciousness in the colonial context.¹⁹³

Fanon’s scenario of the Martinican facing the ideal image of language is therefore a definitive instance of the imaginization of the Symbolic, when the intervening signifier does not support but, in fact, chastens the subject’s efforts to appropriate the normative mirror image. Fanon seems to urge us to consider the scenario where the ego struggles to transform itself into the ego-ideal through the intervening and already-commoditized signifier, where the “image” of racial and cultural capital is sedimented in “language” and vice versa. As he writes: “The Negro is comparison. This is the first truth. He is comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with

¹⁹² Goux, 58.

¹⁹³ For a similar critique of Goux, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), 215-216.

self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal.”¹⁹⁴ Thus, even as Fanon’s footnoted reference to the mirror stage confines itself to the specular Imaginary, his general analysis of the colonial narcissism repeatedly underscores the linguistic narcissism in the social, of the Imaginary experience of Symbolic “lesions.”

Finally, I want to tease out another important difference between Dolto and Fanon in their approaches to the figure of the mother, who appears in both their representations of linguistic mirroring. If Dolto is almost always celebratory about the soothing effect of the caregiver’s words, evincing a catholic faith in the salutary power of language, we find a much harsher picture in Fanon. In a poem by Léon-G. Damas (from which Fanon quotes in his chapter “The Negro and Language”), it is the mother who goads her son to speak “the French of France/the Frenchman’s French/French French.”¹⁹⁵ And again, later: I am a Negro—but of course I do not know it, simply because I am one. When I am home my mother sings me French love songs in which there is never a word about Negroes. When I disobey, when I make too much noise, I am told to “stop acting like a nigger.”¹⁹⁶ Unlike the caregiver in Dolto (and later in Lacan), the Antillean mother refuses to reassure her child of his self-image as a black man.

Here, I do not wish to ignore Fanon’s insinuation that it is the Antillean mother who is partially responsible for the racial neurosis of her son. As Françoise Vergès notes, it seems as if it is the mother who “produces” conflict in an otherwise neurosis-free family.¹⁹⁷ However, instead of reiterating the legitimate accusations of misogyny,¹⁹⁸ I want to suggest that Fanon’s text also

¹⁹⁴ Fanon, 211.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 191.

¹⁹⁷ See Vergès, 584.

¹⁹⁸ For a critique of Fanon’s misogyny and homophobia, see Fuss 30-36. For a discussion of how sexual difference and in particular the sexuality of the woman of color represent a threat against “community” in Fanon, see Rey Chow, “The Politics of Admittance” *Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon*, *Ethics After Idealism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 55-73.

speaks “Otherwise,” but by showing how the alleged “asymmetry” between the signifier and the signified can do little to prevent the production of “blackness” as a wounded attachment. Fanon’s example shows us that the black mother’s somato-linguistic racism—her body, language, and gestures disciplining the child, all of which enforce the “French” law—and its effects are, in fact, beyond her conscious control. As the commonest and one of the most abiding influences on the child, maternal speech, in this situation, becomes the unfortunate conveyer of a systemic racial neurosis. Fanon’s grievances against his mother are not only signs of his misogyny but also an indication of the disruption (or even impossibility) of “linguistic security” for the non-white child bombarded with racially charged signifiers. The mother, in a sense, becomes a “split mirror” for the child, where the image of her corporeal blackness is at odds with the anti-black whiteness idealized by her speech.

If we follow the Lacanians’ dictum of “asymmetry,” “misfire,” or the of the constant “slippage” of meaning in the Symbolic, “Stop acting like a black” *should* “mean” nothing specific at the level of language, and *should* only drift playfully in the signifying chain. The expression could also potentially contain a “negation” within language to convey the actually empty content of the cause of the mother’s desire, and could perhaps betray the extra-discursive and non-symbolizable aspect of the Real. And yet, none of these universalized readings of the language and the subject of desire, as if language, desire, and subjectivity did not exist within colonial relations of difference, can wish away the effect the mother’s words have on the young Fanon’s ego or prevent their “epidermalization.”

Fanon’s example thus prompts us to ask: *how* indeed does his mother ask him to stop being black? How does her body move and voice sound every time she utters the same expression to produce the more or less same “meaning”? It seems to me that, for Fanon to remember it as a Symbolic lesion in the Imaginary, the materiality of the signifier from the (m)Other originates not in any reified notions of the maternal voice or body but in the deep and unconscious *accumulation* of gestures, pronunciations, stress patterns, intonations, and voice levels that

articulate social “needs” as per the economic “demand” of colonial subjugation, and fabricate “acting like a black” as a recognizable expression of self-deprecation.¹⁹⁹ It is this intractable form of imaginization of and psycho-somatic subjugation through language (uttered by the mother and read/made sense of by the son) that also maintains the colonial relations of production. As Pierre Macherey has argued in a recent essay: if, in Althusser’s scene of interpellation, the everyday and banal linguistic utterance “Hey you!” is not “responsible” for creating the subjects responding to the call—insofar as “in every case they are already subjects” —Fanon’s descriptions of the (simultaneously everyday and exceptional) linguistic hailing of the black by Imaginary (white and black) others, “underscores the *cumulative nature of the process by which is installed—in the mind of someone, who, here says ‘I’—the feeling of not being a subject like the others...*” (my emphasis).²⁰⁰

Black Skin White Masks therefore has good reason to stay with the Imaginary, to demonstrate how the signifier “sticks” in varying degrees to the embodied Imaginary labors of the colonized, to generate an “inhuman” surplus value for French and whiteness as linguistic and racial commodities *par excellence*. Fanon’s account of narcissism shows that the colonized subject is neither “outside” the Symbolic order—as Wilderson suggests—nor in a position to access the Kantian experience of the Symbolic—as Copjec sees it—as reason whose limit is that it lacks a limit. The text theorization of the production of the “meaning” of race—through processes that undo the Symbolic/Imaginary binary—should be a lesson against an overinvestment in “free” Symbolic Otherness in cultural criticism that fails to address “the historical and economic realities” linked to the “entry” into and Imaginization of language and

¹⁹⁹ I am not suggesting that “need” be confused with Lacan’s notion of “desire,” the enigmatic remainder after all needs are allegedly met. But I am arguing for the need to stay with “need,” the mechanism of its production and articulation, its differential distribution, and their possible impact on the dominant forms of the “cause of desire” in a given socio-political conjuncture. Simultaneously, I am arguing that Dolto and Fanon give us enough reason to contest the standard psychoanalytic claim that needs concern only the biological organism and not socially and economically engineered desires.

²⁰⁰ Pierre Macherey, “Figures of interpellation in Althusser and Fanon,” *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May/June 2012): 14.

even impede arguments for structural changes.²⁰¹

For the same reason, it would be quite off the mark to claim that Fanon makes the “mistake” of impressing upon the “Lacanian” Symbolic Other a particular racial identity.²⁰² Rather, by turning to the structure of the mirror stage and to the *de-humanizing* function of linguistic capital in it, Fanon’s text emphasizes the role of the inevitably normative “image” in fixing and capitalizing on “identity” (however temporary and localized that fixing might be) through a harnessing of the signifier from the Other. Fanon shows us the socio-economic logic behind apparently arbitrary “cuts” or “quilting points”: what it “means” to be a Negro, it turns out, is an effect of the imaginization of language *and* image, a process that produces the psychic and bodily habitus of the colonized in a tacit pact with local forms of global capitalism.

Conclusion

In the last two chapters, I have analyzed mirror stage narcissism as a structure that is both universal and particular through the shifting emphases of Dolto, Fanon, and Lacan. The topology²⁰³ that emerges from this comparative analysis foregrounds narcissism not just as a

²⁰¹ Chow has called this “subject work” in critical theory: the tendency to downplay forms of structural control to favor open-endedness and instability. See Chow, *Ethics After Idealism*, 57.

²⁰² This is Christopher Lane’s claim without a close reading of the Imaginary-Symbolic nexus in Fanon. See Christopher Lane, “The Psychoanalysis of Race: An Introduction,” *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 14.

²⁰³ A brief note on why I have not included the register of the “Real” in this topology and in these two chapters. My focus has been on the role of language and the politics of signifiers in three thinkers over a period when the Real had not been conceptualized. While I appreciate the value of the construct of the Real—Dean explains it variously as “negation within language,” “a realm devoid of signifiers,” “traumatic,” “transcendental,” “extradiscursive,” “generative,” “necessary contingency”—I am not convinced that the Real is the sole “condition of possibility” of the subject (of what we may call the “wounded unconscious” in the light of our discussion). That is to say, I am not convinced that the Real fully controls the imaginization of language in an era of multinational capital to produce the racialized subject-worker as its “effect,” or that social change can be envisaged only at the level of Real violence by leaving the Imaginary and Imaginary triggers out. Dean himself is unable to argue for a convincing distinction between Real identification and Imaginary-Symbolic identification in his analysis of Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning*. See Dean, 1-93. For an interesting discussion of the Imaginary origins of “Real” violence in Fanon, see Mikko Tuhkanen, *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 102-103.

matter of visibility of the image but of invisible forces of *lisibilité* (“legibility”)²⁰⁴ or a “readability” in language. My own active interpretation and “over-reading” of Fanon is not prescriptive, in that I do not claim to demonstrate how *only* race should be universally theorized or located in the Imaginary, but rather to show how the mirror stage can be read from an existential and anti-colonial perspective. I have therefore not attempted a critique of Fanon’s general turn to psychoanalysis or his rather limited scope of the “social.”²⁰⁵ My goal has been to show how Fanon’s sees the presence of language—necessarily as linguistic capital—in a racially charged Imaginary almost a decade before Lacan revises his theory of the mirror stage.²⁰⁶ This theory of linguistic narcissism, I have showed, reveals the ideological assumptions that remain implicit in the Lacanian turn to “language in the universal.” In my argument, the lesson offered by *Black Skin White Masks* is this: given that the majority of the global population constituted the underbelly of colonialism and slavery,²⁰⁷ perhaps what can be “universalized” is a common minimum of W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness,”²⁰⁸ the “lesser” ideological concept that has no doubt played second fiddle to the universal splitting that avid Lacanians have

²⁰⁴ Lacan speaks only of the *lisibilité* of “sex” and not in the more general context of imaginization of the Symbolic categories of difference like race or gender. See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 176.

²⁰⁵ Undoubtedly, Fanon’s position stems from his own experiences of racism. However, it may be argued that his reformulation of the mirror stage allows no room for a distinction between the theorization of “race” and “racism” in the Imaginary. For instance, Vergès contends Fanon’s critique is locked in a black/white binary and is unable to accommodate any conceptions of hybridity or *métissage*. I take up this critique in the next chapter. Finally, Fanon’s approach to the mirror stage can also be critiqued from both feminist and queer perspectives for privileging race as the category of analysis (over gender and sexuality) in the context of colonialism and cross-racial encounters. See Vergès, 591. For a discussion of how Fanon’s homophobia is inseparable from racialized discourses of colonial masculinity, see Mercer, 125.

²⁰⁶ The film theorist Daniel Dayan turns to this Lacan when he says “What Lacan shows us is that language cannot function outside of the Imaginary.” See Daniel Dayan, “The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 28 (1974): 25.

²⁰⁷ Scholars like Clifford Geertz and Nathan Keyfitz have argued that between 1800 and 1950, the global population also grew, particularly in the tropics, as a result of the exploitation of these regions for raw material and the need for labor. See Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (Berkeley: U. Cal. Press, 1968). See Nathan Keyfitz, “National Population and the Technological Watershed,” *Journal of Social Issues* 23 (1967): 62-78.

²⁰⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

canonized.

Finally, through chapters one and two, I have also conceptualized “reading” in a broad sense, alongside (the much criticized) Imaginary-Symbolic impetus of Althusser’s “interpellation,” to begin thinking about the origins and limits of the semiotic habits under colonialism and post-colonialism. Being inextricably tied to economic and cultural resources, reading, here, cannot be uncritically celebrated but, instead, needs to be theorized as *competing habits*. Learning to read is not very different from producing the “soul” that Michel Foucault famously called an “effect and instrument of a political economy” and the “prison of the body.”²⁰⁹ How and what the subject “reads” or makes sense of in the social through her narcissistic Imaginary and bodily affects follows from the modalities through which s/he is “read” by the individual and institutional “bearers” of the Symbolic order. My approach to reading is thus resonant with Mary Jacobus’s attempt to “unpack some of the implicit assumptions about reading whether considered as a process, a representation, or an ideology....”²¹⁰ However, as I hope to have demonstrated, I disagree with Jacobus’s claim that theories of “[bodily] affect and the imaginary” need to be seen in opposition to or perpetually out of synch with “language and the symbolic.”²¹¹ The subsequent chapters will examine the vexed relationship between these narcissistic meaning making practices marked by social identification and disidentification—what Spivak calls reading “the world as a book”²¹²—and “reading” or “critique” as an ethical and political practice in diasporic and post-colonial literary studies.

²⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977), 30.

²¹⁰ Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading: The Clarendon Lectures in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.

²¹¹ See Jacobus, 10. See also Dean, 59.

²¹² Spivak, “Reading the World,” in *In Other Worlds*, 95.

CHAPTER THREE: Identification, Reading, and the Confessions of Capital

Such varied dispositions toward text, self, and society lead us again to wonder: can the act of reading ever acquire consensual definition?...Inescapably we ask: who reads? But imperatively we must also know: to what end does the reader construe the text and in what historical context?

—Ihab Habib Hassan²¹³

Who's there, or here, and who's gone? It's us, here and gone, abandoned at the border, left to our own devices—most of them, let us say, words—and our own responsibilities...but without knowing who we are, who is there, and where is there. Our responsibilities, somehow in excess of our knowledge if not simply opposed to it, are to the other, and to the underdetermined other, and our vigilance consists in the care with which we attend to the noise that precedes our question, the mark or trace to which we respond at the beginning.

—Thomas Keenan²¹⁴

The damage is deeply psychological....The patois-speaker feels inferior, full stop....Because the model is the white English man, his language and educational standards... and we have not been able to attain it.

—Faith Linton, BBC Interview (December 2011)²¹⁵

Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that the narcissistic Imaginary is not only a space of specular misrecognition but of a dynamic interaction between the visual, the linguistic, and the social. The nature of this interaction, I suggested through Fanon, is not pre-determined but contingent on the subject's socio-economic position in the relations of production. The experience of linguistic meaning or lack thereof, I also argued, depends on the nature of ideological forces shaping the linguistic-specular Imaginary. This chapter begins by tracing the impact of post-structuralist

²¹³ Ihab Habib Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 157.

²¹⁴ Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), 10.

²¹⁵ Robert Pigott, "Jamaica's Patois Bible: The Word of God in Creole" (December 24, 2011). Accessed on February 10, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16285462>.

approach to language and signification in North American literary studies, specifically in the notion of the “literary” developed by Paul de Man. The chapter, then, contrasts the de Manian-Lacanian and deconstructionist approach to “literariness”—as that which means “nothing”—with a more variegated experience of the literary amongst contemporary bilingual diasporic and post-colonial writers. My main argument is that, for these bilingual writers, who negotiate raced and gendered identifications through their literary practice, literature is necessarily bound to a socio-politically determined linguistic Imaginary and is haunted, in varying degrees by Fanon’s account of linguistic narcissism. My focus, here, is on unequal relations between languages shaping bilingual literary practice. These relations, I contend, once again, make the linguistic ego not a site of illusory autonomy but of manifest gendered and ethnic fragmentation. The second section of the chapter examines the explicit articulation of these fragmentations in Theresa Cha’s experimental text *DICTEE*. Simultaneously, I read in Cha’s experimental “image-text” an ethical imperative to move *beyond* the literary to assess the impact of the visual/cinematic mode of production on the subject’s narcissistic reading habits. Cha’s turn to the photographic, I finally suggest, also challenges post-structuralism’s dismissal of referentiality.

What happens to *différance* in diaspora?

In his 1979 *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man develops a reading practice with the help of a broad selection of French and German writers (Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust) to argue against the notion of “referentiality”—the assumption that meaning is “fixed” and resides “outside” of language. de Man acknowledges his debt to the French “semiology” of literature that has “demonstrated that the perception of the literary dimensions of language is largely obscured if one submits uncritically to the authority of reference.”²¹⁶ Refusing to give up on the fictionality of literature and developing further the post-structuralist emphasis on the gap between the sign

²¹⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 5.

and the referent, de Man calls for programmatic action where literary criticism will ceaselessly assault the metaphysics of presence through an intralinguistic analysis of rhetorical instability, of tropes whose perlocutionary dimensions cannot be predicted: “The key to this critique of metaphysics, which is itself a recurrent gesture throughout the history of thought, is the rhetorical model of the trope or, if one prefers to call it that, literature.”²¹⁷ This critique, de Man further argues, is not imposed on literature, or brought in from the outside by the literary critic. It is already there in the authors and poets chosen by the critic: “The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place....Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction.”²¹⁸ In other words, in de Man’s theory of reading, language (or poetry or literature) is that which repeatedly lays bare through its formal operations the illusions of metaphorical coherence, autonomy, and unity through identification. Reading, then, is not about finding reflections of the self or the outside world in the literary text. Rather, as a site of radical uncertainty, literary reading exposes the illusions that undergird oppressive approaches that see language as the site of meaning, communication, and communitarian politics. Literary reading as a specialized field of expertise makes visible what the desire for referentiality do not. de Man, here, is close to Lacan’s notion of the Symbolic and to the theory of Symbolic reading, in which to read is to render visible “the annihilation of the conscious subject.”²¹⁹

While my intention is not to challenge de Man’s readings of individual authors, I do want to re-examine his fundamental assumptions around “correct” literary practice in light of my last two chapters. It is important to note that de Man’s analysis of Rousseau and others in *Allegories of Reading* is premised on two basic observations on the workings of language from semiotic theory: First, de Man borrows the notion of “deflection” from literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke, who defined it as “any slight bias or even unintended error,” and considered to be

²¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 37.

“the rhetorical basis of language.”²²⁰ Second, he also reminds his readers of philosopher and semiotician Charles Saunders Peirce’s notion of the “interpretant.” For de Man, the notion of the interpretant makes clear how meaning is deferred:

He [Peirce] insists, as is well known, on the necessary presence of a third element, called the interpretant [beyond signified and signifier], within any relationship that the sign entertains with its object....The interpretation of the sign is not, for Peirce, a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on *ad infinitum*...²²¹

Finding further support in the idea of continuous movement from sign to sign, de Man admits that a “concise theoretical exposition” of this linguistic “difficulty” is beyond his powers, and he therefore chooses to “retreat therefore into a pragmatic discourse and try to illustrate the tension between grammar and rhetoric in a few specific textual examples.”²²² The rest of the argument, about the literary text as a *mise en abîme* collapsing into itself, is well known. But what happens if we stay with de Man’s opening reliance on post-structuralist linguistics a little longer? For instance, what are the conditions under which what Burke calls “deflection” or what Derrida calls *différance* can be privileged over the “illusory” effect of meaning? What shapes the “biases” and “unintended errors,” the impersonal and literary birds’ eye view of which reveals *différance* as the product of the difference between *langue* and *parole*? Is this bias always experienced by the subject of *parole* as a “bias”? In other words, what might prevent the subject from experiencing and/or believing in the potential of erring and continuous movement, a potential that is simultaneously self-destructive and liberatory?

De Man’s turn to Peirce’s notion of the interpretant performs an oversight that will be relevant here. For de Man, the interpretant is that enigmatic third element which facilitates the continuous movement from sign to sign during the act of reading. This is, however, a somewhat selective view of the interpretant. Although Peirce is by no means clear on what he means by this

²²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²²¹ Ibid., 9.

²²² Ibid.

term, he does describe it as part of a mental act that may not always produce a sign *but instead yield a socially engendered emotion or a feeling*. The interpretant, Pierce notes in his *Collected Papers*²²³ “is that which the Sign produces in the Quasi-mind that is the Interpreter by determining *the latter to a feeling, to an exertion, or to a Sign...*” (4.536) (my emphasis). That is to say, a sign will produce responses in the form of emotions and actions of the reader *without necessarily producing another sign*. Peirce gives the example of the “automatic” response of the military officer’s mechanical answer to his subordinate salute and calls it an “energetic interpretant.” What de Man ignores *is the notion that the Interpretant, as a response to a sign, may easily be a psycho-social response*. de Man glosses over the very likely possibility that the “quasi-mind” of the Interpretant generated by the sign may respond to it without ever acceding to a movement forward toward rhetorical instability. In other words, even if there is a mobility or instability of meaning involved, that instability does per se guarantee liberation from meaning-effects such as “the feeling” or “exertion.”

In the last chapter, we noted Fanon’s ambivalent relationship with the French language—his inability to separate it from racism in the colony as well as Martinique’s ties with France. We concluded that even as Fanon himself wrote in French, it remained a difficult narcissistic identification that made him feel neither black nor white, producing a nether psychic space that he was unable to celebrate or happily occupy. We might ask: how relevant is Fanon’s linguistic angst in the twenty-first century? Have literatures and writers from Franchophone regions left the anxiety generated by linguistic and cultural capital far behind them, given the recognition received by bilingual diasporic writers in France over the last twenty years? Could the fact that a number of writers awarded by and received into the French Academy—like the Libyan Amin Mallouf, Algerian Mohammed Dib, Greek Vassilis Alexakis, Canadian-English Nancy Huston,

²²³ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Volume IV)*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

and Chinese Shan Sa, to name a few²²⁴—have *chosen* to write and make their literary careers in French (and sometimes primarily in French) suggest that diasporic and post-colonial writers are further away from Fanon’s “wound” and closer to de Man’s “literature”²²⁵

As should be clear by now, I would argue otherwise. When literature is seen as a simultaneously regional, ethnic, national, and transnational cultural activity carried out in different “literary modes of production,”²²⁶ because of divergent notions of what literary practice can achieve, it becomes impossible not to see de Man’s equation of “the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself”²²⁷ as one such predominantly Euro-American mode of production. If de Man places reading in an idealized and apparently homogeneous extra-social space—where literary “poetics” seems to have nothing to do with either “hermeneutics”²²⁸ or semiotic conflicts that are generate divisions along the lines of social categories of difference—even a very cursory glance at a few contemporary diasporic and post-colonial authors’ negotiations with literary production produces a very different picture.

Let me begin with a fairly “assimilated” writer like Vassilis Alexakis, who was born in Greece and moved to France in the sixties to become a journalist and novelist; Alexakis was

²²⁴I borrow from a helpful list in Anne Rosine Delbart’s “Être bilangue et écrivain français: les motivations du choix d’une langue d’écriture,” *bulletin vals-asla* 76 (Winter 2002): 161-178. Delbart discusses some of the personal motivations of these authors who have chosen to write in French. I am, however, also interested in theorizing the role of the larger politics of the language environment(s) of the reading-writing subject, and the value of such a theory in critical reading practices.

²²⁵ A similar question could be posed with regard to post-colonial writers in English, Spanish, or Portuguese.

²²⁶ This is, as I have noted in the introduction, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton’s term for a unity of social forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation. Eagleton argues that any literate society will contain multiple modes of literary production (in various relations of homology, contradiction, and conflict) but all of whose forces of production will be furnished by the general mode of production i.e. capitalism. See Eagleton, 44-63.

²²⁷ de Man, 10.

²²⁸ For de Man, poetics and hermeneutics are antithetical concepts. Hermeneutics is pedestrian interpretation that seeks “meaning,” and hence the nemesis of de Manian “poetics,” which highlights the play of the material signifier. See Paul de Man, *Resistance to Theory*, ed. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 55-56.

awarded the prestigious Le Grand Prix du Roman by the French Academy in 2007.²²⁹ He is now an internationally respected figure not just because of his work in French but also as a bilingual writer who translates from his native Greek. Evidently, Alexakis, who was born in Athens and learned French first at the French Institute there and then as a student in Lille,²³⁰ did not learn the language as a result of a direct colonial imposition. Yet, in his memoir *Paris-Athens*,²³¹ Alexakis gives his readers a rather candid account of his fluctuating relationship with French. In Paris, looking for a job, the author, he tells us, went through a temporary phase, during which he “imitated the French accent well enough, so that one could not always tell if I were a foreigner.”²³² Although he was a prolific writer, he did not escape the xenophobic reactions of his critics: “Oh really? Do you write in French?...It must be difficult. There are so many nuances!... We are delighted that French has won over [the hearts of] foreigners but we are not all convinced that they could in their turn win over the language.”²³³ This mixed reception affects the author’s self-perception and even causes him to admit to the possibility of abandoning French: “The idea that I could be brought one day or another to break my ties with French upset me...My relationship with French was strained...I needed French.”²³⁴ Alexakis’s relationship with French is one of desire and derision, an ambivalence that has its origins in his inability to “master” French and market himself as a French author.

In the late seventies, while struggling to make a career in France, Alexakis also felt guilty of having abandoned Greek. He returned to Athens to publish his first Greek novel *Talgo* in

²²⁹ Alexakis received the Prix du Roman from the French Academy in 2007 for his novel *Ap. J.-C.* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

²³⁰ Vanessa de Pizzol, “L’identité déchirée de Vassilis Alexakis : *La langue maternelle* et *Les mots étrangers*,” *Écrivains multilingues et écritures métisses : L’Hospitalité des langues*, ed. Axel Gasquet and Modesta Suárez (Clermont-Ferrand Cedex 1: Presses Universitaire Blaise Pascal, 2004), 293-301.

²³¹ Vassilis Alexakis, *Paris-Athènes* (Paris: Seuil, 1989). All translations are mine.

²³² Ibid., 97.

²³³ Ibid, 15-16.

²³⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

1980.²³⁵ However, his love for French did not remain unrequited for much longer. In the course of the eighties and nineties, Alexakis became well-known in the Parisian literary and journalistic circle and won the Médicis Prize for the novel *Mother Tongue* in 1995. As a bilingual writer and auto-translator, he has learnt to see himself as a lover obliged to respond to the commanding presences of his two inamoratas. In a prefatory note to his 1997 collection of short stories, he writes: “Languages are very demanding and jealous mistresses, even [those] of the past.”²³⁶ At one level, this personification makes literary activity a very private and individual activity for this writer who shuttles between languages and identities. He is a diasporic writer, we might say, who refuses to be categorized. At the same time, the individualism would translate very differently and less uniquely if we see the gendered personification as a projection: it is not as if languages have “feelings” in and of themselves. Rather, it is Alexakis’s socio-linguistic past and present that determines how he feels towards French and Greek. In other words, by laying bare his own placement within social circumstances under which he shifts his affections between French and Greek, Alexakis simultaneously individualizes and banalizes his relationship with languages. Yet this banalization is valuable because it reveals that his literary activity is constantly modulated by his reception in France.

In an interview taken shortly after he received Le Grand Prix du Roman from the French Academy in 2007,²³⁷ Alexakis compares his relationship with the French language to a long courtship that finally bore fruit:

I moved to Paris in 1967, at the time of the Greek dictatorship and I wrote my first book in French. I have worked very hard with this language which, today, I consider as my

²³⁵ As his popularity grows, his relationship with the language, as *Paris-Athens* documents, undergoes further changes. Alexakis no longer feels the need to imitate the French accent, begins to speak with (what he thinks is) a pronounced non-French accent, and finally begins to miss and reuse Greek: “...it was then necessary that I somehow re-embraced in some way my mother tongue.” Ibid., 58.

²³⁶ Vassilis Alexakis, *Papa* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 9.

²³⁷ Thomas Yadan, “Interview de Vassilis Alexakis—Après V.A.” Accessed on Dec 01, 2011. <http://www.evene.fr/livres/actualite/interview-vassilis-alexakis-ap-jc-1074.php>.

own. I think that this prize is a reward for the affection that I have for the French language. [It was] as if, the [French] language, in its turn, showed its love for me (my translation).

Based on this reaction to the award, would it be inaccurate to say that even after his recognition and accolades, Alexakis is not outside the sway of “French French” and that the French Academy is the final arbiter of his love? As Alexakis notes, the prize makes him feel as if the French language has finally responded to his overtures. And this reciprocation can be experienced as such only because Alexakis has (or at least publicly demonstrates) his faith in a metonymic relationship between the French language and the French Academy. Although in another interview, he is critical of systemic normalization of language skills, and “the relentless onslaught against local speakers in the whole world,”²³⁸ here, the French Academy stands in as his “linguistic superego.”²³⁹ Love coming “from a language” is metonymized and (mis)recognized through a process of abstraction and equivalence in the form of a reward from an institution that actively polices what counts as that language.

To turn to a different scene of reciprocation: a couple of years before Alexakis’s labors earned him the affection of the keepers of the French language, Algerian writer Assia Djébar was welcomed into the French Academy and elected as a member. In her 2006 acceptance speech,²⁴⁰ Djébar, like Alexakis, speaks of this recognition as a momentous event that will transform her relationship with French:

²³⁸Vassilis Alexakis, “Vassilis Alexakis, sur la piste du premier mot” (Sept 2010). Accessed on December 15, 2011. <http://www.info-grece.com/magazine/arts-lettres/vassilis-alexakis-sur-piste-premier-mot,143021.html>.

²³⁹ I borrow this term from the linguist Robert Hall, by which Hall means the abstract notions held by speakers and practitioners of a particular language about what language and speech “ought” to be. See Robert A. Hall Jr., “Innate Capacity, Know-How and Use in Language,” in *Linguistics and Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Rulon S. Wells*, ed. Adam Makkai and Alan K. Melby (John Benjamins Publishing Company: Amsterdam, 1985), 5.

²⁴⁰ Assia Djébar, “Réception de Mme Assia Djébar : Discours prononcé dans la séance publique, le jeudi 22 juin 2006,” Accessed on January 10, 2012. http://www.academie-francaise.fr/immortels/discours_reception/djébar.html.

I remember, last year, in June 2005, the day on which you elected me to your Academy [sic] this was my response to journalists who were eager to know my reaction: “I was happy for the Francophonie of the Maghreb.” Temperance was necessary, because I was seized by an almost physical sensation that your doors did not open only for me, neither for my own books, but for the still vivid shadows of my colleagues—writers, journalists, intellectuals, women and men of Algeria whose act of writing, of exposing their ideas or simply teaching in French cost them their lives in the decade of the nineteen nineties (my translation).

Born in Algeria in 1936, Djébar was introduced to French (alongside Berber and Arabic) by her father who taught in a primary school in the small town of Mouzaïville. After completing her studies at a Quranic school in Algeria, the University of Algiers, and at the prestigious Lycée Fénélon in Paris, Djébar trained as a historian at the École Normale Supérieure. Her first novel *La Soif* appeared in 1957, and she wrote three more novels and a play in French over the next ten years. Once Algeria gained independence from France in 1962, Arab nationalists criticized her for writing in French rather than in Arabic, which was, by then, the national language. But for Djébar, liberation from the French government did not mean abandoning one of the main languages of her childhood.²⁴¹ Although she took a ten-year break from writing to be a filmmaker in Algeria, she never dismissed writing nor the French language. Describing her return to French in 1976, Djébar notes: “I had just turned forty. It’s at that point that I finally felt myself fully a writer of French language, while remaining deeply Algerian.”²⁴²

A rudimentary attempt to parse out the difference between Alexakis’s and Djébar’s approaches to French will be useful here. Alexakis’s Francophilia, we might say, is in part, the product of the “pericolonial” presence of neo-Hellenic France in nineteenth-century Greece.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djébar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool, Cambridge: Liverpool University Press, 2006).

²⁴² Assia Djébar, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 168.

²⁴³ Although not directly colonial, Greek Francophilia, according to a number of historians, needs to be understood in relation to the intercontinental rivalry and quasi-colonial impulses that lurked behind the façade of nineteenth century neo-Hellenism of France, Britain, Germany, and The Netherlands. In particular, the foundation of the French School of Archeology in Athens (the “spiritual father” of the French Institute) is seen as an aggressively political act carried out to consolidate French interests in Greece against those of the British. See Georges Milliex, “L’Institut français d’Athènes, fils spirituel de l’École

Although it wields an ideological influence over Greek intellectuals, French, in no way actively interferes with Greek nationalism or with Alexakis's relationship with the Greek language.²⁴⁴ In contrast, Djébar's love for French is caught up in a strong colonial legacy as well as the French language's shifting position among other languages in independent Algeria. On the one hand, as a result of the social milieu in which she grew up, Djébar was able to embrace French as the language of her intellectual development. The colonizer's language becomes, as she said in the reception speech, "the site of discovery in my work, the space of my meditation or of my dream...the tempo of my respiration, from one day to another...." Thus, French, here, is a complex colonial inheritance whose legacy conflicts with but cannot be undone through the imposition of Islamist Arabization. Furthermore, as Djébar makes clear in her speech, this inheritance is not hers alone: it is something the writer thinks she shares with a collective of Francophone Maghrebi intellectuals and not least with her Francophone Algerian colleagues killed in the Civil War. In other words, French is not simply a colonial inheritance but also the means to speak and write against the forms of oppression introduced by independence from the French state, most notably against state violence directed toward Algerian intellectuals.

On the other hand (and again, in contrast with Alexakis), Djébar does not see French as an invulnerable and inviolable substratum that determines her responses to the less privileged languages of Arabic and Berber. Her Francophilia is, in fact, wounded forever as a result of her contact with the Berber and Arabic spoken by the women of her maternal tribe. This "wounding" is also something that she brings up in her speech:

française," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 120 (1996): 70. For a discussion of French neo-Hellenism as an instance of "autosopic mimicry," see Státhis Gourgoúris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996).

²⁴⁴ Although a number of Greek intellectuals were inspired by the ideals of the French revolution, the language question was not influenced by French thinking. In fact, although Korais, the one of the key language reformers, lived in France while formulating rules for modern Greek in the nineteenth century, he distanced himself completely from the French tendency of freeing the French language from Latin. Korais and other purists wished to stress the continuity between modern Greek with classical Greek. For a discussion, see Peter MacKridge, *Language and National Identity in Greece 1766-1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

I was searching for the memory of the peasant woman in the mountains of Duhra while shooting for my film. And as I listened to the women's recollections of their painful wounds in Arabic and Berber, I received a definite concussion. A return to the roots. I would even say an ethical and aesthetic lesson, from the women of all ages of my maternal tribe: as they remembered their experience of the war of Algeria, but also evoked their daily lives. Their words let loose, through surprising images, little bittersweet tales, always pouring into a sense of faith at the end, grim and serene, like a spring that washes and removes all grievances (my translation, modified).

Djebar's perception of the subalternity of her interviewees lingers in her (re)identification with Arabic and Berber. The heterosexual bravado of Alexakis (or his fear of castration?) is, here, replaced by the realization that, somehow, French is inadequate if Djebar wants to write about the peasant women's voices which, whether captured in film or through literature, are always bound up with differences of gender, ethnicity, and class. Whether Djebar's desire to represent subalternity is compassionate or idealistic is a different debate. But it need not be doubted that this moment of disorientation, which gives Djebar both a "concussion" and an "ethical and aesthetic lesson," is an accretion to and perhaps irreversible modification of her linguistic Imaginary. In other words, while French plays a dominant role in the formation of the linguistic superegos of both Alexakis and Djebar, the latter's experiences in Arabic and Berber transform her future engagement with the idiolect of her youth.

Djebar describes this moment in her speech by moving from the point of view of the protagonist of her film to her own experiences:

The young female architect in *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* returns to the rural areas of her childhood. Her eyes resting on the female peasants seek an exchange of words: they finally begin to converse....My French thus gained a spark twenty years ago, from the night of the *women of the Chenoua Mountain*. I think they still dance for me in secret caves, as the Mediterranean sparkles at their feet. They greet me, and protect me. I carry with me, over the Atlantic, their smiles, their images of "shefa'," that is to say "healing." Because my French, amplified by the smoothness, but also the thorns of the languages overshadowed so far, will perhaps heal the lesions created by memory (my translation).

Although Djebar begins by describing her film in this anecdote, it is significant that her emphasis moves from the ocular, to the aural, to the linguistic, simultaneously moving from the gaze of her actor-protagonist to her literary practice.

French continues to be the language that Djébar writes in when she returns to literature from filmmaking. And it is literary activity in that language that she hopes will heal her wounds. The healing power, however, will come not through “reading” from within the French language, but through a certain referential power of the images of the Algerian women in Djébar’s hybridized French. In a sense, Djébar is “read” or even “written” by these images before she returns to write to be read. As Djébar makes clear, she learns her aesthetic and ethical lessons from these “afilmic” images that she experiences while making her film. Importantly, each individual image, “seen” in darkness, is also tethered to the Arabic that verbalizes the pain and the joy contained in each woman’s smile. Djébar’s turn to vision and her use of the word “image” here is interesting for two reasons. First, aesthetically, it combines the visual and the aural, insisting on a certain referential power of language: Djébar hopes that her language will still bear traces of the smiles of these women. Second, if all the women’s voices exert a collective influence on Djébar’s French, thereby risking an abstraction that eclipses their individual lives and experiences, the author’s insistence on the plurality of the images makes “shefa” (the Arabic word for “healing”) a simultaneously singular and collective presence. With this experience of a “shefa” that is both individual and collective, Djébar’s French undergoes a contamination that she finds salutary. Thus, the key difference between Djébar and Alexakis is this: instead of an ability to be perfectly bilingual, to switch “flawlessly” between languages, Djébar insists on a “multilingual” French that will accommodate the tonalities and idioms of Berber and Arabic.²⁴⁵

As this example of wounded Francophilia suggests, the de Manian’s desire to undo identity and identification through literature thwarted by colonial inheritances. Yet even this example is not sufficient precisely because of the Euro-centric nature of the Francophilia. We

²⁴⁵ This celebration of linguistic impurity through the use of non-French words, however, does not fully explain her decision to join the French Academy, which recently went online and started a monthly article on officially sanctioned French. The Academy went started a forum called in 2011 called “Dire ne pas dire” (“To say [and] and not to say”) to list English words it wants banned from French usage. See “Dire ne pas dire.” Accessed on February 02, 2012. http://www.academie-francaise.fr/langue/dire_nepasdire/dire1.html.

must also acknowledge literary activity based on complete rejection of languages used as a tool for colonization. To take just a few examples, a sizable number of West African writers like Cheik Aliou Ndao, Ousmane Sembène, and Xadi Faal have turned away from their “mother tongue” French to protect African languages in spite of the difficulties of publication and distribution posed by such decisions.²⁴⁶ For instance, Ndao was born in Senegal in 1933 and educated in Dakar and in France, and has taught in the United States and written poetry and plays in French. However, since 1999, he has been writing primarily in Wolof. In an interview published online, Ndao differentiates African Francophonie from other kinds:

Our relations with Francophonie cannot be the same as that of an inhabitant of Quebec or Wallonia. We, Africans, are not attached to Francophonie by nostalgia. There is no bodily respiration between this term and us. We do not write in French out of love or because of a deliberate choice. We use the language of Molière because of a historical accident. Francophonie is not our heritage because our collective inner self expresses itself in our maternal languages. One must not forget that in Africa, Mandingue, Pulaar, Hausa, Swahili are spoken by a larger number of speakers than English and French. To write in a borrowed language is to accept to participate in the creation of a temporary literature while waiting to follow our precursors like Khali Madiakaté and Hadi Touré who have left us an exceptional oeuvre but in Wolof (my translation).²⁴⁷

Once again, Ndao’s inability to separate language from ethnic affiliation leads us to a mode of analysis that does not isolate literature as a privileged activity but considers the self-representation of the author in relation to her/his larger socio-linguistic milieu, what Ihab Hassan calls the “parabiographical” environment.²⁴⁸

Drawing on my discussion of Symbolic “lesions” in the structure of the Imaginary in the preceding chapters, I would argue that before making any generalized claims about the “literary,” it is crucial to investigate the local Imaginary matrix within which a language operates, how the

²⁴⁶ For a discussion of how divided African writers are in their attitude toward French, see Amadou Ly, “Le pèlerinisme comme stratégie textuelle d’appropriation de la langue écrite,” in *Les langues du roman : Du plurilinguisme comme stratégie textuelle*, ed. Lise Gauvin (Montreal : Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1999), 87-100.

²⁴⁷ Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana, “Un entretien avec Cheik Aliou Ndao, Écrivain.” Accessed on February 04, 2012. <http://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au/MP1299ndao.html>.

²⁴⁸ Ihab Habib Hassan, “Parabiography,” *The Georgia Review* 34 (1980): 593-612.

language is situated in relation to other languages and/or attached to certain social groups in a particular economy, and the ways in which capital penetrates the speaker-writer's individual circumstances to generate particular kinds of Imaginary affect around a particular language. In other words, I wish to emphasize the shifting interactions between social classification, local economies, and individual circumstances that produce linguaphiles and readers of varying dispositions of which de Man, Lacan, or Ndao is but one example.

Lingual Memory, Capital, and Alterity

My very brief discussion of the distinct linguistic Imaginaries of Alexakis, Djébar, and Ndao should give us an inkling of how divided literary practice is, globally, in terms of its aims and priorities. My goal here is not to take sides but to show how differences between them are predicated on their relationship with (in this case, French) capitalism. Furthermore, in a bi- and multilingual context, it becomes clear that it is inadequate to presume a fundamental narcissism (as Dolto does) as a usually healthy relationship with language. Neither is it adequate to say (as Lacan does) that we are all (equally) traumatized by language. With and after colonialism, language and capitalism seem to function together as a peculiar “alloy” that is inflected by the individual and social circumstances under which that alloy is acquired and processed.

These distinct diasporic and post-colonial scenarios of identification also bring together two concepts that may seem disparate: linguist A.L. Becker's notion of “linguaging” and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of “linguistic capital.” For Becker (who spent three decades in Asia learning, studying, and teaching Burmese, Javanese, and Malay), there is a distinction to be made between “language,” as an abstract structure, and “linguaging” as the process by which each language comes to be articulated as a particular utterance. Becker is conscious of the distinct techniques and effects of linguaging for each new language that he learns in Asia. These techniques range from memorizing grammatical rules, reading aloud, and listening to others

speak, to requiring a general submission to the pedagogical rules set by the instructor. As Becker writes:

A language then, is a system of rules and structures, which in the Saussurean view, relates meanings and sounds, both of which are outside it....*Languaging*, on the other hand, is *context shaping*. Languaging both shapes and is shaped by that context. It is a kind of attunement between person and a context. Languaging can be understood as taking *old texts from memory* and reshaping them into present contexts. This is the basic way language contrasts with languaging. *Most current theories of language have no place for memory*. But building a new memory, a new past...is, it seems to me, the hardest part of learning a new way of languaging....Our own languaging is such an elusive thing. "It" is the most personal thing we possess, in the sense that the particularities of our repertoire of acts, and voices, and all *our lingual memories* are unique to each one of us, yet "it" is in large part inherited and shaped in interaction with others (my emphasis).²⁴⁹

Unlike language-as-system, languaging denotes the specific circumstances that shape the parole of the individual and the nature of her attachment to that language. As he explains, one of Becker's main difficulties, while learning these new languages as an adult, is that he lacks lingual memories attached to each of the new languages. These are collective and individual memories that are available, through repetition and habit, to speakers born in that linguistic environment. Lingual memories are made over time in particular ideological contexts and therefore cannot be available immediately when the subject learns new languages as an adult.²⁵⁰ Following Becker's concept of lingual memory, Gayatri Spivak writes:

The infant invents a language. The parents begin to recognize it. Somehow, without knowing quite how it happens, this gets inserted into a language with a history, a past, a future, which will last after the child dies, but nonetheless the child will then invent himself or herself in that language. It will become his or her own language. This learning

²⁴⁹ A. L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 8-13.

²⁵⁰ For instance, Becker describes his slow comprehension of the value the common Burmese expression "*ah nah deh*," which could be translated as "(my) strength hurts (me)." Becker writes: "It was a reluctance to put themselves forward—their own power made them uneasy—a signal that more persistent inviting was needed...that I learned very slowly to value." See Becker, 11.

process and this alone sets going the meta-psychological circuits and produces lingual memory. Only one language is learnt like that....²⁵¹

While structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics do not usually speak of lingual memory in this way, illustrations of the concept can be detected in both Dolto and Fanon. For example, it is some kind of socio-lingual memory that prompts Dolto's patient Bernadette to choose the "flower-doll" even before she sees it. For Fanon, the word "nègre" cannot be detached from his mother's inadvertent racism towards her own son. These memories do not lay claims to a single originary language, but they do indicate that there are prior social texts that influence Bernadette's and Fanon's semiotic practices. Thus, from an anthropological-comparative perspective, there is no language without languaging, and there is no memory that can fully take the place of the lingual memories of the initial languaging.

While Becker refers to lingual memory primarily in terms of childhood and sedimented cultural experiences, I would like to inflect it a little differently and investigate it as the effect of Imaginary penetration of cultural capital in the subject's daily life. As an ethnographer and translator, Becker is by no means unaware of the hierarchical relationships between languages created by colonialism. In fact, his whole career, one could argue, is an attempt to fight that hierarchy through "deep language learning" and "transnational literacy."²⁵² However, Becker's conceptualization of a "pure" lingual memory (whether in Javanese or in Malay) risks obfuscating the complex motives and effects of Europe's language policies in the colonies. Whether attempting to repress vernaculars with metropolitan speech or partially preserving vernaculars to manage local populations, the bi- and multilingualism produced by colonial capital makes lingual memory a rather fraught field of language images.²⁵³ As Spivak explains later in

²⁵¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "More Thoughts on Cultural Translation" (April 2008). Accessed on February 10, 2012. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en>.

²⁵² These are terms that Spivak uses in "More Thoughts" to describe the task of comparative literature.

²⁵³ For a discussion of how the British preservation of Malay as a vernacular for the lower classes maintained differences within colonial and post-colonial Malay society, see Alistair Pennycook, *English*

the same passage quoted above: “If you’re in a multi-lingual situation it is possible that what I am calling one language is actually, two or more named languages.” Given that these “two or more languages” are never equally valued by colonial and post-colonial capital, it seems likely that the lingual memory of a subject, at some level, would also register these inequalities. In other words, in some “metapsychological” register, the speaker would record the gap between the relative values of the languages. Furthermore, as Spivak suggests, if it is lingual memory that begins to make the subject a semiotic laborer and a participant in cultural production,²⁵⁴ then it follows that this sense of a lack of parity between the named languages would also inform the bi- or multilingual semiotic laborer’s future meaning making practices. This is where the ideologically riven concept of lingual memory at once benefits from and complicates French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of language-as-capital.

As is well known, Bourdieu insists that capital is valorized not just economically (through money, stocks, and shares) but also culturally and linguistically. Critiquing structuralist linguistics for privileging idealized notions of language communities, Bourdieu emphasizes political, social, and economic circumstances under which a particular set of linguistic practices become dominant and facilitate the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital and vice versa. In his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu comes very close to what Becker calls languaging, but with an attention to the demands imposed by the linguistic market on the socialized subject:

All symbolic domination presupposes, on the part of who submit to it, a form of *complicity which is neither passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values*. The recognition of the legitimacy of the official language has nothing in common an explicitly professed, deliberate and revocable belief, or with an intentional act of accepting a “norm.” It is inscribed, in a practical state, in dispositions

the Discourses of Colonialism (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 98-100. For a discussion of how Javanese culture was overshadowed by Malay culture as a result of colonial knowledge production, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, *The Politics of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: One Kin, Two Nations* (Oxford: Psychology Press, 2005).

²⁵⁴See Spivak, “More Thoughts.”

which are impalpably incalculated, *through a long and slow process of acquisition*, by the sanctions of the linguistic market, and which are therefore adjusted, without any cynical calculations or consciously experienced constraint, to the chances of material and symbolic profit which the laws of price formation characteristic of a given market *objectively* offer to the holders of a given linguistic capital....Political unification and the accompanying imposition of an official language establish relations between *the different uses of the same language* which differ fundamentally from the theoretical relations...between different languages, spoken by politically and economically independent groups. All linguistic practices are measured against the legitimate practices, i.e. *the practices of those who are dominant*. The probable value *objectively assigned* to the linguistic productions of different speakers and therefore the relation which each of them can have to the language, and hence to his own production, is defined *within the system of practically competing variants* which is actually established whenever the extra-linguistic conditions for the constitution of a linguistic market are fulfilled (my emphasis).²⁵⁵

Echoing Althusser's notion of interpellation in the Imaginary, Bourdieu's "symbolic domination" (hence closer to Lacan's Symbolic "lesion" than to his "free Symbolic") focalizes the relationship between the economic-cultural market and the gradual development of linguistic and rhetorical habits.

These habits, Bourdieu suggests, are not always practiced consciously, and that are modulated according to the demands "objectively" offered by the market. It is the accumulation and performance of these habits that make the linguistic subject a commodity within a particular market. Thus, Bourdieu's description suggests that, in a post-colonial world order, language acquisition and linguistic performances are never not negotiations with capital. Simultaneously, his theory of the psycho-linguistic life of capital does not exempt the critical thinker—whether a linguist, a theorist, or an artist—from the notion of "symbolic profit." In other words, in this self-critical framework, Saussure's and Bourdieu's own views on language would be products of their Imaginary encounters with forms of capital and, furthermore, turn them into competing commodities in markets catering to specific academic disciplines. But, then, what happens to the simultaneously social and deeply personal lingual memory, if considerations that drive language acquisition are at once "impalpably incalculated" and "objectively" assigned? Who or what exactly is "objective" in Bourdieu's description of accumulation of linguistic capital?

²⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 51-53.

In my view, this is how the notions of lingual memory and linguistic capital can benefit from each other: if we take Bourdieu's Althusserianism seriously, Becker's idea of lingual memory is not safe from the forces of commoditization. If language is what purportedly distinguishes humans from animals, and if the human subject is formed in language, then the "objectivity" of the market becomes the projection of a fundamentally "human" impulse to be *objectified*, (mis)recognized, and to perform as a commodity. At the same time, Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital cannot fully explain Djébar's turn to Arabic and Berber or Ndao's abandonment of French unless we take the ethico-political conflicts produced by lingual memory into account. Djébar's and Ndao's language choices *against* dominant notions of linguistic capital would emerge as abiding remainders produced by lingual memories, as articulations of racial, ethnic, and/or gendered differences that are not simply "nativist." That is to say, in considering the work of post-colonial authors writing from different national and transnational contexts, difference must first be confronted as a deep-seated fragmented image generated by the immaterial perceptions of capital. However, the extent to which these choices have altered or will alter dominant notions of linguistic capital is questionable. The scope of Ndao's literary resistance may be severely limited because of the international politics of publication and translation. Similarly Djébar's "special" status in the Academy and therefore in French literature, as someone who comes "from afar,"²⁵⁶ can also turn into a form of "differential racism" that, as Étienne Balibar points out, can lock "individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy."²⁵⁷ Pessimistic as it may seem, Balibar's warning could, in fact, be an apt description of an ongoing "semiotic segregation" along racial and ethnic lines.

That this segregation can be traced back to colonialism is borne out by the confessions of

²⁵⁶ See Pierre-Jean Remy, "Réponse de M. Pierre-Jean Remy au discours de Mme Assia Djébar : Discours prononcé dans la séance publique le jeudi 22 juin 2006." Accessed Feb 14, 2012. http://www.academie-francaise.fr/immortels/discours_reponses/remy2006.html.

²⁵⁷ Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 22.

one of the biggest critics of identity politics in his much cited discussion of the impossibility of linguistic mastery. In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida famously presents the paradoxical formulations: “I have only language...and it is not mine”²⁵⁸ and “*We only ever speak one language....We never speak only one language.*”²⁵⁹ Through these paradoxes, Derrida wishes to assert a certain otherness or distance that is endemic to language and our relationship to it. This otherness is always colonial insofar as “All culture is originarily colonial.”²⁶⁰ We can never fully own or inhabit a language because its identity as “one” language is a myth. Yet we all speak one language insofar as we can all be only partially successful in matching up to that ideal of a unitary language-as-law whose power at once subjects and eludes us.

However, this dream of perfecting language and linguistic performance does not even spare Derrida. In a remarkably confessional moment of the book, he notes:

I do not believe that anyone can detect by *reading*, if I do not myself declare it, that I am a “French Algerian.” I retain, no doubt, a sort of acquired reflex from the necessity of this vigilant transformation. I am not proud of it, I make no doctrine of it, but so it is: an accent—any French accent, but above all a strong southern accent—seems incompatible to me with the intellectual dignity of public speech....It simply exposes me to suffering when someone, who can be myself, happens to fall short of it.²⁶¹

Even Derrida cannot forgo his attachment to the French (non)accent, although he is not unaware that it is impossible to speak without an accent, or that which is deemed accented in one part of the world is considered unaccented in another, or that the basis for privileging one over others is unabashedly discriminatory. Somewhat like the Martinican in *Black Skin White Masks*, who spends hours rolling his “r’s,” Derrida also performs, and “suffers” when he feels that his performance has “fallen short” of that myth of perfect Frenchness.

²⁵⁸Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Language thus becomes a precarious act in which the specter of failure continually haunts the actor. In her reading of Derrida's reflections, Ginette Michaud writes:

Accent is also often the mark of particularism that is most resistant; furthermore, it presents itself as a symptom which comes to betray the subject when he expects it the least, sort of like an *objet petit a* that clings to his skin and glues him in the maternal envelope of his origins, whatever effort he makes to extirpate himself from this imaginary fusion....Of all the effects of language, the accent is without doubt also the sign that hits the most the person who listens, even if the listener does succeed in identifying it, in retracing its "roots" only imperfectly. As the bearer of inherited morphological traits (the accent is saturated by sedimented deposits of a history, transmitted generation after generation), it is, at the same time paradoxically impersonal and personal (it remains in effect inseparable from the timber of this voice, of its unique grain). At this juncture of the individual and the collective, the accent presents itself par excellence as a region of articulation, a point of contact and of friction where the subject and the language meet, confront each other often hand to hand either as lovers or warriors, always alone (my translation).²⁶²

Michaud's reading of language and accent is especially noteworthy because she treats these as part of the Imaginary and thus takes us away from romanticized notions of a comforting maternal envelope. Accent is that wound of difference and the cause of desire that begins to be formed early at the narcissistic crossing between the individual and the collective, subject and language. At the same time, accent, taking shape in the maternal envelope, is the root of all trouble, the dead giveaway. Accent, as a form of linguistic alterity deposited in the Imaginary by capital to preserve a (Real?) kernel as the *objet petit a*, is not only persistent but even transmitted over generations. For Derrida, accent is that internalized alterity that he cannot alter and attempts to hide by sounding as French as possible. Derrida, of course, does not stop at confessing to his own racism. His guilt over being so attached to French also becomes the basis of his particular brand of ethics and politics, of his movement from being the receiving object of monolingualism to the creative (non)reader of monolingualism: "What, then, are the chances of the readability of such a discourse against its unreadability?...I am not even speaking of an ultimate veiling, but of what will have remained alien, for all time, to the veiled figure, to the very figure of the veil....I finally

²⁶² Ginette Michaud, "'À voix basse et tremblante': phonographie de l'accent, de Derrida à Joyce," *Les langues du roman*, 16.

know how not to have to distinguish any longer between promise and terror.”²⁶³ The unpredictability, unreadability, and terrifying qualities of otherness, for Derrida, also bear the potentiality and promise of a different, albeit uncertain, future.

However, neither Derrida nor Michaud’s reading of him explicitly tackles the question of heterogeneity within this discussion of the experience of linguistic alterity. Derrida speaks of monolingualism as a general condition that confronts all languaged subjects. Although he speaks of his own “community”—cut off from Maghrebian culture, the French metropole, and Jewish memory—and his “own” monolingualism,²⁶⁴ the implications of the suggestion that there may, in fact, be different kinds and degrees of monolingualism are not addressed. We are all monolingual, but are we all equally or similarly monolingual? What kinds of barriers might prevent others from (finally) reading monolingualism as indistinguishably terrifying and promising? In her reading of Derrida, Michaud claims a communal connection with Derrida and prompts the same question:

The monolingualism of the other therefore represents this aporetic situation, this impasse in which every subject finds itself in front of her “mother tongue,” when it is posed simultaneously as rule and law on the one hand, and as object of desire, experience of alterity and language of the Other on the other hand....What happens in fact for the subject who sees himself at the same time imposing the language as an interdictory figure (model for correction and of good speech, French is the language of the master) and as the interdicted figure (evading all appropriation, French remains for him, for us, this inaccessible language, “there,” mythical object of fascination (my translation)).²⁶⁵

The aporetic situation—language as both law and desire—need not be doubted. Derrida does not have a way “out” of this mother tongue that he desires deeply but can never call his own.

However, the sleight of hand here—Michaud’s quick move from “for him” to “for us”—reminds me of another fascinating moment in Derrida’s text. While recounting his schooling in French in Algeria, Derrida speaks of two different groups of children at his *lycée*: on the one

²⁶³ Derrida, 72-73.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁶⁵ Michaud, 18.

hand, the majority who learned only French and who were subjected to the interdict against Arabic or Berber languages (including himself) and, on the other hand, a very small number of non-urban students of Algerian origin who did learn Arabic:

Those who, in extremely limited numbers, enrolled in it by a choice that at that time seemed unusual or even bizarre did not even form a homogeneous group. Among them, there were students of Algerian origin (the “natives,” according to the official interpellation), when in exceptional cases, they gained access to the lycée—but not all of them, at that time, turned toward Arabic as a linguistic discipline. Among those who chose Arabic, it seems to me that there were little French Algerians of non-urban origin, children of settlers who came from the “interior.” Following *the counsel or desire of their parents, necessity being the law, they thought in advance of the need they would have one day of this language for technical and professional reasons: among other things, to make themselves heard, which means also listened to, and obeyed by their agricultural workers*. All others, including myself, submitted passively to the interdict (my emphasis).²⁶⁶

In Derrida’s description of these non-urban children, the “necessity” for Arabic is the children’s families’ need for agricultural capital, and this aim is markedly different from the motive for learning French, which is directly allied with colonial language policies and a different “necessity” to be close to metropolitan France. Derrida’s juxtaposition of French against Arabic and Berber, of himself against the “native” rural children also raises questions about the presence of racial and class differences in language choices. We might say that a certain feeling of superiority implicitly sticks to the interdiction that shapes Derrida’s lingual memory as he trains himself to “pass” in metropolitan French, at a distance from the non-whiteness of Arabic, the language of the agricultural class.

But what if we also speculate from the other side? For the non-white Algerian children who learn both Arabic and French, would not their (bi)lingual memories be marked by social difference a little differently than Derrida’s, considering that they are taught to “need” Arabic (a language that their French protectors care little about) while training in the prized lingua franca? Given that Arabic is their language of daily use and one of their languages of instruction, would not the value of the metropolitan French accent internalized by Derrida be more discontinuously

²⁶⁶ Derrida, 38.

available to these children? In other words, could the French accent and indeed the French language be less appealing to the Algerian children than it is to Derrida? Without conflating the singularity of their encounters with the languages, we could argue that the Imaginaries of these children, while acquiring Arabic as well as the popular interdiction against it in late 1930s Algeria, would be fundamentally different from Derrida's (primarily French) lingual memory. Negotiating colonization bilingually, both accepting and refusing the hierarchy between Arabic-Berber and French in daily linguistic practices and habits, the children's experiences of inequity between languages could very well be at odds with the young Derrida's childhood experiences in French and therefore his adult perception of monolingualism.²⁶⁷ Consequently, these children's adult perceptions of linguistic performance need not have matched Derrida's guilty confession of "falling short of the dignity of perfect speech" or his desire to see linguistic alterity as the sight of both entrapment and a terrifying literary democracy. Thus, Derrida's theory of language could be more democratic (in perhaps a more conventional sense of the term) if it explicitly argued with a bilingual voice or two, who under French colonialism in Algeria experienced the French language differently and in direct collision with Arabic and Berber: that of poet Malek Haddad, for instance, who insists that there is "only an approximate correspondence between our Arab thought and our French vocabulary" (my translation).²⁶⁸ It is this differential experience of linguistic alterity that Derrida at once evokes and overlooks while theorizing deconstructive literariness. There is, then, a distinction to be made between the varieties of experiences of linguistic alterity (produced by bi- and multilingualism under colonialism and neocolonialism) and the alterity of Derridean monolingualism experienced primarily in French: utopianism in the latter becomes possible by glossing over the heterogeneity and disparities in the experiences of

²⁶⁷Rey Chow also critiques Derrida for not considering the hierarchical organization of languages in a given political moment. See Rey Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 227.

²⁶⁸ Malek Haddad, *Les zéros tournent en rond* (Paris: Maspéro, 1961), 34.

the former.

The heterogeneities and disparities that remain implicit in Derrida's account of linguistic alterity are precisely the effects explicitly illuminated in the work of Korean American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. In the next section, I read Cha's 1982 art-book *DICTEE*²⁶⁹ as a text that troubles post-structuralist and avant-garde notions of literary resistance. I am interested precisely in the ways in which *DICTEE*, even as it moves past identity politics or an "ethnic" politics of literary criticism, presents reading as a process haunted by referentiality and processes of minoritization under globalization.

Language, Image, and Alterity in *DICTEE*

Writer, filmmaker, and performer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in 1951 in the midst of the Korean war in Pusan in South Korea. Cha's family moved to Hawaii in 1962 and then to San Francisco in 1964, where she attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley—where she acquired eclectic reading habits, ranging from Korean poetry to the European and American avant-garde—Cha briefly visited Paris to study with film theorists Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, and Thierry Kuntzel. She came back to Berkeley in the late 70s to complete an MA and MFA in art, and then moved to New York in 1980, the same year that she edited and published *Apparatus*,²⁷⁰ one of the earliest anthologies in film theory.

DICTEE, published shortly after Cha's sudden death in 1982, is useful for our discussion because it combines elements of personal, national, and transnational history with the artist's interest in the production and reception of language and the visual image. Broadly speaking, since the mid-nineties, *DICTEE* has been at the center of a tussle between critics who want to see it as a

²⁶⁹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁷⁰ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha ed., *Apparatus—Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* (Tanam Press New York, 1980).

“Korean American” text²⁷¹ and those who wish to emphasize the influence of post-structuralism and/or the avant-garde in Cha’s work.²⁷² In my reading, I show why it might be productive to see *DICTÉE* in terms of its *failure* to fit into any of those categories. I argue that it is the text’s performance of a fragmented linguistic and visual Imaginary that causes this productive failure.

As numerous critics have noted, it is difficult to find a narrative thread or to say what *DICTÉE* is “about.” Nevertheless, a brief description, however inadequate, is in order before I begin my analysis. The text is divided into nine sections with each section named after a Greek muse and her usual field of expertise. But these titles have little or no connection with the actual content of each section. “CLIO/HISTORY” is Cha’s homage to the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon. “CALLIOPE/EPIC POETRY” recounts the linguistic and cultural isolation of the narrator’s mother in exile in China at some point during the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. “URANIA/ASTRONOMY” is a poetic-graphic meditation on the physiological and socio-political aspects of linguistic utterance. “MELPOMENE/TRAGEDY” contains a letter written by the narrator from Korea to her mother, eighteen years after her exile. “ERATO/LOVE POETRY” describes a woman in multiple roles as a cinematic spectator, speaker, wife, and a mother. From this point onwards, the sections get harder to narrativize. “ELITERE/LYRIC POETRY” (where Cha modifies the name of the Greek muse “Euterpe” to “Elitere” here without an explanation) is a meditation on language in an experimental style associated with the American avant-garde of the 70s. “THALIA/COMEDY” is a recombination of the themes of

²⁷¹ See for instance Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón ed., *Writing Self Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on DICTÉE by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994).

²⁷² See for instance Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The Limits of Thinking Theory: Responding to the Theory/Practice Debate in Asian American Studies” (paper presented at the University of North Carolina, 1999). Accessed Jan 15, 2012. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/MCM/people/chun/papers/limits.PDF>. See Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001). See Michael Stone-Richards, “A Commentary on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTÉE*,” *Glossator* 1 (Fall 2009): 145-210. See Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

reading, speaking, spectating/watching, and being watched presented in the two previous sections. In “TERPSICHORE/CHORAL DANCE” Cha’s poetic prose describes the slow rise and liberation of voices from under a heavy stone. Finally, “POLYMNIA/SACRED POETRY” retells a Chinese story of a little girl seeking remedies for her sick mother from a healer. However, none of this is only or simply about what I have summarized. Traces of a previous section surface in a new one, and elements of one section are anticipated in another. And as we shall see, visual materials like photographs, calligraphy, photocopies, and diagrams add to *DICTEE*’s formal and generic complexity.

Cha opens the prefatory section of *DICTEE* with representations of scenes of language instruction: the verbatim transcription of a dictation exercise in French, including compositional instructions and punctuation marks. The transcription is followed by an approximate English translation of the French passage:

Aller à la ligne C’était le premier jour point
 Elle venait de loin point ce soir au dîner virgule
 les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guil-
 lemmets Ça c’est bien passé le premier jour point
 d’interrogation ferme les guillemets au moins
 virgule dire le moins possible virgule la réponse
 serait virgule ouvre les guillemets Il n’y a q’une
 chose point ferme les guillemets ouvre les guille-
 ments Il y a quelqu’une point loin point ferme
 les guillemets

Open paragraph It was the first day period
 She had come from afar period tonight at dinner
 comma the families would ask comma open
 quotation marks How was the first day interroga-
 tion mark close quotation marks at least to say
 the least of it possible comma the answer would be
 open quotation marks there is but one thing period
 There is someone period From a far period
 close quotation marks²⁷³

²⁷³ Cha, 1.

This representation of linguistic instruction is no doubt a defamiliarization of the familiar. Cha over-follows the mandates of the dictation, spelling out instructions and punctuations, and even visually replicating on the printed page the different lengths of pauses taken or to be taken by the speaker(s).

As Lisa Lowe suggests, Cha's opening indicates her interest in representing dictation as a "topos" of internalization of norms that govern linguistic practice.²⁷⁴ This defamiliarization slows down and therefore intensifies the experience of the regulatory structure of the dictation. However, there is nothing to indicate the exact context or repercussions of this linguistic performance. For instance, we do not know if Cha offers the passages as a student's erroneous or rebellious written responses to a dictation exercise, or if this is an attempt to represent instructional utterances, where every word, and every pause uttered by the instructor(s) will be part of the lessons. As Michael Stone-Richards points out, these two passages could also belong to two different or parallel scenes of linguistic instruction.²⁷⁵ While there is no clear indication in these two passages that the student is not a "native" speaker of English or French, both introduce the figure of the "outsider," the female immigrant as a linguistically marginalized subject who will become one of *DICTÉE*'s central concerns.

These two passages are followed by Cha's description of the figure of the *diseuse*, a female speaker who is struggling to imitate and repeat utterances of others:

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to

²⁷⁴ Lisa Lowe, "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*," *Writing Self Writing Nation*, 38.

²⁷⁵ See Stone-Richards, 157. In contrast, Lowe sees the second passage as the student's "unfaithful" response of the first. However, nothing in Cha's text supports that claim. Lowe also identifies differences between the French and the English passages to argue that the "nonequivalence of the French and English text...thematizes the failure of translation as a *topos* of faithful reproduction" For her, the translation is an instance of "'failed' subjection, affirming a departure from the pedagogical model of formation." See Lowe, 41. I find this reading of "failure" to be unconvincing primarily because of what follows in the text. Also, Lowe does not make clear why the translation from one major language of colonization into another should be seen as an act of "resistance." Finally, Lowe's reading of "resistance" (or error as an exposure of the "vulnerability" or "failure" of interpellation) is also problematic because it relies on a partial reading of Althusser, an issue I will come back to later.

mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter something. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position.²⁷⁶

Cha draws the reader's attention to the bodily dimension of this attempt at linguistic articulation and to the speaker as one who cannot speak with felicity. Her anxieties around "accuracy" produce moments between silence and speech in which her body is both ready to and prevented from inserting itself into language. In italics, Cha conveys the conflicted state of the speaker, wounded by both the attempt at speech and the ensuing silence: "*It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside.*"²⁷⁷ This psycho-somatic reaction produced by language, reminiscent of Fanon in its ambivalence toward "accuracy," is significant given that Cha's dedication of *DICTEE* to her parents is followed by the following invocation attributed to the poet Sappho, "May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve." As I hope to show, *DICTEE* consistently experiments with "words," but that poesis also underscores the coexistence of incompatible spheres of literary politics. Furthermore, I will suggest that *DICTEE* finds "words" to be *inadequate* while attempting to represent historical difference and referentiality within its semiotically divided textual space.

Cha's text makes no direct references to narcissistic identification in the mirror stage. However, a description of the subject's specular encounter with language-as-ideology appears as a prelude before "CLIO/HISTORY" where exercises in French translation and conjugation give way to a scene of religious instruction at the Sacred Heart convent:

...No matter how invisible. Everything is visible to God. Thought as visible as word as act. Act of Contrition as visible as word as act.

²⁷⁶ Cha, 3.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

Act of Contrition. I am making the confession. To make words. To make a speech in such tongues.

Q. WHO MADE THEE?

A. God made me.

To *conspire* in God's Tongue.

Q. WHERE IS GOD?

A. God is everywhere.

Accomplice in His Texts, the fabrication in His Own Image, the pleasure the desire of giving Image to the word in the mind of the confessor.

Q. GOD WHO HAS MADE YOU IN HIS OWN LIKENESS

A. God who has made me in His own likeness. In his Own Image in His Own Resemblance, in His Own Copy, In His Own *Counterfeit* Presentment, in His Duplicate, in His Own Reproduction, in His Cast, in His Carbon, His Image and His Mirror.

Pleasure in the image pleasure in the copy pleasure in the projection of likeness pleasure in the repetition. Acquiesce, to the correspondence. *Acquiesce*, to the messenger.

Acquiesce, to and for the *complot in the Hieratic tongue*. Theirs. Into *their* tongue, the counterscript, *my confession into Theirs. Into Theirs* (my emphasis).²⁷⁸

Cha stages a "Q&A" session in which the respondent's answers show that she is thoroughly caught up in the process of indoctrination. The final question in the exchange blurs into a statement, an already learned lesson that is then repeated and elaborated on: the mirror of religious rhetoric has already taught the narcissistic ego to take (the male) god's image as its own, to take pleasure in the projective identification with "His" image in language. At the same time, Cha's use of words such as "Counterfeit" and "complot" show that the confessing student is able to ironize her participation and dissimulation through the presence of competing ideologies. Cast in terms of Catholic rhetoric, the emphasis, here, is less on the visible specular image than on ideologically charged language as a key force behind the constitution of the gendered and religious subject. Thus, we might say that, in her allusion to the mirror stage in this passage, Cha simultaneously evokes Fanon's concept of the colonial Imaginary, Althusser's description of interpellation and feminist critiques of the (masculine) Imaginary.²⁷⁹

There is, in fact, a striking similarity between this passage in *DICTEE* and Althusser's

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 17-18.

²⁷⁹ I have in mind the work of Luce Irigaray, in particular *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) and *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

description of religion's specular effect in his essay "On Feuerbach." For Althusser, writing in 1967, "God" also stands for this bedrock of a humanism that sees the individual subject simultaneously as an extension and reflection of the divine center:

This effect of the specular relation with reduplication leads to a displacement, from the original centering to a centering that reduplicates the first. There results a specific, supplementary effect whose functioning we saw when we discussed...the relation between subject and object, the center and its horizon. This effect is now displaced on to the reduplicated Subject, here God. The relation subject=object, once it is caught up in the reduplication of this de-centering, takes on a new form, becoming a relation of the absolute subordination of the first subject to the Second Subject. The first subject becomes accountable to the Second Subject; the first subject is subjected to the Second Subject, who is Sovereign and Judge. The specular relation becomes a relation of moral accountability, that is, responsibility. On the other hand, the Second Subject serves the first as guarantee. The couple submission/guarantee...thus reveals itself to basic to the structure of any ideology.²⁸⁰

The main elements of Althusser's description here—the ideological specularly produced by dominant discourse on the God-as-Subject, the ostensibly perfect correspondence between the Subject and the subject, and the proliferation of the subject by decentering and drawing on the Subject as an alibi—could all serve as a gloss for the exchange in *DICTEE*.

Cha, however, takes us in a slightly different direction in her account of narcissistic misrecognition. This difference, I argue, is *not* that Cha reveals interpellation to be an imperfect process allowing room for conflict and the writing of the counter-script: Althusser was not any less articulate about the presence of competing ideologies, disagreement, and struggle in Ideological State Apparatuses and more broadly in the domain of culture.²⁸¹ What is intriguing in

²⁸⁰ Louis Althusser, "On Feuerbach," *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966-67)*, ed. François Matheron, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 129-130.

²⁸¹ One of Althusser's main arguments in his essay on Ideological State Apparatuses is that ISAs may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of bitter forms of struggle. In other words, ISAs can both interpellate subjects and be the site where imperfectly and multiply hailed subjects clash. However, Althusser locates *the origins of the struggle* not in the realm of the cultural superstructure but in the antagonism and hostility generated by the totality of the "structure" or the mode of production comprising productive forces and the relations of production. It is here that I disagree with Lowe's claim that (unlike Cha) Althusser is unable to see the "more complicated and critical understanding of the incommensurability that constitutes the grounds of antagonism between the subjects and apparatuses of interpellation." Lowe's partial reading of

Cha's passage is the idea, or the anxiety, that the individual speaker's "confession," in spite (or perhaps *because*) of its dissidence against dominant ideology, will have to turn into the narcissistic confession of a *collective*: "*Acquiesce*, to and for the *complot in the Hieratic tongue. Theirs*. Into *their* tongue, the counterscript, *my confession into Theirs. Into Theirs*." The speaker, here, we might say, feels that she is being coerced into complotting, into producing a confession that will not be about herself but that of a particular group. How are we to read this anxiety and the paradoxical nature of this confession suspended between the individual and the collective? What is its effect on the rest of *DICTEE*?

Barbara Johnson's and Rey Chow's depathologizing reinterpretations of narcissism through social disparity are useful in considering these questions. In her reading of Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928),²⁸² Johnson analyses the self-destructive tendencies of the African American protagonist Helga Crane in terms of an "open wound." Borrowing from as well as questioning the limits of the individualist framework of "narcissistic personality disorder" defined by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, Johnson argues that Helga's narcissism may, in fact, have social causes where "inadequate mirroring" can cause the ego to desire "self-cancellation" instead of "self-validation," a "hollowness" that arises out of structural differences of class, race, gender, and sexuality.²⁸³ Toward the end of her discussion of the novel, Johnson makes two observations relevant to our discussion: first, the novel's representation of Helga's wounded narcissism and of the self structured like a commodity, while extending Kohut's work to the broader socio-political

Althusser may have something to do with her desire to read "subversion" and "resistance" in *DICTEE*. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," *On Ideology* (1971), trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2008), 20-21. See Lowe, 54.

²⁸² Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: Dover Publications, 2006).

²⁸³ Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37-54. Johnson does not complicate Lacan (like Dolto and Fanon do) and instead makes a distinction between the ("Lacanian") mirror stage and Kohut's Self-Psychology. However, like Fanon, she is critical of the psychoanalyst's overestimation of the nuclear family as the context of psychic development.

context of the African American middle class in the 1920s, should not be equated with the psyche of the novelist.²⁸⁴ Secondly, while the literary elaboration of minority narcissism is neither a cure nor political *per se*, the politics of structural social change will be impossible if narcissistic resistances of minoritized populations are not addressed.²⁸⁵ In other words, while Johnson rethinks narcissism through the literary, this exercise has a purpose well beyond any disciplinary understanding of “literary criticism.”²⁸⁶

Similarly, Rey Chow alerts us to this political dimension of narcissism in her analysis of the (auto)biographical tendency in later immigrant writing in the United States. Building on the Althusserian scene of interpellation, Chow theorizes what she calls “coercive mimeticism,” to describe a confessional mode, a “turn toward the self, especially the ethnic self—as a form of production.”²⁸⁷ By calling this linguistic self-production “narcissistic,” Chow, like Johnson, moves beyond orthodox conceptualizations of narcissism thereby gesturing towards the need for a clearer understanding of the relationship between the psychic and the social in the context of Asian American self-representation. Recast in terms of the social, ethnic narcissism also becomes a “symptom” of marginalization and repression, of the narcissism of the dominant ideology.

Interestingly, Chow suggests that ethnic narcissism has the potential to go beyond the individual,

²⁸⁴ Here, we can also see an important distinction between Johnson’s and de Man’s approaches to referentiality. When de Man’s reading of Proust and Wordsworth rejects referentiality by undoing the distinction between fiction and autobiography, its *goal* is to uncover or reach the “self” that is ungrounded by tropological defacements. In contrast, while examining the work of a novelist from the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson *begins* with the manifestly fragmented self and then moves on to analyze its capacity to refer to relations between the psychic and the social. See Paul de Man, “Autobiography as Defacement,” *MLN* 94 (December 1979): 919-930.

²⁸⁵ See Johnson, 55-60.

²⁸⁶ Samuel Solomon offers a reading where he begins by showing how narcissism, for Johnson, is a depathologized diagnosis necessary for the idea of politics-as-change. But the rest of his article tries to show narcissism is a “literary” and “ethical” category for Johnson in de Man’s sense of the terms. Here, the tension between de Man’s aversion toward referentiality and Johnson’s more nuanced understanding of the social production of the fragmented self is not addressed, perhaps so that narcissism can become another name for de Man’s “allegory of reading.” See Samuel Solomon, “‘The Necessity of Reading and Being Read’: Barbara Johnson and the Literary Politics of Narcissism,” *differences* 21: *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (2010): 98-111.

²⁸⁷ Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic*, 111.

since it mediates between the individual ethnic artist and her ethnic community. It is this oscillation, Chow suggests that could potentially un/make narcissism into a “transindividual issue of attachment and belonging.”²⁸⁸

It is useful to see *DICTEE* as working through similar notions of narcissistic negotiation between the minoritized individual and the collective. Yet, unlike Johnson’s and Chow’s examples, it does so without fully attaching itself to any one identity, or even a single ethnic community, and at a moment when most minority writers and critics in the United States were far less reflexive about the formation of “identity knowledges.”²⁸⁹ In her discussion of Cha’s text, Anne Anlin Cheng notes that while “*DICTEE* is not interested in identities, it is profoundly interested in the processes of *identification*.”²⁹⁰ I am, in particular, interested in examining *DICTEE*’s imperfect interpellations by at least two “ethnic”²⁹¹ communities and their corresponding literary modes of production: the Asian American and the avant-garde.

In its first two sections, *DICTEE* repeatedly asks its readers to see how language became a

²⁸⁸ See Chow, 141. Chow, however, is skeptical of the actualization of this possibility in cultural production, and makes a distinction between theorization on the one hand, and non-theoretical “autobiographical speaking and writing” on the other hand. Analyzing personal essays collected in the anthology *Under Western Eyes*, she emphasizes the sheer sense of abjection and entrapment that marks ethnic self-expression of the contributing writers. I would like to argue that *DICTEE* enacts this transindividual narcissism but without confining itself within a specific community. See Chow, 146. See generally, Gareth Hongo ed., *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1995).

²⁸⁹ I borrow this expression from Robyn Wiegman to mean the various programs and projects of academic study (literary to begin with in many cases) that were institutionalized in the U.S. university-system in the course of the twentieth century for the study of identities primarily based on race, gender, and sexuality. See Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

²⁹⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 141.

²⁹¹ I use the word “ethnic” as Timothy Yu does (through the work of Renato Poggioli), in a sociological sense, to describe the 70s American avant-garde not just as an aesthetic program but as a non-dominant sociological formation whose formation is comparable to that of “minority” and “diaspora” communities. By the same token, 70s Asian American poetry can also be a competing version of this “avant-garde.” Yu’s goal is not to suggest that the Asian American and the avant-garde artists’ experiences of being in the minority are identical but rather that each group is ethnic insofar as it yokes together different groups and individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds for the purposes of political and cultural organization and dissent. See Yu 5. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

particularly political issue for Korea in the wake of the Japanese occupation. After paying tribute to the forgotten revolutionary Yu Guan Soon as well as acknowledging the impossibility of rescuing the individual that Guan Soon was from the rhetoric of historical record, Cha writes in “CLIO/HISTORY”:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To *this* enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of *this* enemy people....To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another....To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernible features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other.²⁹²

Cha’s description of Japan as *the* sign and the Japanese language as that which produces memories of colonization as “meaning” that pricks the body will remind us of moments in *Black Skin White Masks* at which the body is also the domain of operation of language and visceral reactions to language are part and parcel of the colonizing apparatus.

Cha’s reference to the “imaginarization” of language here is thus in stark contrast with contemporaneous post-structuralist assertions about the mobility of the signifier in the Symbolic. The narrator’s voice, here, would sound particularly contrapuntal when read alongside Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* where “meaninglessness” of the fictive “text” called “Japan” and Barthes’s desire to transcend the ideology of the signifier and the signified are predicated on the French tourist’s ability to separate himself from the actual country and its (colonial) history: “The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner (provided the country is not hostile to him) in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue.”²⁹³ Cha’s critique of the foreigner’s abstract production of a

²⁹² Cha, 32-33.

²⁹³ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (1970), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 9.

“distant” land (whether Japan or Korea) is useful precisely because it allows us to see that this protective distance from political specificity (of the complicated relationship between Hangul and Japanese, for instance) serves as the condition of possibility for more transcendental approaches to language and representation like that of the post-structuralism of (late) Barthes. That is to say, it is only by overlooking the difference between Japan’s political treatment of France and its treatment of Korea that Barthes can proceed to apply his ignorance to theorize a fictive Japan as a collection of alienating and meaningless signs and erotic bodies “without hysteria, without narcissism.”²⁹⁴

In “CALLIOPE/EPIC POETRY,” Cha’s narrator continues to reflect on the Imaginary valorization of language. In her reenactment of her mother’s experiences, the narrator hints at the Korean linguistic nationalism and national identity that emerge out of linguistic persecution:

You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly. To speak makes you sad. Yearning. To utter each word is privilege you risk by death. Not only for you but for all. All of you who are one, who by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue. You carry at center the mark of red above and the mark of blue below, heaven and earth, tai-geuk; t’ai-chi. It is the mark. The mark of belonging. Mark of cause. Mark of retrieval.²⁹⁵

The concepts of being “at home” in one’s “mother tongue” or a sense of “belonging” produced by linguistic unification would be anathematic to Derridean and Kristevan approaches to language where one is never at home in one’s language, where we are always already strangers to ourselves.²⁹⁶

Interestingly, *DICTEE*, here, tries to narrate the psychic and political production of linguistic and national identification but without claiming that identity for itself. The narrating voice in this section tries to see her mother’s “Mother tongue” not as a “natural” entity but as

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁹⁵ Cha, 46.

²⁹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

something valued as a form of defense and in opposition to the language of colonization. In a later section called “MELPOMENE/TRAGEDY,” the voice admits that the same understanding of “mother tongue” does not apply to her because she has been interpellated differently: “I speak another tongue, a second tongue. This is how distant I am. From then. From that time.”²⁹⁷

A number of critics in *Writing Self Writing Nation* turn to the first two sections to make their case for *DICTEE* as an instance of “Korean American” and/or “feminine” resistance.²⁹⁸ Cha’s text, however, works against such readings of resistance even as it repeatedly alludes to linguistic, racial, and gendered cultural marginalization. Finding “a” resistive voice is difficult because the narrating-I in *DICTEE* appears inconsistently, is highly unstable, and cannot be pinned down to an autobiographical-I. Even though *DICTEE* has autobiographical elements, readers taking all its disconnected sections into account can make no claims to a “common” Korean or Korean American or even a consistently “female voice,” particularly because of the later sections which involve impersonal and abstract descriptions and third-person accounts, including even facsimiles of letters written from an unidentified “Laura Claxton” to the equally unidentified “H.J. Small” and “a friend.”²⁹⁹

That the by-definition incomplete, partial interpellations by competing ideologies is inadequate to “subvert” the chaotic aesthetic regime that is capitalism is also suggested by *DICTEE*’s ambivalence toward the contemporary poetic avant-garde, well-known for its anti-capitalism. On the one hand, by juxtaposing the avant-garde against identitarian and post-structuralist approaches to language, Cha’s text displays a postmodern fragmentation that Fredric

²⁹⁷ Cha, 85.

²⁹⁸ Elaine Kim, for instance, argues that Cha insists on “the specificity of her Korean American identity.” Lisa Lowe looks for “female difference” in Cha’s text as an obstacle to patriarchal processes of interpellation. See Kim, 21. See Lowe, 58.

²⁹⁹ See Cha 142, 146-148.

Jameson calls the cultural “logic of late capitalism.”³⁰⁰ On the other hand, as I show below, unlike Jameson’s formulation, *DICTEE* does not perform fragmentation to “flatten” difference.³⁰¹ Instead, the juxtaposition of distinct linguistic politics reveals implicit hierarchies between them. Ultimately, neither post-structuralism nor the avant-garde in Cha’s text can evade revealing its complicity with capitalism.

In his very useful discussion of the reception history of Cha’s text, Timothy Yu points out that critics who read *DICTEE* as a manifesto for (post-structuralist) Asian American hybridity fail to see the influence of the avant-garde school of Language poetry in her work. Language poetry emerged in the United States in the 1960s and moved from its marginal status to being a better known group with a larger audience in the late 70s and the early 80s with the publication of its journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. In her review of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Marjorie Perloff notes that in spite of differences between them, these poets formed a collective insofar as they wished to reject the dominant privileging of the referent and the self and instead to foreground the “wordness” of language by moving away from the autobiographical voice as a privileged structure as well as by refusing normative distinctions between prose and poetry. The primary goal of language poetry was therefore to assault referentiality by depersonalizing linguistic use and revealing its inherent possibilities by shifting phonemes, wordplay, alliteration, and assonance.³⁰² Importantly, many of the poets like Silliman, Bernstein, and Steve McCaffery also saw their linguistic assault as an attack on capitalism, since they saw referentiality as a form of commodity fetishism.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53-92.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁰² See Marjorie Perloff, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Review), *American Poetry Review* (May/June 1984): 15-22.

³⁰³ For instance, Silliman writes: “what happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with

Those parts of *DICTEE* that unequivocally turn away from the lyrical and autobiographical-I and blur prose-poetry boundaries bear a strong resemblance to this avant-garde creed. For instance, “ERATO/LOVE POETRY” ends with the following poem: “It had been snowing. During the while./Interval. Recess. Pause./It snowed. The name. The term. The noun./It had snowed. The verb. The predicate. The act of./Fell.”³⁰⁴ The phenomenon of snowing, Cha seems to suggest, can be conveyed only through its linguistic manifestations, which the poetic voice explores through three different formulations to represent the variations of the meaning (and hence the experiences) of the phenomenon. Similarly, towards the end of “POLYMNIA /SACRED POETRY,” Cha writes: “Words cast each to each to weather/avowed indisputably, to time./If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,/residue of word, stand as a ruin stands,/simply, as mark/having relinquished itself to time to distance.”³⁰⁵ Here, as in the case of the language poets, Cha’s interest is not in the specific speaker(s) of the words but in the preservation of their use, in poetry as a kind of “fossil-making” that weathers and survives the test of time. One could find numerous other instances in *DICTEE* where the text leaves aside issues of race, nationalism, and ethnicity to explore “writing” as a mode of discovery and experimentation outside the normative and the normalizing strategies of representation. As Yu suggests, this avant-garde element of *DICTEE* is at odds with its depictions of identificatory processes. These two conflicting paradigms are thus simultaneously visible but the tension between them is not resolved.³⁰⁶

In this context, I would like to pause on Yu’s final claim that “For Cha...politics must first and foremost be a question of language, and thus it is writing that must provide the basis for

corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of ‘realism,’ the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought” (*LB*, p. 125). Quoted in Perloff, 21.

³⁰⁴ Cha, 118.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 177.

³⁰⁶ See Yu, 122.

any attempt to resist domination.”³⁰⁷ Here, it seems to me that Yu, while arguing that “literature” or the “literary” is understood differently by contemporaneous communities, still promotes a somewhat rarified notion of literary resistance. I would argue that *DICTEE* is more equivocal about the powers of literary dissidence. Even as *DICTEE* echoes the language poets’ desire to fight referentiality (and hence the ideology and commodity fetishism of capitalism) with non-referential writing, a few lines that erupt (and recur with variations) in the second half of the text also put into question that avant-garde faith, without being identifiably Korean or Korean American:

To bite the tongue./Swallow. Deep. Deeper./Swallow. Again even more./Just until there would be no more organ./Organ no more./Cries....Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise./Broken speech. One to one. At a time./Cracked tongue. Broken tongue./Pidgeon. Semblance of speech./Swallows. Inhales. Stutter. Starts. Stops before starts.³⁰⁸

Cha’s return to speech during the act of writing, to that opening scene depicting the desire for and constraints imposed on speech (and hence communication, resistance, and politics) should alert us to this aspect of *DICTEE* that is suspicious of “agency” through any literary approach that seems oblivious of the demands that language makes as a commodity.³⁰⁹ I therefore read the first few lines quoted above as *DICTEE*’s almost self-negating desire to destroy the very organ of speech and as its simultaneous performance and critique of the avant-garde. Similarly, in the next few lines, Cha’s impersonal poetics troubles itself with the raced connotations of the stuttering “pidgeon” voice and the “broken tongue,” a voice that perhaps has difficulty articulating itself in

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 132.

³⁰⁸ Cha, 69-75. See also Cha, 158, 161.

³⁰⁹ For a critique of language poetry’s utopian goals to fight capitalism as it subscribes to the mantra of “consumer choice,” see J. H. Prynne, “Extract from letter to ‘Mr. Hayles’,” *Language Issue* I (1993?): unpaginated. For a similar critique of language poetry’s fetishization of language stripped of reference, see Perloff, 21.

and fully embracing the linguistic “neutrality” of this predominantly white avant-garde space.³¹⁰

Just as it troubles the voice, *DICTEE* also troubles the gaze. *DICTEE*’s literariness is impacted upon by its considerations of visuality, by its reflections on and turn to other media—such as the cinematic and the photographic. As mentioned above, both “MELPOMENE/TRAGEDY” and “ERATO/LOVE POETRY” contain passages that demonstrate Cha’s interest in cinematic spectatorship. The early seventies, we will recall, saw the birth of “apparatus theory” that likened the pleasures of narrative cinema to the operations of ideology and misrecognition in the mirror stage. In 1975, Laura Mulvey famously argued that the spectator of classical Hollywood cinema has little choice when invited to identify narcissistically with the “male gaze” that treats the woman in front of the camera as a spectacular object of voyeurism and fetishism.³¹¹ In 1979, Raymond Bellour also analyzed the classical Hollywood text as being trapped in hetero-masculinity and the phallic imperatives of the Symbolic order.³¹² In 1981, a year before *DICTEE* was published, Mulvey revised her earlier position to explore the possibility of female spectatorship as well the impact of a female protagonist on her earlier theory of spectatorship.³¹³ Cha’s references to the female spectator in “MELPOMENE/TRAGEDY” are not surprising given that she had worked with Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel and was thus in the midst of these debates on spectatorship. Describing an anonymous female spectator, Cha writes:

She could be seen sitting in the first few rows. She would be sitting in the first few rows. Closer the better. The more. Better to eliminate presences of others surrounding better view away from that which is left behind far away back behind more for closer view more and more face to face until nothing else sees only this view singular. All dim, gently, slowly until in the dark, the absolute darkness the shadows fade....The

³¹⁰ As Yu points out, although white experimental poets frequently turned to “Asia” for inspiration, (white) avant-garde poets and Asian American poets had little interaction in the 70s and 80s. See Yu, 11.

³¹¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 198-209.

³¹² Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, trans. Constance Penley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 77-192.

³¹³ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘visual pleasure and narrative cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*,” in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (London: Routledge), 69-79.

submission is complete. Relinquishes even the vision to immobility. Abandons all protests to that which will appear to the sight. All 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 totality. Total severance of the seen. Incision.³¹⁴

Like the apparatus theorists, Cha aligns the cinematic image with ideological manipulation that functions as a lure. The spectator wants to be as close to the image as possible, separating herself from those around her, creating a space of self-enclosure that Barthes calls the “cinematographic cocoon.”³¹⁵ In these passages, *DICTEE* underscores both the power wielded by the image on the spectator as well as a critical desire to break out of its hypnotic spell. Thus, an “alteration of the visible,” Cha suggests, cannot happen if the spectator remains a spectator. Cha’s position here is close to Mulvey’s call for practices that aim to “free the look of the camera,”³¹⁶ to extricate image production from the apparatus’s tendency to promote the spectacular and passive consumption. Such a position can be explained by the fact that Cha herself was also an experimental filmmaker. That the riveted spectator here is female is also significant given later discussions in feminist film theory regarding the special proximity of the female spectator to the woman-as-image. As Mary Ann Doane would write a few years later in her discussion of classical Hollywood: “...becoming the image, the woman can no longer have it. For the female spectator, the image is *too* close—it cannot be projected far enough.”³¹⁷

These references to the specular cinematic Imaginary in *DICTEE* need not be seen in opposition to its representation of racialized and fragmented linguistic Imaginary. In fact, *DICTEE*’s reading of the domination of the cinematic apparatus is part of its larger critique of the neocolonial U.S. state apparatus. The passages on spectatorship are preceded by a map of divided

³¹⁴ Cha, 79.

³¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Apparatus*, 2.

³¹⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 209.

³¹⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 168.

Korea and followed by a letter written by the narrator to her mother describing the political deadlock eighteen years after the Korean War:

...Fixed in perpetual exile. Here at my return in eighteen years, the war is not ended. We fight the same war. We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination. We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, the Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate.³¹⁸

Initially, this critique of Korea's partition, its "severance" by the U.S. army (who divided Korea, occupied South Korea in 1945, and called itself the "liberators") seems to have little to do with cinema's severance of the spectator from herself. However, Cha's description of a war-torn Korea and its "Imaginary borders"³¹⁹ is followed by two final enigmatic paragraphs where cinematic and the state apparatuses come together to end the section:

Suffice Melpomene, arrest the screen en-trance flickering hue from behind cast shadow silhouette from back not visible. Like ice. Metal. Glass. Mirror. Receives none. Admits none. Arrest the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own. Suffice Melpomene, to exorcize from this mouth the name the words the memory of severance....³²⁰

Here, Cha appeals to Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, to arrest the coercive operations of this "machine" which, in this passage, could stand for the U.S. state as well as the apparently democratic medium of (Hollywood) cinema. Just as the cinematic apparatus severs the spectator from herself, not so much "reflecting" as "refracting" or deflecting her image into the cinematic medium, so too the U.S. army distances Korea linguistically and culturally from "herself." Cha's turn to film theory is thus not simply an echo of Baudry or Mulvey—it is a simultaneous consideration of the cinematic Imaginary and a larger transnational political Imaginary.

What begins as an echo of contemporary feminist Anglo-European critique of (Hollywood) cinema also becomes a reading of phallic U.S. imperialism. Historically speaking, Cha's striking superimposition of the politics of the cinematic apparatus on to the state is not as

³¹⁸ Cha, 81.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

³²⁰ Ibid., 81.

eccentric as it may appear, given that Hollywood had, in fact, contributed significantly to the economic and cultural expansion of the United States since the early twentieth century which, in turn, allowed the U.S. government to fund its forays during both the First and Second World Wars.³²¹

DICTEE's turn to the "cinematic" state apparatus is therefore also its admission of its inability to sustain a reading practice that seeks refuge in the literary. Together with the fragmentation of the very category of the literary along the categories of ethnicity, race, and national belonging, *DICTEE* demonstrates that its own experience of reading cannot stay away from the multi-tiered politics of the cinematic image. Here, Cha's artistic practice prefigures later theoretical reflections on the cinematic (and visibility more generally) as being crucial to theorizing sensorial experiences that constitute subjectivity and sociality, and, therefore, ethics and politics.³²² That is not to suggest that language ceases to matter in *DICTEE*. For instance, when in "ERATO/LOVE POETRY," Cha separates the description of the camera's movement from the voice or what is heard on the screen, *DICTEE*'s adaptation of an avant-garde experimentation in asynchronism continues to be hounded by apprehensions of linguistic competence and dominance:

³²¹ For a discussion of the contribution of Hollywood studios like Universal, Paramount, and Fox to the U.S. government's pro-war messages to the nation during World War I, see Max Alvarez, "Cinema as an Imperialist Weapon: Hollywood and World War I" (2010). Accessed May 01, 2012. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/aug2010/holl-a05.shtml>. For a discussion of the U.S. government's management of Hollywood during the presidency of Roosevelt and the implementation of the New Deal, see Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). For a discussion of the relationship between the formation of Film Studies as a scholarly discipline in the U.S. academy and the definition of American culture from around 1915 to the mid-1960s, see Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Elite Culture: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³²² See for instance Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Hammerjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory after Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), and Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

She forms the words with her mouth as the other utter across from her. She shapes her lips accordingly, gently she blows whos and whys and whats. On verra. O-n. Ver-rah. Verre. Ah....For a second time. For another time. For the other overlapping time. *Too fast. Slow your pace. Please. Slower, much slower. For me to follow. Doucement. Lentement. Softly and slowly* (my emphasis).³²³

Here too, Cha's representation of the experimental becomes a scene of language instruction, of an unequal power dynamic between the learner and more competent "other," with the latter speaking too rapidly for the learner to learn and repeat after.

Finally, the notion of literary resistance in *DICTEE* is also destabilized if we examine it as a mixed medium text, or what W. J. T. Mitchell calls an "imagetext." Mitchell uses the term to designate composite, synthetic works that combine visual images and linguistic text. However, in coining this term, Mitchell does not want to compare language and image as entities that function independently. Instead, he wants to examine the various kinds of effects enacted through the unavoidable exchange between language and image in representations which might yield the relative dominance or greater "visibility" of one medium over another, mutual collaboration between the two, or incommensurability and non-negotiable difference. For Mitchell, the imagetext is not an "aberration" where "normally" language and image are discrete entities. Rather, the imagetext lays bare and critiques these different relationships constituting the field of representation. Mitchell writes:

The image-text relation...is not merely a technical question, but a site of conflict, a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation. The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not "what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?" but "what differences do the differences (and similarities) make?" That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended or separated?³²⁴

Any attempt toward critique through a purist recourse to "language" or to the "literary" risks being myopic insofar as it may be eliding the experience of the visual that is already a part of and is being used by that "linguistic" exercise.

³²³ Cha, 97.

³²⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91.

Furthermore, if vision/sight is one of the paradigmatic models by which referentiality is produced and maintained as an ideology, then the vexed question of the “referent” also cannot be simply bracketed in quotidian experiences and a critical aesthetics that explicitly combine the visual with the linguistic.³²⁵ Mitchell uses the mixed medium of the “photographic essay” to illustrate these varying relations between the two mediums. The photographic essay, he further notes, is typically complicit with dominant ideology and perpetuates a “frictionless” collaboration between language and image to stage the referent:

The normal structure of this kind of imagetext involves the straightforward discursive or narrative suturing of the verbal and the visual: texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground, and document the text.³²⁶

To move past beyond this ideology of frictionless exchange, what becomes useful for Mitchell is not a wholesale rejection of the visual or of referentiality, but Michel Foucault’s reminder that “the visible” is never completely reducible to the “sayable.” Here, Mitchell helpfully turns to Foucault in *The Order of Things*, who emphasizes that “It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.”³²⁷ Instead of focusing on the potential mobility of the (linguistic) signifier to theorize intralinguistic and psychic slippage, Foucault thus encourages us to explore the modalities of disjunction, incompatibility, and rivalry between language and image, all that is usually covered over by injunctions to name objects and render them identifiable. It is in the context of these shifting

³²⁵ As the philosopher Lévinas notes, referentiality is produced by the (human) tendency to bring “all alterity under its thematizing gaze.” Lévinas, however, does not discuss the production of this gaze in relation to capitalism. In this connection, it would be helpful to recall Djébar’s turn to sight in the reformulation of her own linguistic/literary practice. See Emmanuel Lévinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” in *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 97.

³²⁶ Mitchell, 94.

³²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 9.

language-image relations that I understand Cha's *DICTEE*'s use of images.

None of Cha's critics mentioned so far—except Stone-Richards—notes that *DICTEE* opens and ends not with linguistic signifiers but with visual images. The recto of *DICTEE*'s opening pages is a black and white cinemascope shot of tombs and sandy ruins in a desert. The remnants of what looks like a pyramidal shrine in the corner of the frame, the rocky mounds stretching from the foreground into the distance, and the colorlessness of the image in general—all these elements prefigure the text's interest in historicity, death, and time. However, together with the image, the black masking of the wide-angle shot on the page also demands the reader's attention, since it extends into and fully consumes the verso. If this masking is generally of little interest to the spectator of images in the cinema (except for the fact that it functions as a limit, marking off all that is outside the frame or in the blind-field), *DICTEE*'s foregrounding of this framing suggests to us that the "apparatus," the conditions of representation, and invisibility will be important themes of the text.

In the page following the cinematic image, Cha includes what has been described as a "frontispiece"³²⁸: an image of white inscriptions, or more accurately, letters in the Korean alphabet on a black surface. As several critics have pointed out, this is an image of an anonymous wall carving in Hangul that is well-known to Koreans or those familiar with Korean history. The inscription, when translated reads: "Mother/I miss you/I am hungry/I want to go home."³²⁹ The inscription, originally found on the wall of a coal mine in Japan, is attributed to a Korean exile, one of a few thousand who worked as laborers in Japan in the early twentieth century. For the critics in *Writing Self Writing Nation*, the inscription and the story around it, whether authentic or

³²⁸ See Stone-Richards, 152.

³²⁹ I am following Elaine's Kim translation. See Elaine Kim, "Poised on the In-between," *Writing Self Writing Nation*, 10.

not, are unavoidable reminders of Japan's colonization of Korea.³³⁰ For instance, Elaine H. Kim writes of claims that the carving dates to a period after the Japanese left Korea: "Whether or not these speculations are rooted in official Japanese attempts to deny or deflect criticisms of colonial atrocities, they in no way reduce the symbolic significance of the inscription...."³³¹ In light of my argument so far, Kim's reaction cannot simply be discarded as outmoded identity politics or a call to "mother tongue" as an undifferentiated material envelope. Instead, it would be more useful to see it as a product of the intersection between Cha's evocation of a colonial language politics and a certain anti-colonial "stickiness" that attaches to Hangul language-as-image transnationally, as a legacy of Korea's status first as a Chinese protectorate and then a Japanese colony.

Additionally, a close reading of the frontispiece also tells us that *DICTEE*'s approach to reading and reception cannot be confined to the workings of language "in" the text. As Shelley Wong points out, although the traditional function of the frontispiece is to provide an introductory illustration that leads *into* the piece, Cha's inscription does not exactly fit into that role:

the Korean inscription, reading as it does, vertically from right to left, ending at the extreme left margin, effectively disables that traditional function. Instead of leading the reader into the work, the directional movement of the frontispiece begins to usher the reader back *out of the text* (my emphasis).³³²

Like Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* that Walter Benjamin draws on to think of history, the inscription turns away from the text—that is, toward outside and toward the past shaping the text—even as it marks its beginning and movement into it.³³³ All notions of "resistance" therefore also need to be weighed against the catastrophe and piling debris that is the stuff of *DICTEE*'s

³³⁰ Some scholars in Japan have argued that the inscription dates from a period after the Japanese left Korea. See Kim, 25.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Shelley Sunn Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*," *Writing Self Writing Nation*, 107-108.

³³³ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: 1927-1934 Volume 2*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 389-400. Here, I disagree with Yu's claim that Cha rejects history in favor of "writing." See Yu, 128.

own history, an idea that is in keeping with the opening image of the ruins and tombs. Yet, even as the inscription evokes colonial memory, as a blurred photocopy of an image, the frontispiece also announces its distance from the actual material and immaterial labors of the inscription.³³⁴ It lays bare its alienation from the labors of the inscribers, available to readers only through the photocopy in the form of the art-book called *DICTEE*. That is to say, the frontispiece asks the linguistically competent reader to sit with a difficult proposition: the wounds of colonialism may endure in linguistic experience. There is, however, no easy return or laying claim to the “originary” moment of violence. As Thy Phu points out in her analysis of the frontispiece: “the process of making history visible necessarily involves taking into account that which remains invisible: the facts, the voices, the subjects that remain irrecoverable”³³⁵

At the same time, given that *DICTEE* might fall into the hands of a reader who is not trained in Korean (such as myself), we also need another reading of the Hangul inscription. I would argue that, for the reader unschooled in Korean, Cha’s image of Hangul anticipates moments of linguistic incomprehensibility that recur in the imagetext. For example, immediately after presenting the birth record of the revolutionary Guan Soon who, we are told, is born of “one mother and one father,” Cha inserts Chinese characters for “woman” and “man” in a calligraphic style in the following two pages.³³⁶ Similarly, toward the end of “CALLIOPE/EPIC POETRY,” after the narrator’s reconstruction of her mother’s return to her parents, Cha inserts Chinese characters for “father” and “mother.” To the competent reader, the sudden appearance of Chinese during a retelling of the story of a Korean martyr and the linguistic marginalization of a Korean

³³⁴ To my knowledge, Stone-Richards is the first critic to make this important observation. See Stone-Richards, 152.

³³⁵ Thy Phu, “Decapitated Forms: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility,” *Mosaic* 38 (March 2005): 17.

³³⁶ Cha, 25.

exile could legitimately stand out as *DICTEE*'s reminder of colonial hegemony.³³⁷ But what about the linguistically incompetent reader, who might not, for instance, be able to tell the difference between Hangul and the Chinese scripts?

In an unpublished paper, Wendy Chun employs Thomas Keenan's provocative rethinking of the relationship between literature and politics to theorize the incomprehensibility of Cha's text. Chun writes:

According to Thomas Keenan, "it is precisely when we do not know exactly what we should do, when the effects and conditions of our actions can no longer be calculated, and when we have nowhere else to turn, not even back to our 'self,' that we encounter something like responsibility."³³⁸

Later, in the same essay, Chun writes: "...*DICTEE* emphasizes the responsibility, the impossibility and the necessity of reading. Faced with a text that defies decipherment, the reader must still read even as it is impossible to comprehend fully."³³⁹ Following Keenan's notion of responsibility (which echoes Derrida's "democracy"), Chun sees *DICTEE* as an aesthetic lesson in reading-as-cognitive-uncertainty.

I would suggest that we push Cha's multilingualism and its thwarting of the readers' identification even a little further: the moment of responsibility, here, is also an awareness of the *irresponsibility of capital in the post-colonial era*, which makes "some" languages (like Chinese or Hangul) globally "more foreign" than English or French, the two languages that *DICTEE* mainly employs. Here I agree with Naoki Sakai's insight that Cha shows the "irrevocable presence of the history of political coercion in the very choice of a language."³⁴⁰ However, *DICTEE*'s aesthetic performance does not level the uneven experiences of language and linguistic choice in Cha's text. Neither does this unevenness produce an open invitation of

³³⁷ For instance, see Wong, 126.

³³⁸ Chun, 10.

³³⁹ Ibid., 20.

³⁴⁰ Sakai, 28.

“the Other.” That is to say, contrary to what Sakai argues later in his essay (echoing Derrida), it is difficult to see “every language as a foreign language”³⁴¹ if we bear in mind *DICTEE*’s references to linguistic domination as a form of political domination. In other words, I would argue that Cha’s politics of incomprehensibility drives home the *degrees of foreignness* of languages. Instead of a promise of radical (literary) democracy, *DICTEE*’s erratic multilingualism elicits skepticism and raises the following disturbing questions: How is this experience of linguistic alterity to be radically political and transcend identity if the alterity is shaped by (post)modernism’s capitalism’s fundamental ethnocentrism and its capacity for accommodating and isolating “difference”? What if the groundlessness and uncertainty of reading performed by *DICTEE* is that which constitutes the very “identity” of global capital?

Last but not least, turning to Cha’s use of nameless and uncaptioned photographs will give us another opportunity to analyze *DICTEE*’s fraught relationship with the “linguistic turn.” Since *DICTEE* was published a year after *Camera Lucida*, Cha may or may not have been aware of Barthes’s theorization of the relationship between mortality and the photographic “this-has-been.”³⁴² Nevertheless, *DICTEE*’s evocation of historicity, death, and transience through its photographs, together with its recurrent use of the figure of the mother, prompts a comparison between the two texts.³⁴³ As is well-known, in *Camera Lucida*, written as a tribute to his deceased mother, Barthes withholds his mother’s photograph from his readers. This is the “Winter Garden Photograph” that was taken when Barthes’s mother was a child, and which concerns the entire second half of *Camera Lucida*. Barthes’s withholding of the photograph and its replacement through linguistic description are significant because the photograph contains the kernel of his argument about all photographs: the Winter Garden Photograph epitomizes that pricking,

³⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

³⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

³⁴³ Here, my analysis both draws on and moves beyond Phu’s comparison between Cha and Barthes.

wounding awareness of mortality that Barthes associates with every photograph (some more than others) and which he calls the *punctum*. Barthes explains that his logic for excluding this defining photograph: since the *punctum* is entirely personal in nature, the Winter Garden Photograph is likely to produce “indifference” in the reader. In other words, Barthes concludes that what is not personally familial, or more specifically not related to the readers’ own experiences of the maternal, is not pointed enough to wound the reader and will thus remain in the domain of the “ordinary.”³⁴⁴ For Barthes, the extraordinariness of the photograph of his mother can therefore only be conveyed as and through a linguistic exercise.

In contrast with Barthes, Cha opens “CALLIOPE/EPIC POETRY” with a photograph of her mother Hyung Soon Huo. It is perhaps what Barthes would call an “ordinary” photograph, of a woman in a black jacket standing against a frayed wall, offering no striking “detail.” As discussed above, Cha begins this section by describing the mother as a linguistically marginalized woman in exile in China. However, it soon becomes clear that, in this imaginative reconstruction, Cha is not attempting a biographical description or a character sketch of her mother. Here, the mother’s experiences blend into and are filtered through the narrator’s experiences, where the referents of the “I” and “you” are not entirely distinct: “I write. I write you....I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American.”³⁴⁵ What purpose does the photograph in the beginning serve then, in Cha’s fluid play of pronouns?

It is important to remember that this photograph (like all other photographs used in *DICTEE*) is uncaptioned. Unlike Barthes’s detailed description of the Winter Garden Photograph, Cha gives us no context and does not tell us where or when her mother posed for this image. Readers can confirm that it is Hyung Soon Huo only because the photograph is also on the cover

³⁴⁴ See Barthes, 70-77.

³⁴⁵ Cha, 56.

of *DICTEE* and labeled at the back. In her reading of Cha's inclusion of this photograph, Phu writes:

Cha's handling of lineage and photography implicitly refutes Barthes's self-absorption and privileging of writing. Whereas Barthes could envision preserving his life through writing figured as an act of procreation, death and life in this [Cha's] fragmented autobiography are inextricably bound through the visual text, the photographic evocation of writing.³⁴⁶

Thus, in Cha, the photograph does something that writing does not or cannot. The photograph, I would add, stands at a distance from Cha's linguistic text. That is to say, the photograph, bordering on anonymity but insisting on its mundane "this-has-been," stands against Cha's own linguistic play as well as the complete subsumption of "mother" by the linguistic wound inflicted by her exile in China and Japanese colonialism. The context-less photograph, in a certain sense, liberates Hyung Soon Huo of her maternal and linguistic responsibilities that Cha's literary persona otherwise feels the need to carry out. Additionally, by virtue of its ordinary presence, and Cha's ability to distance the photograph from and not make it "speak to" the reconstruction of "mother," readers are perhaps also encouraged *not* to read every other photograph in *DICTEE* through maternal loss.

DICTEE's "dialogue" with *Camera Lucida* can be continued without difficulty if we examine some of the other photographs that Cha uses, particularly the journalistic or news photos of an execution of martyrs, a Korean procession or a rally, and the group photo of anonymous Korean women that ends *DICTEE*.³⁴⁷ In this context, it will be useful to recall that, for Barthes, most journalistic photos are not worthy of his attention because of their theatricality and shock value, elements that he associates with the term *studium*: "these journalistic photographs are received (all at once), perceived. I glance over them, no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁴⁷ See Cha 39, 122, and the unnumbered final page.

reading: I am interested in them (as I am interested in the world), I do not love them.”³⁴⁸ The order of “loving” is therefore accessible through the extraordinary *punctum* that is opposed to the mundane and unlovable *studium*. And yet, in this movement from the *studium* (associated with the photographer’s motives, ideology, gimmicks) to the *punctum* (the accidental, contingent, the Real), Barthes undermines his own claim about the photograph’s relationship with referentiality: “I call the ‘photographic referent’ not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.”³⁴⁹ What we should note in this definition is *Camera Lucida*’s fundamental respect for the “real thing.” The photograph offers some measure of the spatial and temporal difference between the observer and the photographed referent. But as a trace of the real thing, the photograph also marks its own distance from the referent which, or, who, is an entity independent of and existing prior to being “captured” by the medium. That is to say, the photograph is unique because it carries with it, in however mediated and attenuated form, the uniqueness of the subject-as-referent. However, this deferential distance ceded to the referent is put aside when Barthes moves from the alterity of the “the political order” to the self-referentiality of the “metaphysical order”: “I am the reference of every photograph,” Barthes writes, “and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it I am alive *here and now*.”³⁵⁰

If Barthes moves away from what could be a critical politics of alterity to privilege the self-referential *punctum*, *DICTEE* counters its own self-referential language with the alterity of the referents of its journalistic photographs. Two of these (namely the mass execution and the rally) are political spectacles that *Camera Lucida* would associate with “shock” and hence the

³⁴⁸ Barthes, 41.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 84.

studium.³⁵¹ So it is remarkable that Cha *chooses* to present blurred and faint versions of these news photos, once again, without any contextual information. These are photographs whose *studiums* are at once retained and manipulated by Cha. The referents—the victims of the execution, the participants in the rally—adhere but as shapes who are neither identified nor identifiable. We might even say that these referents “prick” because they are completely devoid of details but not fully invisible. As Phu notes in her discussion, these photographs

complicate the politics of visibility by emphasizing invisibility....By removing the news-photo from the newspaper, and especially by removing the image from its directive caption, Cha highlights the institutionalization of meaning. Instead of making meaning, the news-photo in *DICTEE* questions the terms and stakes involved in that process, and the elisions entailed once that process is resolved....That is, Cha is concerned to underscore....how the illustration of such a jarring alienation paradoxically signals an ethical way to possess the past, by surrendering the institutional imperative to make representations intelligible.

While I agree with Phu’s reading of how Cha challenges the ideological apparatus that is the news industry, I do not think that Cha’s use of these photographs makes them “unintelligible” or “meaningless” in *DICTEE*. These “decapitated” journalistic images “speak” of referentiality as historical difference and at a distance from the self-referentiality of Cha’s poetics.

For instance, towards the end of “CLIO/HISTORY” and right before including the photograph of the mass crucifixion, Cha describes a fragmented mode of recording/writing, presumably that of *DICTEE* itself:

The decapitated forms. Worn. Marred, recording a past, of previous forms. The present form face to face reveals the missing, the absent. Would-be-said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole....The memory is the entire. The longing in the face of the lost. Maintains the missing. Fixed between the wax and wane not a sign of progress. All else age, in time. *Except some are without* (my emphasis).³⁵²

Cha’s description begins perhaps by including and alluding to the image which is part of this decapitated and necessarily incomplete process of recording. At the same time, her description stops abruptly while speaking of those who are “without.” Here language abdicates and hands its

³⁵¹ Ibid., 41.

³⁵² Cha, 38.

responsibility *over* to the photograph, perhaps so that those who are outside time's reckoning can stand out through their silence, their inability to be part of this literary exercise.

The final image of *DICTEE* is another uncaptioned photograph of a group of women wearing the Korean *hanbok*. Once again, this is a poor copy in which the women's faces are indistinct and washed out. Two of the women's faces to the extreme right are cut off, telling us that this reproduction is part of a larger image. On closer inspection, the reader realizes that the face of the woman in the right hand corner is that of Guan Soon and that her earlier close-up in the text was, in fact, part of this (bigger) picture. Who are these other women? What is their relationship to Guan Soon? Are they more forgotten than Guan Soon because they were not "martyrs"? Why is the image placed "outside" the text after the end-notes? Of course, *DICTEE* does not answer these questions. But we do finish reading the text, not by forgetting history but by being reminded that history is an effect of partial visibility and invisibility and of the capacity of the mundane photographic image to unsettle the reader without the blessings of linguistic alterity. Here, there is no dialogic exchange between the literary and photographic traces of the histories of these anonymous women who cannot be captured by Cha's poetics.

What then of the question of referentiality? If, as Edward Said writes (in response to photographs of Palestinians taken by Jean Mohr), "exile is a series of portraits without names, without context. Images that are largely unexplained, mute," *DICTEE*'s punctuated use of nameless and barely visible faces leaves its readers with just such a notion of exile as a mediated but undeniable historical distance, in which the referents can be neither expelled nor fully accessed, persistently haunting *DICTEE*'s avant-gardism and post-structuralism.³⁵³ For *DICTEE*, referentiality is not simply a fetish. It is something whose ongoing political-aesthetic production has to be acknowledged and explained while making an effort to retrieve, however partially, the histories of anonymous referents who have been the victims of referential violence, whether

³⁵³ Jean Mohr and Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 12.

through the production of the colonial subject, the crucified martyr, the anonymous woman under patriarchy, or the racially marked immigrant.

Perhaps we can see Cha's approach to referentiality as a kind of "self-erasure"³⁵⁴ that is more alert to the effects of capitalism than an aesthetics based solely on the alterity of language and a rejection of the Imaginary. Interestingly, in both Barthes and Derrida, discussions of referentiality inevitably circle back to a reference to the self. Barthes, as we noted, finally sees himself in every photograph. And in his eulogy to Barthes, Derrida also makes a similar move to tackle the (photographic) referent:

This is a 'return of the dead,' whose spectral arrival (*l'arrivée spectrale*) in the very space of the photogram indeed resembles that of an emission or an emanation. Already a sort of hallucinating metonymy: it is something else, a piece come from the other (from the referent) that finds itself in me, before me but also in me like a piece of me.³⁵⁵

Why is it so easy for Barthes and Derrida to hop on to this centripetal flight that carries back the otherness of the referent to the self? Or does otherness arrive at the self's door in and of itself, without the self ever having to leave itself? How, particularly in Derrida's case, is the other in the photograph (presumably the trace of a human subject, animal, or object with a particular history) so smoothly converted to linguistic alterity that de/constitutes the self?³⁵⁶ Could the smoothness of this return of the dead other have anything to do with the fact that neither Derrida nor Barthes, while trying to grasp radical potentials of the "literary" or the "photographic," seems concerned

³⁵⁴ Yu uses Susan Howe's term "aesthetics of erasure" to describe Cha's work but still stays within the framework of writing-as-resistance. See Yu, 137.

³⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* Volume 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 285.

³⁵⁶ In a 1990 interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills, Derrida claims that although he loves words more than images, he treats the words "as bodies that contain their own perversity..." which in turn shows "how the apparently non-discursive arts such as photography and painting correspond to the linguistic scene." That is to say, images can be loved because they are "like" language in their non-discursivity. Similarly, in *Copy, Archive, Signature*, Derrida sees photographic "reference" being disarticulated from a unique referent. Like language and writing, photographic reference becomes an issue of "multiplicity, divisibility, substitutivity, replaceability." See Peter Brunette and David Wills, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Laurie Volpe, in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19-20. See Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, trans. Jeff Fort (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010).

about the conditions that give rise to politically clashing aesthetic approaches and oppressive socio-economic effects involving the mediums in question? And finally, could this flight back to the “me” or the “I,” incorporating the otherness of the referent but without any acknowledgement of her history, not confute the very attack on ego-centrism or narcissism that defines post-structuralism?

In contrast with this centripetal flight from referentiality toward the “I” as some sort of guarantee (however decentered), *DICTEE*’s movement seems to be decidedly centrifugal, insofar as there is no attempt to constitute the “I” through the incorporation of alterity. Instead, the “I” becomes a voice among others. The authorial “I” loses itself and finally disappears among others whose references in the text are not always reducible to the “democratic” alterity of linguistic signifiers. This is a self-erasure that is also *skeptical* of subversion, since the aim of this “diaspora” or “scattering” is not to celebrate some sort of hybrid space or the absence of identity but rather to present languages and images that are *not* speaking or communicating with each other, voices whose semiotic labors are, in fact, incommensurable. Thus, instead of an example of Asian American, avant-garde, or deconstructionist resistance, Cha’s text may be seen as an enactment and anticipation of Ien Ang’s compelling assertion that the existence of diversity, continuous social differentiation, failure of communication, and the controlled play of or repetition with differences do not mean freedom from power or dominant discourses.³⁵⁷ This indeterminacy of meaning, this fragmentation of the trans/national Imaginary into competing experiences and semiotic spheres—symptomized by the binary constructed between the “superior” drive toward “meaninglessness” and “inferior” demands of identity politics in the academy—is what drives the chaotic order of late capital. Taking *DICTEE*’s fragmented surface into account thus also undoes current distinctions between “symptomatic” and “surface”

³⁵⁷ Ien Ang, “In the realm of uncertainty: the global village and capitalist postmodernity,” *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (London: Psychology Press, 1996), 162-180.

readings,³⁵⁸ thereby allowing the reader to see the text's reading-writing practice as the discomfiting delineation of its own symptom, what Althusser calls "this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems that it defines."³⁵⁹ Cha's contemporary and global relevance lies in this self-effacing confession.

Thus, in this chapter, I have argued that an examination of diasporic and post-colonial literary narcissisms allow to explore aspects of Imaginary semiosis that are overlooked by proponents of the Symbolic cure. Bilingualism and multilingualism, in this chapter, have emerged as split mirrors of enduring post-colonial and neo-colonial power differentials that cannot be ignored by appealing to Otherness and to the purported neutrality of language as a "structure." I explore these "splitting" effects of bilingualism further in the next chapter. My analysis of the Imaginary construction of the "model minority" stereotype in Chang-rae Lee's novel will also bring to the fore the limits of the psychoanalytic deployment of (Real) sex as the antidote to identitarianism.

³⁵⁸ See for instance, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21.

³⁵⁹ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), 25.

CHAPTER FOUR: Literary Reading, Imaginary Politics, and (Queer) Negativity in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

Introduction

In this chapter, I show how Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*³⁶⁰ uses topoi of language acquisition and literary practice not to bypass the Imaginary—the narcissistic/egotistical space of action and (misre)cognition—but to confront, in the locus of minority politics in multiracial America, the *production* of an Imaginary—or, more accurately, multiple wounded minority Imaginaries—fragmented by race, intra-ethnic divide, class mobility, and the heterosexist idealization of interracial desire. Thus, this chapter takes on more explicitly the opposition between post-structuralist literary subversions of identity and more pedestrian and pragmatic politics of identities. In keeping with my focus in the dissertation thus far, I am particularly interested in the relationship between language and racially driven politics in the novel. I also find in Lee's approaches to gender, class, and interracial sexuality a diasporic intervention which, when placed in a larger field of the humanities, emerges as the necessary critique of liberal multiracialism as well as of a certain kind of aesthetic theory's "queer" rejection of the political. That is to say, the novel, in my interpretation, is a critical antidote to anti-humanist aesthetics that summarily dismisses politics as an egotistical illusion and to minoritarian politics that conflates cultural diversity and representation with socio-economic equality. Such a reading, I suggest, can be delineated by paying attention to Lee's critically Imaginary representations of the "stereotype" and language as vehicles of desired assimilation into the American nation and as the site of production of ethnic and racial difference. However, before we get to *Native Speaker*, I would like to reintroduce from my introduction the psychoanalytic backdrop against which the chapter examines Lee's literariness.

As I mentioned in the introduction, over the last three decades, a line of psychoanalytic cultural practice in the Anglo-American academy has often prescribed the "linguistic

³⁶⁰ Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995).

unconscious” and/or “the discourse of the Other” as the radical cure for the afflictions of normativity, ideology, and (the illusion of) semiotic stability. Moving from Shoshana Felman’s redefinition of the literary as “the unconscious of psychoanalysis” to reject the oppressive injunction to “meaning,” to Homi Bhabha’s analysis of anti- and post-colonial writing as enactments of the “negation” of identity in the locus of the Other (chapter two), to Christopher Lane’s quest for the loss of self-mastery through a reading of (queer) desire in the colonial archive, to Tim Dean’s recent study of barebacking and gay cruising in terms of contact with the “alterity of the unconscious” (chapter five),³⁶¹ this dissertation has traced a line of anti-humanist thought that continues to pay its tribute to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the “genuine (Symbolic) Other,” a register that offers self-negation and the mobility of signifier-as-desire as lessons to be learnt by ego-centric adherents of identity politics. I have suggested that the culprit, explicitly or implicitly, for all these critics, is the narcissistic and Imaginary ego, who needs to be shown how illusory its sense of mastery is and how radically democratic the desubjectification offered by the desire of the Other can be. Following the analytic movement in the Lacanian clinic, this brand of critique wishes to transcend aggression produced in and by Imaginary egos to accede to the psychic shattering effected by the Other.

This intriguing drive to shatter egos through readings of cultural practices also marks the contemporary queer turn to anti-relationality, better known as the “anti-social queer thesis.”³⁶² Inaugurated by the work of literary critics like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, the anti-social turn has tried to rethink subjectivity by pushing against what it considers to be a heterosexual interpellation to meaning, teleological development, and regulatory frameworks like socially

³⁶¹ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 204.

³⁶² This was the name used to refer to Edelman (and Bersani’s) work at the PMLA Conference in 2005. See Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean in “Forum: Conference Debates—The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121(3) (2005): 819-828.

sanctioned identities, monogamy, marriage, and child-rearing. Bersani's *Homos*,³⁶³ for instance, warns against the limits of liberal assimilation (or suppression) of radical (homo)sexual desire in the name of a desexualized identity politics:

having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining. Or, having “realistically” abandoned...a ‘millennial vision’ of domination’s demise, we resign ourselves to the micropolitics of local struggles for participatory democracy and social justice....³⁶⁴

Thus, moving away from micropolitical governmentality toward structurally mobile and non-communitarian (homo)sexual desire that mimics the movement of the signifier along the signifying chain, Bersani advocates “homo-ness” as a radical promiscuity, “a nonthreatening supplement to sameness,”³⁶⁵ a psychic refusal to attach desire to identity, a rejection of (the hierarchical organization of) difference and heteroized sociality.

Lee Edelman's *No Future*³⁶⁶ goes a step further to protest (hetero)normative assimilation in the United States by introducing the figure of the *sinthomosexual*, the defender of non-Symbolic *jouissance*. Echoing Kristeva's notions of the pre-Symbolic *chora* articulated by the drives but distancing himself from its maternal associations,³⁶⁷ Edelman develops the figure of the “*sinthomosexual*” from Lacan's notion of the *sinthome*—the “knotting” of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders that produces meaning for the subject but is itself beyond meaning. The figure of the *sinthomosexual*, much like Bersani's homo, stands against the normalizing tactics of heteronormativity, in particular to “reproductive futurism,” or the dominant investment in the figure of “the Child” in politics, which Edelman argues “remains...the

³⁶³ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁶⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁶⁷ I have discussed the importance of the mother figure as well as the limitations of isolating her semiotic influence in chapter one.

fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”³⁶⁸ *All politics is heteronormative* insofar as it is the fantasy of the promise of the Child that shapes the fundamental logic within which political actions are conceptualized.

Several scholars within queer studies have critiqued the founding assumptions of queer negative thinking, its *reduction of the political, the relational, and futurity to dominant and (an implicitly white) heteronormativity and, consequently, its dismissal of histories of non-homonormatively queer and queer of color socialities and aesthetics in the U.S.*³⁶⁹ However, assuming that the anti-social thesis is addressed to all subjects implicated in politics, regardless of their sexual orientation and nationality, I am interested in a critique of the anti-social thesis at a different register, which we can begin by probing the more general presumption of a simple opposition between critical ego-dissolving reading (by the anti-social critics) and identitarian interpellations of narcissistic normative politics “out there.” This radically queer protest, it seems to me, relies on a normative binary that we have already encountered: the privileging of psychic undoing (that the anti-social theorists unveil as their aesthetic politics) over narcissistic illusion of Imaginary wholesomeness (seen as the bane of all political commitments). For instance, in his literary instantiations of homoness, Bersani describes the impersonal sexual cruising in the work of Proust and Genet in terms of a self-replication that is also a “self-effacing narcissism,” in which the self is willing to find or lose itself in the other’s difference, thereby shattering its egoic coherence.³⁷⁰ In Bersani’s more recent *Intimacies*, the concept of homoness returns as “impersonal narcissism,” or psychic disintegration defined in opposition to the egoism of everyday politics, in which the narcissistic ego represents the illusion of the “unique personality

³⁶⁸ Edelman, 7.

³⁶⁹ See for instance, José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) and Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³⁷⁰ Bersani, 150.

central to modern notions of individualism.”³⁷¹ In this connection, Bersani also contends that “national, ethnic, and racial identities are like personal egos” that create “imaginary yet powerfully operative borders outside of which lies everything that is essentially different from them.”³⁷² Here, again, the task of impersonal narcissism qua mobile queer sexual desire is to undo the hyperbolizing Imaginary ego’s sense of control and border policing.

For Edelman too, in spite of his exhortation to “fuck the Symbolic” law, it is the *Imaginary* that is the culprit behind the fantasy that is politics:

the fantasy precisely, of form as such, of an order, an organization, that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form....Politics, to put this another way, names the space in which Imaginary relations, relations that hark back to a misrecognition of the self as enjoying some originary access to presence...compete for Symbolic fulfillment.³⁷³

Paralleling Bersani’s move from the politics of the ego to the politics of the homo, *No Future* thus shuns Imaginary narcissism and identification by positing a “narcissism unto death” through the figural irruptions of non-heteronormative, anti-Child *sinthomosexual* characters and presences who embody the self-destructive death drive in the work of artists like Alfred Hitchcock, Charles Dickens, and George Elliot.³⁷⁴

If Bersani and Edelman select cultural texts that extend and elaborate their provocative post-political readings of psychoanalysis to transcend the illusion of Imaginary autonomy and the politics it produces, I wish to pursue a different route through Lee’s novel: without rejecting mundane “politics,” I wish to re-analyze the term through Lee’s representation of intersubjective mirroring and the varying kinds of manifestly split Imaginaries shaped by gender, race, and class. To reprise: what if politics and political Imaginaries are not about this assumed return to

³⁷¹ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 85.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Edelman, 8.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 50.

plenitude? What if politics is a constant cognitive negotiation with psychic and social fragmentation in the Imaginary, an Imaginary that is not pre-constituted but shaped by the form the Symbolic “law” takes in the subject’s shifting relations to capitalism? In what sense are race, ethnicity, and nationalism, as Bersani suggests, “like the personal ego”? How “self-enclosed” is, for instance, an immigrant subject’s ego if “her entry into language” is always already an entry into the nation state’s Imaginary politics, marked by, among others, “Symbolic lesions” in the form of the injunction to assimilate using the norm of “native speech”? How unified does the ego appear to the cognitive subject if it has to straddle the need to assert ethnic particularity and the pull to “belong” to a nation marked by multiple axes of difference such as interethnic conflict and intra-ethnic divides? To address these questions and the shape and form of literary politics that engenders them, I now turn to Lee’s novel.

A brief plot summary will help ground my discussion of *Native Speaker*. The novel’s narrator Henry Park is a second generation Korean American who works as a professional informant-writer and is married to the white speech therapist Lelia. The novel opens with the alienated couple on the brink of a separation after the death of their biracial son, Mitt, in a racist assault and as Henry takes on a new spying assignment to find confidential information about the up and coming Korean American city counselor John Kwang. As Henry gets closer to Kwang’s entourage and then to Kwang himself, he learns about the challenges of reaching out to a multiracial constituency as a minority politician, as well as the obstacles posed by deep-set interracial conflicts that fracture and finally end Kwang’s political vision. Kwang’s steady rise and popularity suffer a decisive blow after his trusted worker Eduardo—who is also a spy but who, unlike Henry, gets caught—is killed in a fire staged by Kwang’s own men. A guilt-ridden Kwang cannot bring himself to make a statement to the media, even as Eduardo’s death is immediately interpreted as a racially motivated act of violence, and the councilman is accused of being racially insensitive. Kwang not only loses his poise but also his reputation after being arrested for drunk driving after an accident and for endangering the life of a Korean waitress he

picks up at a bar. Meanwhile, Henry, troubled by the unforeseeable consequences of being a spy and the impact of his profession on his marriage, decides to quit. But he leaves the profession only after completing his final assignment. In his final act of betrayal, Henry reveals a confidential list of names linked to an illegal “money club” run by Kwang, a list that the Immigration and Naturalization Services use to arrest illegal immigrants among Kwang’s supporters. This scandal completely turns the tide against Kwang, transforming him from a model minority leader into a “smuggler” of illegals who steal American jobs. Lee’s novel ends with Henry and Lelia trying to rekindle their relationship, and the disappearance of Kwang and his family soon after Henry’s betrayal.

Interracial Conflict and Imaginary Vacillations of the Model Minority

Native Speaker was published during the unfolding of a particularly conflicted conjuncture in the United States. On the one hand, the early 1990s saw the assertion of multiculturalism among activists and theorists and the demand for a political recognition of multiracialism so that political representation could beyond the black and white binary. In 1990, the famous Los Angeles Festival of the Arts was held, and artists from twenty-one countries celebrated the city’s (and in extension, America’s) cosmopolitanism.³⁷⁵ In 1993, a debate began about the federal racial classification scheme of the US census bureau: Asian Pacific American and Latino groups wanted new categories to be introduced in the US census (in lieu of the simple category of “other”) so as to include previously unnamed groups. By 1996, this cause had been taken up by multiracial advocacy groups like ProjectRACE, *A Place for us National*, *Interracial Voice*, and *The Multiracial Activist*, all of whom demanded a separate multiracial designation as a step toward the abolition of binary racial thinking and in order to recognize the culturally hybrid

³⁷⁵ Mervyn Rothstein, “A Festival Embraces the Pacific Cultures,” *The New York Times* (August 1997). Accessed May 31, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/27/arts/a-festival-embraces-the-pacific-cultures.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

realities and futures of multiracial families.³⁷⁶

Yet, at the same time, as America celebrated and called attention to its racial diversity and hybridity, civil unrest in the 1990s revealed and widened differences between ethnic communities. Two years after the Festival, racial minorities in Los Angeles led violent protests against the acquittal of the officers charged in the Rodney King trial. Additionally, the media reported on altercations between Korean Americans and African Americans during the riots and on growing socio-economic tensions between the two communities. Over the same period, gang violence between African American and Hispanic groups also rose in Los Angeles, and new ethnically specific prison gangs like the United Blood Nation sprang up in New York.³⁷⁷ In other words, the 1990s saw racial unrest that could not be smoothed over through the rhetoric of multiracialism and its celebration of the racially hybrid child, particularly since it was evident that discrimination on the basis of color had crept even into the juvenile justice system.³⁷⁸

Within this contradictory racial conjuncture, Lee's literary politics is useful for our discussion for two reasons: first, it reminds us that politics cannot be formulated in terms of a homogeneous desire for identity that queer negativity takes as its critical point of departure. Racial difference—contextually constructed and reconstructed through different degrees of identification with particular racial images and accompanying differential disidentification with other images—together with physical and affective violence, economic, and cultural marginalization makes the politics of identities far more complex than a competition for the (illusion of) egotistic/Imaginary coherence. Second, the novel offers a productive pairing of hope and skepticism in its reading of politics in a multiracial democracy. Given these features, I am

³⁷⁶ See Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 44-47.

³⁷⁷ The Associated Press, "Black-Hispanic Gang Rivalries Send Chill through L.A.," *USA Today* (August 2006). Accessed on May 13, 2012. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-08-12-racial-gangs_x.htm.

³⁷⁸ See Janice Joseph, *Black Youths, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

interested in exploring the implications of the literary paradox offered by Lee: difference and otherness can neither be denied nor marshaled as the basis of equality.

What strikes the reader of *Native Speaker* almost immediately is the narrator's as well as other characters' blatant racial and ethnic generalizations. Throughout the novel, Lee overtly presents Henry's social anxieties and aspirations as those that are stereotypically associated with the "immigrant," the Asian American, and sometimes, specifically, the Korean American. At once reminiscent of and marking its distance from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*³⁷⁹—in which the racial minority is both invisible and hypervisible—Henry repeatedly tells us how self-conscious he feels about his ethnicity, about appearing "Asian," as being part of a population that is socially recognized as being distinct from blacks, whites, and ethno-religious groups in the United States like "Hasidims" and "Hindus."³⁸⁰ *Native Speaker*'s protagonist also describes himself as the perfectly docile and model Asian immigrant, "a duteous foreign-faced boy,"³⁸¹ an "invisible underling,"³⁸² someone who happily plays the role of a man raised in what Henry's boss Hoagland calls the "Discipline farm" of "your standard Asian Household."³⁸³ However, Lee's readers will notice that Henry's ethnic self-perception is never unmediated and is almost always articulated in terms of his reflections on how he is likely to be "read" by (racial) others around him. To return to a concept we discussed in the last chapter, "ethnic narcissism" in the novel is expressed through *clichés* whose origins do not lie in the self.

Consider, for instance, Henry's stereotypical self-representation as the youthful,

³⁷⁹ For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Lee and Ellison, see Daniel Y. Kim, "Do I, Too, Sing America?: Vernacular Representations and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.3 (2004): 231-260.

³⁸⁰ Lee, 346.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 161.

³⁸² Ibid., 202.

³⁸³ Ibid., 173.

inscrutable Asian American when he feels self-conscious while visiting a multiracial neighborhood with other members of Kwang's party:

I was unaccustomed to this scope of attention....I put myself in the onlookers' places and considered the scene: here is an Asian man in his early thirties. He could pass for twenty-four....He's not looking at anything in particular, his gaze too fair. Too fair all around, as though he couldn't offend anybody. So he looks friendly, he looks like he'd be willing to talk to you, but really because of the way his gaze circles about you...you think he's really stepping back inside and back away from you so nothing can get around or behind him.³⁸⁴

In this description, Henry thinks that he is seen as a non-threatening racial body who cannot be fathomed or known too intimately. Importantly, this conclusion is not "his" in that he is merely repeating an established stereotype about "Asianness." As the passage makes clear, if Henry begins to describe himself or "self-identify" as an inscrutable Asian, it is because he puts himself in the place of "onlookers" who impinge on his consciousness. Kissing Lelia for the first time at a friend's party, Henry asks her if she has been with an "Asian" before. Lelia replies that she has not, and then adds that Henry tastes "Definitely Korean."³⁸⁵ While such a racio-sexual appraisal blurs boundaries between the offensive and the inoffensive, a more damning description of Henry (and of his "kind") appears in the letter that Lelia gives Henry before their temporary separation. Amongst the various names that the disappointed and unhappy white woman calls her secretive and incommunicative Asian husband are "illegal alien" and "Yellow peril: Neo-American."³⁸⁶

How are we, as readers, to react to these literary instantiations of racial stereotypes? Are they to be seen simply as racist gestures made by its characters and, ultimately, perpetuated by the novelist Lee? If Lee wants us to see the ethnic self as the product of the onlookers' "gaze," is that "gaze" another name for white supremacy? I would argue that such readings, while plausible, will not fully take on the novel's complex engagement with the origins and dynamic intersubjective

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.

dimensions of identity politics and stereotyping in a multiethnic America.

In this context, I want to read Lee's novel alongside a well-known post-colonial theorization of the stereotype through the psychoanalytic notion of identification. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that the key to understanding the effectivity of colonial stereotypes of racial-sexual otherness lies in engaging with the inherent "ambivalence" in its deployment and repetition, its constant vacillation between desire and derision as it seeks to guard fantasies of origin and identity. When the colonizer stereotypes the colonized as "duplicitious" or "licentious," this denigration involves a disavowal that these traits are, in fact, part of the internal alterity that splits the purported unity of the colonizer's identity. The act of ethnic stereotyping, for Bhabha, is therefore a total identification with whiteness, but only insofar as that zealous identification is also a kind of fetishism that substitutes and projects the lack in the self with/onto the depiction of the colonized, who is a source of both pleasure and fear. It is this founding lack that "gives the stereotype its fixity and phantasmatic quality—the same old stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time."³⁸⁷

Reading scenes from *Black Skin White Masks*, where Fanon describes himself being linguistically assaulted as a black man by a white child,³⁸⁸ Bhabha helpfully reminds us that the action of stereotyping, in fact, returns both the colonizer and the colonized to the "Lacanian schema of the Imaginary":

The drama underlying these dramatic "everyday" colonial scenes is not difficult to discern. In each of them *the subject* turns around the pivot of the "stereotype" to return to a point of total identification. The girl's gaze *returns* to her mother in the recognition and disavowal of the Negroid type; the black child *turns away from himself*, his race, *in his total identification with the positivity of whiteness which is at once color and no color*. In the act of disavowal and fixation, the colonial subject *is returned to the narcissism of the Imaginary and its identification of an ideal ego that is white and whole....* Like the mirror

³⁸⁷ Bhabha, 111.

³⁸⁸ I have discussed these scenes in chapter two.

phase “the fullness” of the stereotype—its image *as* identity—is always threatened by a lack (my emphasis).³⁸⁹ Here, by returning to Fanon’s account of the intersubjective Imaginary, Bhabha (perhaps unwittingly) suggests that stereotyping is not a disavowal of one’s “inherent” alterity. The colonizer does not stereotype to disavow some universal heterogeneity constituting human subjectivity. Rather, ambivalence toward the stereotype, Bhabha seems to concede, is the product of an unconscious awareness that whiteness is not “superior” *per se* and only because it *needs* to be so to keep the colonial apparatus intact. *That is to say, internal alterity does not explain racial conflict and ambivalent identification under colonialism; it is the other way around.*³⁹⁰

The stereotype of the black subject, in Bhabha’s reading, emerges as a kind of “anti-mirror image,” a doppelgänger necessary for the colonial project, against which the normative white mirror image is chosen for the purposes of narcissistic identification. However, by comparing the stereotype of blackness to the mirror image of the mirror stage (and not just whiteness), Bhabha also introduces questions he leaves unanswered: who is “the colonial subject” here—the stereotyper or the stereotyped? And do they have identical psychic paths to “disavow” blackness and “return” to identify with the white mirror image? Can the girl’s quick “return” to and refuge in her (mother’s) whiteness be equated with the black child’s turn *away* from his own body and *toward* the whiteness that he can never attain? In chapter two, I argued to the contrary. I showed, through Fanon, that the stage and structure of the mirror stage, when viewed through

³⁸⁹ Bhabha, 109.

³⁹⁰ Here, I am arguing with and against cultural critique that views the stereotype as being “inevitable” in cross-cultural relations. Stereotypes are “inevitable” insofar as they are representations explicitly or implicitly deployed in favor of the capitalist mode of production, and not because they betray a “fundamental” antagonism in man. In her reading of the stereotype (via Freud and Jameson), Chow links its origins to such a destructive potential in man, what Freud calls the “death drive” in *Civilization and its Discontents*. But such an approach to “human” aggression does not explain why some stereotypes are so effective politically in certain places and at certain times, and indeed, why some cross-cultural representations are readily read as stereotypes and whilst others are not. Indeed, even as Chow sees the stereotype through the Freudian notion of fundamental aggressivity, she also agrees with Richard Dyer’s view that it is crucial to study who controls and shapes stereotypes and whose interests they serve. See Rey Chow, 55-60. See Richard Dyer, *Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12-16. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, vol. 21 of *Standard Edition*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961).

colonial power relations, cannot be the same experience for subjects socially read as “black” and “white.” I also argued that identification with whiteness in a colonial as well as a neocolonial environment is a particularly fraught process when one is somatically coded as a non-white subject. This Du Boisian reading of Fanon and Lacan led us to conclude that the whole assumption of the “fullness” of the Imaginary image needs to be rethought in the context of whiteness and/as capitalism.

In this chapter, I would like to build further on this distinction between the Imaginary narcissisms of the stereotyper and the stereotyped. I have argued that race relations in the colony produce at least two different Imaginaries—the first one is marked by the presumed plenitude of whiteness, where “white” is what one “is”—that is, where being white is socially never in question, because it is defined as that which is neither black nor any other “color.” Here, the stereotypical representations of non-whiteness (if we follow Bhabha’s reading) are caused by the projection of the anxiety that comes from a certain disavowal of the fictionality of the superiority of whiteness. But then there is also another Imaginary which the non-white subject occupies, where idealized whiteness is at odds with the non-whiteness of one’s body, where the body at once “incorporates” and reacts against the stereotype. Here, non-whiteness is a source of a different kind of anxiety, an anxiety of “alterity” that cannot be so quickly “disavowed” because it is *made* visible on one’s skin everyday through racially charged language.³⁹¹

In other words, even though Bhabha’s turn to “ambivalence” is an important step toward the evaluation of the psychic economy of the stereotype, my suggestion is that we need to move away from an uncritical and univocal application of the “Lacanian schema of the Imaginary” in order to evaluate minoritizing experiences of that ambivalence/alterity in particular political contexts. And to that end, we need to shift the focus from illusory (white) plenitude to the elements of the *manifest contradictions* that shape the narcissistic identifications of those who are

³⁹¹ My intention, here, is not to privilege race over other categories like gender or class. I begin with race to show how it is also fractured by the other categories.

stereotyped. Such an analysis would also seek to analyze the psychic life of capitalism by moving beyond the white/black binary so as to take on the contradictions produced by the larger proliferation of ethnic differences within a multicultural society—one of the direct consequences of migration of human capital to settler-colonies.³⁹²

That is precisely what Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* does: the novel invites its readers to approach stereotyping from within interethnic politics in mid-nineties America. While the novel focuses specifically on both the effects and limits of the political spectacle of Asian American identity, it pushes us to examine the challenges faced by a larger politics that offer neither a return to a dream of plenitude nor to the negativity of drives but a far less utopian confrontation with *multiple* minority "fictive ethnicities."³⁹³

Constructing multiracial America from a fictional Asian American vantage point, Lee's novel also underscores the ambivalence of the stereotype, but it does so through a kind ruthless "hollowing out" of its ethnically marked (male) characters: the stereotype, here, does not stop at being a product of (the white) man's fantasy and disavowal. It actually constructs a particular kind of Asian American Imaginary that some Asian American subjects cannot but *strategically embrace*. That is to say, these Asian American subjects inhabit an Imaginary stereotype that precedes them—that of the "model minority." For instance, in Lee's novel, the Asian American entrepreneur-politician Kwang admits that the appellation of model minority is something that he can neither fully accept nor entirely refuse. The term doggedly chases and constitutes the social and political persona of the economically successful Kwang, even though he is aware of its dangers and selective application. As Kwang confesses to Henry:

³⁹² This is where Fanon's black/white binary also risks becoming ahistorical. As David Macey points out, colonial Martinique had a more complex system of racial classification than what Fanon describes. Nowhere in *Black Skin White Masks* do we find references to the immigrants who were coded as neither black nor white: the Indian "coolies"—descendants of the indentured laborers who replaced blacks once slavery was abolished—and Syrian traders of Lebanese descent. See Macey, "Adieu foulard. Adieu madras," 19.

³⁹³ Balibar and Wallerstein, 96.

When others construct and model you favorably, it's easy to let them keep at it, even if they start going off in ways that aren't immediately comfortable or right. This is the challenge for Asians in America. How do you say no to what seems like a compliment? From the very start we don't wish to be rude or inconsiderate. So we stay silent in our guises.³⁹⁴

What Lee's Kwang is alluding to, here, is the complexity of the historical construction of the "model minority" myth in the US. It is important to remember that term model minority was first used in 1966 by the social demographer William Peterson not to refer to Korean Americans but to Japanese Americans.

In an article called "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" in *The New York Times Magazine*, Peterson compared the relative "success" of Japanese immigrants to other racial minorities, in the US focusing on their high education achievement levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, juvenile delinquency, and psychological problems.³⁹⁵ A number of articles followed Peterson's, which extended this praise for Japanese Americans to the Asian American community at large.³⁹⁶ What were the historical reasons for this sudden emergence of the notion of the model minority? Several critics, writing after the publication of *Native Speaker*, have shown how the invention of the myth can be directly related to domestic interracial politics in the 60s. They argue that "Japanese-ness"—codable and diffusable in terms of "intrinsically" non-Western behavioral traits—was deployed by the U.S. state and non-state actors to mark certain other minorities (African Americans and their demand for civil rights in particular) as "less" model populations. As Vijay Prashad notes:

As if to say protest is un-American, the myth of model minority emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement to show up rebellious blacks for their attempts to redress

³⁹⁴ Lee, 193.

³⁹⁵ William Peterson, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *The New York Times* (1923-Current file); Jan 9, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times* (1851 - 2006). Accessed 31 May, 2012. http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/modelminority.pdf.

³⁹⁶ For a discussion, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 174-175.

power relations....Look at the Asians, the black intelligentsia was told, they work harder without complaint.³⁹⁷

For Prashad, the language of praise showered on Asian Americans was a code of sorts, deployed to denigrate other minorities who were unable to use the “free enterprise” system to their advantage.

At the same time, the invention of the model minority myth through *Japanese* Americans cannot be fully explained by domestic conflicts alone. As T. Fujitani has argued more recently:

...explanations for the minor explosion into the public arena of a discourse on Japanese Americans as the model minority must also look beyond the domestic scene. The prominence of Japanese Americans as the “almost, but not quite white” minority coincides in both logic and historical timing with the construction of discourse on Japan as the honorary white nation....Over the transwar years, this notion triggered a fundamental transformation of popular images about Japan and the Japanese people in the postwar and Cold War years. Dominant images of Japan underwent a miraculous metamorphosis, from those of a backward nation peopled by an insectlike or herdlike population to those of the United States’ most reliable, friendly, and democratic ally (although racism and stereotypes obviously continued to exist in latent and sometimes blatant form). As a democratic, capitalist, and almost, but not quite white nation, “Japan” came to be deployed as the new model for aspiring peoples of color throughout the world.³⁹⁸

In Fujitani’s analysis, the invention of the model minority myth is also directly related to a new turn in US-Japan relations in the 60s. The total shift from wartime “enemy” to model minority was the result of a political alliance which was, as always, inseparable from economic interest. Specifically, American enthusiasm around the “modernization” of Asia was inseparable from American “national interests” in the region.

Thirty years after the beginning of this process of abstract commoditization of Asian and Asian American ethnic specificity, Lee’s character John Kwang admits that this favorable representation is not something he can wholeheartedly embrace. Yet, Kwang and others in comparable positions ride that myth, “staying in their guises” so as to be recognized as successful minority citizens. To the general public, Kwang is thus known as a self-made millionaire with a

³⁹⁷ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 179.

³⁹⁸ T. Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 231.

degree from Fordham, the perfect combination of education and political acumen: “The pundits spoke of his integrity, his intelligence. His party was pressuring him for the mayoral race. He looked impressive on television. Handsome, irreproachable. Silver around the edges. A little unbeatable.”³⁹⁹ This mediated spectacle of Asian American success becomes a point of entry for Kwang, not just into American capitalism but into American politics. Kwang becomes the city Councilman only after he has come to be known as a “self-made millionaire” who has very efficiently expanded his business of leasing and selling high-end equipment beyond the “intimate community of his church and family.”⁴⁰⁰ Kwang’s own admission of giving in to the myth is a prefiguration of later observations by Asian American scholars like Viet Thanh Nguyen and Robert Chang who have also noted that the “success” of the model minority myth lies in the fact that it found support among *those who identify as Asian American*, and it inadvertently rendered invisible and therefore legitimized the oppression of less privileged Asian Americans, African Americans, other minorities, and disadvantaged whites.⁴⁰¹

My reason to dwell on the particularity of the ambivalence of the model minority stereotype is this: if we return to Bhabha’s discussion of participation in the stereotype as an exemplification of Imaginary identification, we can see how feelings of inclusion as well as exclusion produced by this kind of stereotyping—influenced by (trans)national capitalist ambitions of the nation-state—cannot be mapped onto a structure of disavowal defined only through racial difference. That is, we can begin to understand how, in the multiracial US context, a fragmentation of the Imaginary is no longer (as Fanon and Bhabha see it) simply a product of an opposition between whites and non-whites. Class privilege and divisions within a seemingly

³⁹⁹Lee, 23.

⁴⁰⁰Ibid., 182.

⁴⁰¹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143-172. See also Robert Chang, “Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space,” *California Law Review* 81 (5) (1993): 1243-1323.

homogeneous ethnic community produce social identifications and disidentifications that refract this desire for “whiteness” into non-congruent experiences of alterity.

Lee’s novel grapples with this multi-tiered and overdetermined production of alterity in American society through the representation of Kwang’s daunting political ambition: the Councilman wants to build an interracial coalition of oppressed minorities (including African Americans) and simultaneously address the concerns of the heterogeneous body of “new immigrants.” For Kwang, garnering support as a “minority” politician in New York City entails not just being hailed by the white majority but also confronting the anxiety of being *misrecognized* by other minorities—such as African Americans—who may perceive the Asian American entrepreneur as being the privileged and “preferred” minority and therefore not equally oppressed. As Kwang asks Henry: “Soon there will be more brown and yellow than black and white. And yet the politics, especially minority politics, remain cast in terms that barely acknowledge us... And if I don’t receive the blessings of African-Americans, am I still a minority politician?”⁴⁰² As noted above, to pursue his political goals, Kwang has to give in to the model minority myth. Furthermore, as Henry tells us, this myth is constructed through a discursive repetition of politician’s emulable qualities and the *suppression* of a past that is entirely inadmissible in the seamless public narrative in which Kwang has progressed from being a conscientious whole-sale merchant to a charismatic politician. Henry wants his readers to know that Kwang does, in fact, have an untold story, a past that is far from “model”:

I want to tell them that what they have here is a man named John Kwang, born in Seoul before the last world war, a boy during the Korean one, his family not mercifully sundered or refuted but obliterated, the coordinates of his home village twice removed from the maps. That he stole away to America as the houseboy of a retiring two-star general. Where he saved enough money to leave the general’s house in Ohio and go to New York. Where he named himself John. Where he was beaten nearly to death and robbed of all his savings. Where he worked in a Chinatown noodle shop and slept outside next to the steam vent and awoke one morning to see that his feet had turned almost black with the cold. Where he knew hunger again, that unforgettable taste of his other country. Where, desperate as he was, he took to stealing from others, one of them a young priest

⁴⁰² Lee, 196.

who saw something to salvage and took him to a Catholic orphanage. Where he first went to a real school and learn to read and write and speak his new home language.⁴⁰³

Kwang's "rise," here, is not just a result of "industry" typically associated with the model minority, but an overdetermined product of circumstances, events, and contingencies that are not always causally associable: racial violence, economic adversity, crime, interethnic oppression, white charity, and accidental class mobility. Kwang's story, then, is not exactly a "model" story since it is a product of personal circumstances and national and transnational economies and politics that interact in complex ways to reinforce and/or undermine each other.

If we understand the literary term "fiction" neither in opposition to "reality" nor in terms of the self-referentiality of language but as a critical exercise that sees fictional construction as a means of "deciphering signs inscribed in the general aspect of a place, a group"⁴⁰⁴—and, in that sense, as that which concerns itself with the *geopolitics* of semiotics—then, we might be able to see Lee's fictional rendition of the semiosis of the Asian American model minority, or the "unrealistic" story of John Kwang, more productively. Here, the disjunctions between the fictional constructions of Kwang's past, his idealized image, and his final downfall allegorically uncover the tactical nature of and inequalities covered over by the model minority myth. The fiction also exposes the underside of the term's ostensibly progressive goals of making America "immigration friendly."

In this connection, it would be useful to examine how the novel brings into relief the relationship between American capitalism and the element of shifting racial and ethnic "comparisons" built into the model minority stereotype. Kwang recalls how, when racial segregation was still in place, he experienced preferential treatment in Louisiana and Texas as a

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁰⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 37. While I find this definition of fiction (and its relationship to the historico-political) very useful, this chapter argues against what Rancière calls "literary disincorporation," or political subjectivization through the literary. See Rancière, 40.

Korean American. As an Asian man, he was preferred over blacks, Mexicans, and even “other”

Asians:

One day I was coming out of a public bathroom in Fort Worth and a pretty white woman stopped me and pointed and said that the Colored in the sign meant black and Mexican. She smiled very kindly and told me that I was very light skinned. “Orientals” were okay in those parts, except maybe the kind from Philippines.⁴⁰⁵

“Oriental,” here, is a contingently privileged signifier whose exceptional status is produced in relation to other non-exceptional non-white subjects—African Americans and Mexicans—as well as other “undesirable” Orientals, such as the “kind from Philippines.” Kwang’s anecdote serves as a historical reminder that Filipinos, since the 1920s, were, in fact, regarded with a special ambivalence because of the US state’s colonization of the Philippines, a nation that was part of Asia but not quite “Asian enough.”⁴⁰⁶

That is not to say that the novel wants us to see “model minority” as a stable stereotype in which certain Asian ethnicities, once deemed “model,” acquire permanent membership. While “approving” of his daughter’s marriage with Henry, Lelia’s father Stew hails Koreans and Korean Americans—as the *new* model minority—at once threatening and emulable:

There’s so much that’s admirable in Oriental culture and mind. You’ve been raised to be circumspect and careful. It’s no wonder that you are getting our heads handed to us. It’s a new world out there. Different players now. Different rules.... We’ve grown into a spoiled culture. Japan, thank God, is going the same way, the first signs are there. I go there a half dozen times a year and I can see things are on a downswing. You Koreans are really doing a number on them, in certain areas. You’re kicking some major butt around the world.⁴⁰⁷

I will later return to Lee’s use of interracial marriage and the *limits* he imposes on the abilities of his (white and non-white) characters to embrace racial and cultural difference. Here, let us note the *errancy of language* demonstrated by Stew’s simultaneously anxious and self-critical

⁴⁰⁵ Lee, 195.

⁴⁰⁶ See Palumbo-Liu, 40-41.

⁴⁰⁷ Lee, 121-122.

references to Asia and Asianness. At first, “Oriental culture and mind” seem to offer a worldview that is steadily asserting itself over “Western” values. But it is unclear which nations and their diasporas collectively constitute the Orient. Later, however, Stew sees the Orient as a *new* configuration, insofar as it is no longer identical to the image of Asia in the 60s, since Japan—the country of origin of the model “subnation” of Japanese Americans—no longer occupies center stage.

I would like to suggest that Lee’s performance of ambivalent Orientalization produces irony at two distinct but related registers. First, at the literary and rhetorical level, Lee invites us to read the slipperiness of the signifier “model minority.” However, instead of arguing for an “intralinguistic” instability and the “intrinsic” failure of language to produce a stable meaning,⁴⁰⁸ Lee turns our attention to the relationship between domestic politics, the nation-state’s transnational ambitions, and the mobility of racial semiotics. The (initial) semiotic link between American readings of “Japaneseness”—readings that produce Japan as the model Asian nation and Japanese Americans as model minorities—and “Asianness” is undone or disrupted once the economic crisis affects US-Japan ties.⁴⁰⁹ If Barthes saw Japan as full of “empty” signs (a country where signifiers do not lead to final signifieds) by ignoring Japan’s relationship with the West and her Asian neighbors,⁴¹⁰ Lee gives offers a more sinister model of rhetorical instability and movement, where the signifier also moves but in order to produce points of temporary “meaning” and according to the demands and ideologies of a still-dominant US nation-state.

Lee’s literary performance of semiotic instability, here, can be read alongside the work of critics like David Palumbo-Liu and Gary Okihiro who have historicized this confusion and the

⁴⁰⁸ See my discussion of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida in chapter three.

⁴⁰⁹ For a discussion of the tense US-Japan relations in the 1990s, see Edward J. Lincoln, *Troubled Times: US-Japan Trade Relations in the 1990s* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

⁴¹⁰ See my discussion of Barthes in chapter three.

malleability of who is allowed to be and/or pass as the (model) Asian American. As Palumbo-Liu writes:

...the Asian presence has historically prompted a reassessment of not only the general ideological specificity of white America, but also of the presence of other racial minorities within American ideology. Different Asian groups were compared to the contemporary abstraction of an American citizenry and to the particular images that had coalesced around other racial minorities as they were situated within that abstraction....The signifier "Asian American" has been produced under particular historical pressures, rescripting "Asia" in relation to its American projection and introjection, and in relation to other racial groups.⁴¹¹

Similarly, Okihiro argues that the model minority myth also becomes a ploy to produce an idealized version of the immigrant subject who, in spite of his best efforts, can never quite be completely assimilated into the American nation-state. There is always that implicit gap between the "model Asian American and "the American" where the ambiguity of the new stereotype can betray traces of the older and more explicitly violent stereotype of the "Yellow Peril": "'Models' can be 'perils,' and 'perils,' 'models' despite their apparent incongruity."⁴¹² This circular relationship between the "model" and the "peril" is also hinted at in Stew's awkward praise for Korea and/or a "new" Asia (*sans* Japan) whose members are "kicking some major butt around the world" and handing Americans their own "heads."⁴¹³ Lelia calling Henry "Yellow peril: neo-American" in a moment of anger thus takes on an extra-conjugal interracial significance, which is something to which I will return in the conclusion.

Secondly, in addition to the rhetorical, at a more immediately historical register, through Stew's ambivalent praise, Lee also alludes to the isolation of Korean Americans from the general population of Asian Americans in the wake of the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles. As several scholars have pointed out, reports of violence between Korean Americans and African Americans

⁴¹¹ Palumbo-Liu, 149-150.

⁴¹² Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 142.

⁴¹³ We should note that these economically and politically motivated social readings of the model Asian minority do not correspond to the Census category of "Asian" and its sub-classifications, which also change over time.

during the riots (following the release of the four white policemen accused in the murder of Rodney King) were exaggerated and distorted by the mainstream US media. There was, in fact, widespread speculation that the media actively focused on the conflicts to polarize the two communities further, so that Korean immigrants would be seen and see themselves as the victims of black militancy and so that the failure of the police to curb the violence would be read as African American “wrath” against Korean “prosperity.”⁴¹⁴ Stew’s inordinately positive appraisal for Korean /Americans—who were, in the early twentieth century, considered to be indistinguishable from the Japanese⁴¹⁵—is therefore also ironic when viewed in the context of racial politics of (the representation of) the L.A. riots, an event that Henry’s narration also references at several points.⁴¹⁶

Thus, to take Bhabha’s analysis further: the Imaginary affair of stereotyping must be understood as a linguistic, rhetorical, and historically specific move. Peterson’s and his followers’ creation of the model minority myth is, to begin with, a linguistic interpellation that altered race relations in the US forever and producing powerful images of an ambivalent and a precarious privileging of select ethnic minorities and a language of comparisons based on balances of sameness and difference. In the next section, I want to turn to the politics of language in *Native Speaker*. In particular, I am interested in examining the ethico-political implications of a certain contradiction in Lee’s novel: its desire to see language as the site of democracy and a “trans-ethnic” alliance, on the one hand, and its own acknowledgement of the impossibility of such a coalition under neoliberal individualism and (heterosexist) multiracialism on the other. I demonstrate that, like Cha, Lee also sees language as the primary tool of social and political

⁴¹⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press), 91-93. See also Elaine Kim, “Home is Where the Han is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals,” *Social Justice* 20 (Spring-Summer 1993): 1-21.

⁴¹⁵ Palumbo-Liu, 40.

⁴¹⁶ Henry mentions Korean-black “uprisings” that erupted in the wake of the King trial verdict; the killing of Latasha Harlins, an African American teenager (Lee changes the girl’s name to “Saranda Harlins”) by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American proprietor; and the boycotting of Korean grocery stores in African American neighborhoods. See Lee, 193.

fragmentation of the minoritarian Imaginary. I also argue that the novel shows us how the wounded immigrant Imaginary's gendered idealizations of linguistic difference—valorized as inassimilable “cultural” difference—at once creates and obfuscates divisions within racialized populations.

Language, (The Impossibility of) Assimilation, and “Ethnic Narcissism”

Native Speaker repeatedly asks us to consider the psychic effects of the social demand made on the immigrant subject to demonstrate linguistic competence. In stark contrast with the '90s celebration of multicultural hybridity, the multiracial lobby's colorblind push for a “multiracial consciousness,” or even the Asian American critical turn toward “cultural resistance” outlined in the last chapter, Lee's fiction gives us a much grimmer version of the immigrants' entry into the “melting pot,” where linguistic acculturation cannot be separated from cultural coercion and disciplining.

In the novel, Henry's wife Lelia is a speech therapist who works with children who have clinically diagnosed problems as well as those who are learning to speak English as their second language:

The children she saw had all kinds of articulation problems, some because of physiological defects like cleft palates or tied tongues. Others had had laryngectomies, or else defective hearing, or learning disabilities, or for an unknown reason had begun speaking later than was normal. And then others—the ones I always paid close attention to—came to her because they had entered the first grade speaking a home language other than English. They were nonnative speakers. All day she helped these children manipulate their tongues and their lips and their exhaling breath, guiding them through the difficult language.⁴¹⁷

Like the scene of dictation in Cha's *DICTEE*, the recurrent image of the child learning to speak English as a non-native speaker and in the shadow of the “native speaker” becomes the topos of Lee's novel. As Lee's description of the “manipulation” suggests, it is through a kind of somatic and social disciplining that the immigrant children learn to imitate the model speaker Lelia, who

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

describes herself as “an average white girl” but also admits that it is her (white) unremarkability that gives her an exceptional status among non-native speakers: “Unfortunately, I am the ‘standard bearer.’”⁴¹⁸ Here, Lee’s blurring of the social and the clinical, the “normal” and the “abnormal” in Lelia’s profession can be seen as a critique of a long trend of the racialized standardization of English in the United States, influenced by xenophobic movements since the early 1900s.⁴¹⁹ But the representation of speech therapy can also, very plausibly, be a reference to technologies of assimilation used in the late twentieth century. In 1993, *The New York Times* reported that, increasingly, immigrants working in New York City were turning to speech therapists, speech evaluation centers, and “accent reduction” classes in the face of harassment and discrimination at work and in social situations:

Even though experts say such sentiments amount to bias, immigrants have turned to speech lessons offered by tutors, private companies and colleges. Although it is difficult to determine how many people have taken such courses, experts say they are becoming increasingly popular among immigrants.⁴²⁰

As the same article goes on to note, in 1992, the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed its first lawsuit on the issue of accents, accusing a California company of discrimination after it dismissed an employee who was a native of India because the company felt his accent was “not good for its image.”⁴²¹

In Lee’s novel, Henry encounters this bias against the non-native accent as a second generation Korean American. Watching Lelia’s students in her studio, he remembers his own speech training at school: “In kindergarten, kids would call me ‘Marble Mouth’ because I spoke

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹⁹ See for instance, Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002).

⁴²⁰ Raymond Hernandez, “When Accents Becomes an Issue: Immigrants Turn to Speech Classes to Reduce Sting of Bias,” *The New York Times* (March, 1993). Accessed on May 13, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/02/nyregion/when-accent-becomes-issue-immigrants-turn-speech-classes-reduce-sting-bias.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

in a garbled voice, my bound tongue wrenching itself to move in the right ways.”⁴²² Henry at once desires and despises the model diction of his (white) classmate Alice Eckles, who sneers at him as he leaves his class every day for a special period on “Remedial Speech” together with the other “misfits.” Henry’s introduction to English literature is marked by the discipline of his hostile assimilatory apparatus. His memory of Percy B. Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*—particularly of the image of its protagonist Prometheus’s beloved Asia descending into and transforming herself through a profound sea of the “ever-spreading sound”⁴²³—is indelibly marked by recollections of his struggles with the “scabrous mouthful” of sounds of the English language and of his teacher Mrs. Albrecht striking Shelley’s meter on his palms and the backs of his calves.⁴²⁴

Henry’s bilingualism thus bears marks of a conflict between Korean and English. Even as he learns to sound like a native speaker, that conflict is not resolved: “I always hear myself displacing the two languages, conflating them—maybe conflagrating them—for there’s so much rubbing and friction, a fire always threatens to blow up between the tongues. Friction, affliction.”⁴²⁵ This social construction of this “antagonism” between the two languages leads Henry to lead a kind of double life: it produces a desire to assimilate into dominant white

⁴²² Lee, 234.

⁴²³ The lines that Henry quotes—“Till, like one in slumber bound,/Borne to [the] ocean, I float down, around,/Into a sea profound, of ever-spreading sound...”—are from Act II of *Prometheus Bound*. They are uttered by Asia, the long-lost Eastern lover of Shelley’s protagonist Prometheus. Shelley sees Asia as the savior of Prometheus, the founder of the human civilization. In this Act, the poet describes Asia is a formidable presence defying spatial and temporal constraints. See Percy B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* in *The Selected Poems and Prose of Shelley* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 273. Lee’s cross-hatching of two radically different ideologies of “Asia” could be seen in light of the literary critic Spivak’s recent admission: “...as long as we take the literary as substantive source of good thinking alone, we will fail in the task of the aesthetic education we are proposing: at all cost to enter another’s text.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10. For a reading of how Lee’s novel shows the disciplining of the non-native subject through “high” literary culture, see Rachel Lee, “Reading Contests and Contesting Reading: Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*,” *MELUS* (Autumn-Winter 2004): 341-352.

⁴²⁴ Lee, 233.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

America, on the one hand, and a desire to reserve a special place for an inassimilable (linguistic) self, on the other: "I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers. Lelia says there are certain mental pathways of speaking that can never be unlearned."⁴²⁶ Henry looks for these "bad errors" in himself and other apparently assimilated subjects such as Kwang:

I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race. Although I had seen hours of him on videotape, there was something that I still couldn't abide in his speech....When I was young, I'd look in the mirror and address it, as if daring the boy there; I would say something dead and normal, like "Pleased to make your acquaintance," and I could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking.⁴²⁷

For Henry, linguistic performance of the immigrant subject becomes a mirror for a kind of cultural alterity in the self that defies assimilation. In his childhood encounter with his own specular image, he experiences a strange splitting, caught between the mimicking "I" that utters "Pleased to make your acquaintance" and the "I" who simultaneously reflects on the act of conscious mimicking. Here, Henry cannot fully appropriate his own image and he sees his linguistic performance in the mirror as a kind of ventriloquism. The social speculum shaping Henry's performance in front of his mirror *produces* racial otherness not just in terms of physiognomic difference but also through a linguistic and cultural dimension that Henry believes cannot be wished away through imitation.

Interestingly, Lee's literary representation of this ambivalence, this vacillation built into the psychic dimension of linguistic acculturation, at once draws on and complicates contemporary clinical psychoanalytic theorizations of immigrant subjectivity. In his essay "A Third Individuation: Immigration, Identity, and the Psychoanalytic Process"⁴²⁸ (published the same year

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁴²⁸ Salman Akhtar, "A Third Individuation: Immigration, Identity, and the Psychoanalytic Process," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 43 (1995): 1051-1084.

as Lee's novel), analyst Salman Akhtar argues for the need to see immigrant identity, however variable, as a "hyphenated" phenomenon, constructed through negotiations with (at least) two distinct cultures and value systems. Akhtar's primary goal in the essay is to describe the process through which the immigrant moves from feelings of rejection, loss, alienation in the new culture to a "healthy" psychic functioning where he can comfortably align himself with the culture of origin and the culture of assimilation. The acquisition of a new language that is not one's "mother tongue," Akhtar argues, is central to this process of "mending" in which the immigrant moves from a feeling of exclusion to a feeling of inclusion.

And yet, towards the end of the essay, he admits this description of a remodeled ego harmoniously negotiating multiple identifications may be too idealistic. There may be factors that may impede the immigrant's assimilation. Akhtar therefore proposes a more "realistic" model in his conclusion based on the work of D. Copelman:

Instead of positing unified, discrete cultures and nations to which we can all someday claim to belong, recent works suggest that we are bound to have fragmented allegiances, and dissonant voices within ourselves that name our world. This is not, I believe, some new version of the melting pot, for that assumes a synthesis which seems not only overly idealistic, but in fact undesirable. Instead of synthesis, there is the frightening but also exciting potential of multiplicity. Instead of completion or closure, there is the anxiety of partial identities as well as the challenge of ongoing process [Copelman, 1993, p. 79] (emphasis in the original).⁴²⁹

Like Henry in front of the mirror, Akhtar notes the persistence of otherness in the immigrant psyche. However, it is not entirely clear whether the otherness that Akhtar sees in the self is an immutable given or if this experience is, in fact, a product of being structurally interpellated as an "immigrant" or an "outsider" in the host country. Learning a new language as an immigrant, as Akhtar points out, is a particularly difficult journey, and, in its earliest stages, "the native language can become an object of idealization and create the narcissistic illusion that only

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 1076. See also D. Copelman, "The Immigrant Experience: Margin Notes," *Mind and Human Interaction*, 4 (1993): 76-82.

it can express things well.”⁴³⁰ The psychoanalyst here echoes Cha’s formulation of the “mother tongue” which the subject’s first language takes on a new narcissistic and cultural value *because* the colonized and/or immigrant subject feels that it is not valued as much as the lingua franca.⁴³¹

In this context, it is worth mentioning that Akhtar’s discussion of alterity and psychic splitting produced by polyglottism borrows from the work of the Italian psychoanalysts Jacqueline Amati-Mehler, Simona Argentieri, and Jorge Canestri, who are also working with polyglottic patients.⁴³² While Amati-Mehler et al propose the existence of a universal, primal polylinguistic potential expressed in neurophysiological capacities for language acquisition, they are also concerned with the historical and social repression of this multi-linguistic potential and the diversity and differences between languages. They argue that, within the space of clinical analysis, the choice of a particular language over another or the switching from one language to another by either the analyst or the analysand needs to be understood as a mechanism of psychic defense.⁴³³ And one can begin to analyze the nature of that defense only through an evaluation of the relationship between the languages and the context(s) within which the different languages

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 1068.

⁴³¹ See my discussion of *DICTEE* in chapter three.

⁴³² Amati-Mehler et al make a theoretical distinction between “polylingualism”—the early acquisition of several languages during one’s childhood and “polyglottism”—the later learning of languages. However, they also point to the blurring of boundaries between the two, and the crucial influences of internalized object relations on the individual’s incorporating, using, rejecting, or denying the relationship with a particular language and the culture associated with it. See Jacqueline Amati-Mehler, Simona Argentieri, and Jorge Canestri, *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Tongues in the Analytic Dimension*, trans. Jill Whitelaw-Cucco (Madison and Connecticut: International Universities Press Inc., 1993), 100-101.

⁴³³ Amati-Mehler et al begin their book with an intriguing and little known quote from an unpublished letter written by Freud in 1938 to Raymond de Saussure, the son of the structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the founder member of the Paris Psychoanalytic Society. In this letter, Freud asks Saussure to consider, in his theory of language, the linguistic loss of the “emigrant”: “It is—one can only say: the loss of the language in which one lived and thought and which one will never be able to replace with another, for one’s efforts and empathy. With painful comprehension I observe how otherwise familiar terms of expression fail me in English and how It [Es] even tries to resist giving up the familiar Gothic script.” The authors then proceed to analyze the implications of Freud’s own bilingualism and his various provocative but untheorized references to his patients’ multilingualism and their use of dialects. See Amati-Mehler et al, vii.

were learnt.⁴³⁴

In their account of “splitting,” the emphasis shifts from Melanie Klein’s notion of splitting (or *Spaltung*) as a primordial defense mechanism⁴³⁵ to the “barred” Lacanian subject struck by language. But Lacan’s theory, too, is revised to analyze several kinds of linguistic splitting encountered in the clinical context. They state:

It is our opinion that in an overall evaluation of the problem, too little attention has been paid to the family and affective context in which the two (or more) languages are learnt. For example, not enough consideration has been given to the difference that exists if the mother speaks only to the child in the “second language,” or if she also uses this language when speaking to the father or to other family members. There is a no less significant difference between a situation in which the eventual second language is linked to migration, with all the complex entanglements of separations, losses, and traumatic experiences connected with settling in a new country....⁴³⁶

Later, they continue:

...the actual mental organization of the multilingual subject lends itself in particular to the enacting of defenses, splittings, and repressions. Occasionally a new language represents a life-saving anchor which allows for “rebirth.” At other times it can be a justification for the mutilation of the internal world of the self.⁴³⁷

Amati-Mehler et al thus argue that the exposure to multiple languages at various stages in one’s life inevitably leads to splittings, whose affective quality is contingent on the circumstances of language acquisition and practice. The subject,⁴³⁸ on the one hand, might feel “reborn” through the new language if its acquisition is not a particularly conflicted process. Here, the alienation, separation, or distance that the subject feels s/he has achieved from the first language may even be salutary. On the other hand, if the acquisition of the new language(s) is marked by psychic conflicts or thwarted by discriminatory circumstances, then the splitting, or what Akhtar calls the

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴³⁸ Amati-Mehler et al do not use “subject” to refer to Lacan’s “subject of the unconscious.” They use a model where linguistic splitting, the ego, and the unconscious together shape the subject.

“exciting potential of multiplicity,” is something we need to examine further. For instance, we need to ask: what exactly is the nature of the splitting for those who are socially read as “immigrants” but are structurally constrained from linguistic and cultural assimilation? What kind of “multiplicity” may we envisage if linguistic splitting is always already bound to inequalities surrounding and within immigrant and minority socialities?

Several twentieth-century minority writers in the United States, like Ralph Ellison, Houston Baker Jr., Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Frank Chin, have reflected on the relationship between racial discrimination and the linguistic development of oppositional racial identities. For these minority writers, (literary) language is the site to forge a non-white (African American or Asian American) identity that defines itself in opposition to white supremacy. Interestingly, many of them have been particularly concerned with the development of ethnically specific literary styles which, while shaping minority identities, can also claim to be literary renditions of the voices of those who may not be directly involved in the synthesis of that literary style—specifically working-class communities of color. As Daniel Y. Kim has shown in his comparison of African American and Asian American writers, there is a striking similarity between the goals of the “blues” and “jazz” aesthetic of Ellison and Baker and Frank Chin’s Asian American theory of the “vernacular.” All three writers wish to appropriate English not to assimilate into white America but to “cannibalize” and “ape” the dominant language in order to produce literary styles that, they suggest, aesthetically aim to represent a certain “‘street’ discourse” spoken by the minority working class.⁴³⁹ From within this politics of linguistic appropriation, we might say that the rebellious re-appropriation of English and its infusion with other languages and non-white cultures—whether it is Ismael Reed’s “mumbo jumbo”⁴⁴⁰ or Frank Chin’s Asian American “vernacular”—attempt to convert linguistic splitting and its attendant alienation into a kind of

⁴³⁹ Daniel Y. Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 203-210.

⁴⁴⁰ Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

“rebirth” of the diasporic individual as well as an inassimilable “multiplicity” of a larger minority working class. Yet, as Kim’s analysis also shows, the vernaculars envisaged by Ellison, Baker, and Chin are disturbingly gendered in that they explicitly wish to assert a “masculine” African American or Asian American cultural nationalism into mainstream America. This is a literary practice that wishes to assert non-white “manhood” in response to the social structure, in which, to be non-white is to be seen as powerless, weak, and therefore “feminine,” “castrated,” or “queer.”⁴⁴¹ The aesthetic intent that is championed by Ellison and Chin

is depicted not only as racially authentic but as wholly virile. What these writers valorize (as do Baker and Gates) is a *masculine* figure who speaks from the racial margins, whose linguistic prowess lies in his deft capacity to repeat parodically and subversively the languages that constitute the center, none of which he should be able to claim as properly his own. He is defined by a violent and aggressive capacity to incorporate, appropriate, and mangle whatever linguistic materials enter into his verbal domain.⁴⁴²

What Kim identifies as Chin’s desire for “masculine” mangling of language in order to claim an “authentic” Asian American identity takes as its nemesis the “feminization” or “feminine inauthenticity” of Asian American cultural production. And this binary finds expression in Chin’s vehement rejection of female writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and homosexuality in the work of male playwright David Hwang.⁴⁴³

Kim’s analysis of the ideology of masculinity structuring the vernacularist Asian American (and African American) literary practice offers an important lesson: linguistic splitting and the mimicry that might follow in a multiracial context are unlikely to be “radical” as long as gender and sexual binaries color racial thinking. Even if a certain linguistic fluency presents the minority writer with an opportunity to make his ethnic narcissism a vehicle for expressing

⁴⁴¹ There is a significant body of scholarship that has examined the interarticulation of race, gender, and sexuality in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and their legacies. I will not attempt to produce a list here.

⁴⁴² Kim, 38.

⁴⁴³ See for instance Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong ed., *The Big Aiiieeeee: Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1991), xiii-xv.

communal solidarity,⁴⁴⁴ as a gendered and sexualized form of retaliation that constructs femininity as virile masculinity's inferior other, ethnic literary politics will only reproduce familiar forms of exclusion and oppression.

I would like to suggest that *Native Speaker* self-consciously brings to its surface such a critique of linguistic appropriation and literary hybridity: in the novel, intrapsychic splittings and consequent mimicking triggered by varying degrees of linguistic competence do not lead to the production of a common ethnic vernacular. Instead, these multiform splittings have *interpsychic* repercussions that produce divisions between different minority groups and simultaneously rescript gender hierarchies within the Asian American community.

For instance, Lee's narrator Henry tells us how, as a partially assimilated immigrant entrepreneur with limited linguistic skills, his father sees linguistic mimicry not as a subversive act but as a way to *mute* his ethnic difference while interacting with his white customers. Mr. Park thus asks his more assimilated son to utter "some Shakespeare words" to impress his white customers—an instruction that Henry defies by "grunting" his best Korean to converse with his co-ethnics in his father's shop.⁴⁴⁵ At the same time, even as he wishes to use linguistic assimilation for better business, Mr. Park deliberately employs migrants who have little or no knowledge of English. These migrants, he believes, are "hard working" because they feel vulnerable without the necessary language skills. Lacking the linguistic skill (that, for instance, the minority ethnic writer Chin possesses), Mr. Park projects his own vulnerability onto these immigrant laborers who he points out "didn't speak English too well, just like us."⁴⁴⁶ As Henry notes:

⁴⁴⁴ See my discussion of Chow's theory of trans/individual ethnic narcissism in chapter three.

⁴⁴⁵ Lee, 53.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 187.

This became a rule of thumb for him, to hire somebody if they couldn't speak English, even blacks from Haiti or Ethiopia, because he figured they were new to the land and understood that no one would help them for nothing. The most important thing was they hadn't been in America too long.⁴⁴⁷

As a member of the ethnic American petit bourgeoisie, Mr. Park is a contradictory or split subject, produced, in part, by the value structurally attached to language-as-capital in diaspora. Even as he values linguistic capital, Mr. Park wishes to make use of his employees' low exchange value and easy replaceability as linguistically incompetent and "low skilled" migrants. In other words, *Native Speaker* foregrounds what Chin's politics of literary subversion covers over: the different degrees of competence that distinguish the practitioners of aesthetic subversion from the working class that they claim to represent through their aesthetics. Mr. Park is an intriguing literary figure because he represents the *impossibility* of a pro-proletarian politics of linguistic subversion under unequal globalization. His split subjectivity is constituted through a racialized awareness of language-as-capital, but it is also informed by the social exploitation and denigration of the lack of linguistic competence. Situated between competence and incompetence, Mr. Park attempts to capitalize on both the assimilatory capacities of his son and the ineptitude of the migrant laborers that he employs.

At the same time, through Mr. Park, the novel presents a kind of Asian American "'street' discourse" that identifies the ideological limits of Chin's ethno-nationalist literary vernacular, even as the novel marks its distance from the language of aesthetic subversion. Henry recalls his father using English (that he has picked up by listening to his customers) to silence his monolingual housewife during their arguments at home:

He used to break into it when he argued with my mother, and it drove her crazy when he did and she would just plead, "No, no!" as though he had suddenly introduced a switchblade into a clean fistfight. Once, when he was having some money problems with a store, he started berating her with some awful stream of nonsensical street talk, shouting

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

“my hot mama shit ass tight cock sucka,” and “slant-eye spic-and-span motha-fucka” (he had picked it up, no doubt from his customers).⁴⁴⁸

Through such fictional moments of linguistic mimicry, *Native Speaker* problematizes both post-structuralist assessments of iterability and the minoritarian literary politics of appropriation championed by the earlier generation of Asian American (and African American) writers. Firstly, even if Mr. Park’s repetition of his customer’s language produces meanings other than what he “intends,”⁴⁴⁹ more significantly, it manages to connote gendered domination and hostility, not through its “meaning” but because Henry’s mother (mis)recognizes his utterance each time as a performance of the patriarch, utterances that she cannot understand or offer responses to in the same language. As Henry conjectures, to his mother, English becomes a (gendered) weapon that she does not possess. Here, the semantic uncertainty that could have been produced by *différance* is overridden by a general connotation of patriarchal violence. This violence does not need a denotation to produce an affective response in Henry’s mother a feeling of being abused, wounded by, a language that she does not speak.

Secondly, we might say that what Henry calls “nonsensical street talk” is also the novel’s meta-critical reading of the limits of ethnic literary desire for the pedestrian vernacular. Through Mr. Park’s imposition of a string of sexist and homophobic abuses on his wife, *Native Speaker* urges us to consider what the writer/reader might gain by returning to the Bakhtinian distinction between the “organic” hybridization of language (which occurs through actual intercultural contact) and “intentional” hybridization (which is the writer’s creation).⁴⁵⁰ As “literature,” the novel seems to put into question the privileging of the intentional over the organic and the structural, a choice that most often drives the desire for literary subversion. Simultaneously, this particular modality of linguistic splitting brings into relief the “organic” sexual and gendered

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁴⁹ I am thinking of Derrida’s famous statement “iterability alters.” See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 62.

⁴⁵⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

violence that structures interracial exchange and that also forms the “masculinist unconscious” of the intentional ethnic program of hybridization.

Hybridity, however, is not the only subjective response to linguistic splitting in *Native Speaker*. There are several moments in Lee’s novel when Henry—as a second-generation immigrant—attempts to draw on (the alterity of) the *Korean* language to name, authenticate, and stabilize his ethnic identity momentarily, as an alternative to the mimicking of English, whose sounds, he thinks, alienates him from himself. That is to say, in spite of his assimilation, Henry is unable to leave behind what Akhtar calls the “narcissistic illusion” of the “native tongue” defined in opposition to English. That is to say, it is not Asian Americanness but an ineffable sense of *Koreanness* that Henry seeks in language. Visiting his Korean friend Albert’s house in New Jersey, Henry hears Albert’s parents talk in Korean and experiences a sense of kinship that he cannot explain:

...while sitting at dinner listening to her [Albert’s mother] and Albert’s father asking their son questions about school, his health, *worrying as they were in the very words, in the very tone and gesture of my growing up, a familiarity arose that should have been impossible but wasn’t*....It wasn’t that Albert and I were similar; we weren’t, our parents weren’t. It was something else. That night, lying in the short bunk bed above snoring Albert, I wondered if anything would have turned out differently had a careless nurse switched the two of us in a hospital nursery, whether this family would be significantly changed, whether mine would have been, whether any of us Koreans, raised as we were, would sense the barest tinge of a loss or estrangement (my emphasis).⁴⁵¹

Henry does not imagine kinship in terms of consanguinity. Kinship, here, is felt in terms of affective ties recognized through a language whose use is confined to domestic and communal spaces marked as non-white or ethnic.

Likewise, Henry idealizes Kwang’s son Peter’s Korean accent as more “authentic” than his own, and continues to look upon his first language—one over which he no longer has a firm grasp because of his assimilation—as a vehicle of experiences he cannot convey in English.

⁴⁵¹ Lee, 97.

Henry longs for that language he has partially lost to be able to console Kwang after the death of his supporter Eduardo in the fire:

It is in these moments that I wish for John Kwang to start speaking the other tongue we know; sometimes our English can't touch what I want to say. I want to call the simple Korean back to him the way I once could when I was Peter's age, our comely language of distance and bows, by which real secrets may be slowly courted, slowly unveiled.⁴⁵²

What are we to make of these readings of linguistically experienced "Koreanness" in the novel?

Again, it might be useful to look at such instances of "essentialism" as representations of structural constraints to the kinds of literary or aesthetic reading practices offered by post-structuralism. If Derrida speaks of literature as that which dissolves egoic attachments to "invent" its reader "if s/he is willing,"⁴⁵³ and if Bersani claims that (certain kinds of) art produce and is produced by an "aesthetic subject" who gives expression to the unconscious and "unimaginable imagination of an identityless miasma, of something before articulated being,"⁴⁵⁴ then *Native Speaker* seems to suggest that the conditions of production of the subject of language and articulation might make that subject entirely *unwilling* to "undo" her/his subjectivity, to reach for that anti-social miasma through language and/or aesthetics, particularly in the face of being constantly *read* socially as the ethnically marked subject. In spite of the differences between their respective historical and political contexts, Lee's representation of Henry's attachment to Korean, we can say, has something in common with the post-colonial bilingual writer's privileging of his/her first language over languages learned later as a colonial subject. This comparison between

⁴⁵² Ibid., 275.

⁴⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 74. Here, I disagree with Crystal Parikh's turn to Derrida in her interpretation of Lee's novel. I discuss Parikh's reading in the next section. See Crystal Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 28.

⁴⁵⁴ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 145.

Henry and writers discussed in the last chapter⁴⁵⁵ is not that far-fetched, given that Lee's protagonist is not just a spy but also a "writer," tasked with the production of informative biographies about his co-ethnics. In the next section, I will show how the *Native Speaker*, through its generic complexity, also offers its own allegorical reading of the larger politics of multiculturalism and the US multicultural academy that generates and maintains the minority intellectual's ethnic narcissism. I will also pay attention to the novel's desire to transcend ethnic boundaries through a trans-racial (literary) vernacular and its simultaneous admission of its failure to do so.

An Allegory of Ethnic Studies and "Anti-social" Class Mobility

Lee's protagonist, Henry Park, we will recall, works for an espionage company. We are never told exactly what the company does or who its clients are. Henry mentions that their clients are "multinational corporations" who pay for information about dissident immigrant subjects working against the corporations' interests. The task of the spies employed by "Glimmer and Co." is therefore to investigate the lives of these insurgent immigrants. The spies, however, have ethnic specialties and research people from their own ethnic groups. As Henry tells us:

We chose instead to deal in people. Each of us engaged our own kind, more or less. Foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans. I worked with Koreans, Pete with Japanese. We split up the rest, the Chinese, Laotians, Singaporans, Filipinos, the whole transplanted Pacific Rim....Then we wrote the tract of their lives, remote, unauthorized biographies. I the most prodigal and mundane of historians⁴⁵⁶

Henry describes spying as a kind of knowledge production undertaken by "native informants" who have access to important information as "insiders" in a particular ethnic community. But this knowledge production is also a betrayal, not just because the spy uses his own ethnicity to expose his co-ethnic but also because the terms of information production are determined by the company's clients.

⁴⁵⁵ See my discussion of the West African writers Cheik Aliou Ndao, Ousmane Sembène, Xadi Faal in chapter three.

⁴⁵⁶ Lee, 17-18.

The production of ethnic knowledge is based on a certain kind of *reading* that his boss Hoagland and his clients want: “My appointed plan was to give a good scratch to the surface, come away with some spice or flavor under my nails. As Hoagland would half-joke, whatever grit of an ethnicity.”⁴⁵⁷ Later, Henry tells us:

I am to be a *clean writer*, of the most reasonable eye, and present the subject in question like some sentient machine of transcription. In the commentary, I won’t employ anything that even smacks of theme or moral. I will know nothing of the crafts of argument or narrative or drama. Nothing of beauty or art. And I am to stay on my uncomplicated task of rendering a man’s life and ambition and leave to the unseen experts the arcana of human interpretation....I will simply know character. Identity. That is the all. I am to follow like a starved dog the entrails of any personal affect.⁴⁵⁸

As an ethnic spy, Henry is not allowed to worry about form, style, or the method of knowledge production. He is only allowed to trust his ethnic “affect” and build the “identity” of his subject. In other words, even as Glimmer and Co.’s multinational corporations/clients, as powerful agents of global capitalism, allow or even encourage the proliferation of ethnic difference, they disallow the spies from questioning the process and reasons for such readings and subsequent knowledge production. Ethnic narcissism—the discursive production of knowledge of one’s own ethnicity—here, serves institutions and interests that it cannot always see.

In her reading of *Native Speaker*, Crystal Parikh compares Henry’s act of betrayal to the vocation of the minority intellectual, particularly one who is involved in culturally specific knowledge production in the field of “Ethnic Studies” in the United States, a discipline that grew out of grassroots and student-driven initiatives and cultural nationalist programs in the wake of the civil rights movement in the 60s and the 70s. While Parikh sees unquestionable value in the establishment and survival of Ethnic Studies as a discipline and its objects of inquiry, she also echoes Balibar and Chow in her critique of capitalism’s controlled production and regulation of

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 140-141.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

difference.⁴⁵⁹ Ethnic Studies, Parikh warns us, without introspection about its own conditions of possibility and operation as part of the (transnational) corporation that is the American university, risks becoming an apparatus of racial and intellectual segregation under the signs of “multiculturalism” and “transnationalism” where all that the Ethnic Studies scholar is expected to do is produce “truths” about her own ethnic identity and “culture of origin.” Lee’s novel, Parikh suggests, is such an exercise in reflexivity which Henry, as the ethnic spy, acquires some awareness of the fictitious nature and political ramifications of the essentialisms he himself perpetuates.⁴⁶⁰

Making “class” her central axis of analysis, Yoonmee Chang offers a comparably introspective critique of Asian American studies through Lee’s novel. Emphasizing the need to see class not as a monolithic or stable category but as a *system of economic and political inequalities* that sometimes collectivizes and at other times divides experiences of those inequalities along other categories of difference like race, gender, and sexuality, Chang uncovers the pitfalls of what she calls the “culturalist epistemology” in Asian American discourse: the tendency to privilege “culture” and cultural representation over class conflicts, thereby displacing systemic and structural dynamics of political economy into an ethnic group’s putative “inner” cultural values and ethics. While the culturalization of class is not unique to Asian Americans, Chang points out that the “model minority” myth, premised on the celebration of ethnic “values,” makes culturalization particularly pronounced in the Asian American context, producing an “ethnographic imperative” that ignores class differences and demands that Asian American writers and critics continually produce cultural essences about their community.⁴⁶¹

In her reading of *Native Speaker*, Chang argues that the novel rehearses the

⁴⁵⁹ See my discussions of Balibar’s notion of “differential racism” and Chow’s notion of “coercive mimeticism” in chapter three.

⁴⁶⁰ See Parikh, 111-115.

⁴⁶¹ Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1-24.

culturalization of Asian American otherness with a view to anatomizing its political consequences. Chang draws our attention to the contradictory effects of culturalization of racial difference in Lee's narrative. On the one hand, race enables class privilege: as the ethnic spy-writer, the narrator Henry actively capitulates to the model minority myth to better his prospects. Through the "apparatus" of multiculturalism that is Glimmer and Co., Henry willingly converts his ethnicity into a commodity. And while this commoditization may hinder Henry's cultural and racial assimilation, it does permit him to mobilize racial difference for his own economic empowerment. On the other hand, the novel also shows how this culturalization-as-commoditization can happen only by excluding the majority of Asian immigrants—such as Henry's father and his linguistically incompetent co-ethnic laborers—for whom the "cultural" quality of being "industrious" does not translate into class mobility in quite the same way.

In particular, Chang focuses on Henry's representation of his father's ethnic entrepreneurship as a form of "ghettoization" that allows the immigrant subject to advance economically but keeps him socially invisible and hostile to organized political struggle and the assertion of civil rights. As an immigrant with limited linguistic skills, Henry's father is unable to make use of his (Korean) training as an engineer. He becomes a greengrocer to shoulder his familial responsibilities, and, eventually, he is the owner of a number of vegetable stores in New York City. However, even as Mr. Park earns enough money to buy a majestic house in an upscale and predominantly white suburb, his economic affluence does not result in commensurate social inclusion. According to Henry, the Park family could never quite fit into their Winchester neighborhood as they "mince delicately about in pained feet through our immaculate neighborhood, we silent partners of the bordering WASPS and Jews, never rubbing them except with a smile...."⁴⁶² Simultaneously, the desire to prosper economically in a new country makes Mr. Park eschew civic engagement. Henry tells us that his father is unabashedly hostile toward political activism and the civil rights movement: "the sole right he wanted was to be left

⁴⁶² Lee, 52.

alone...so that he could just run his stores.”⁴⁶³ Thus, as Chang argues, Lee represents Mr. Park’s ethnic entrepreneurship as an activity that produces economic stability but is unable to erase the modalities of class that are lived through the experiences of racialization.

Class mobility, in the case of Henry’s father, is an economic mobility that is “fractured” in that it produces economic prosperity *without* social recognition. The desire for class mobility, here, is also a form of psychic “disciplining” given that the demand for civil rights and protests against racial discrimination, from Henry’s father’s point of view, are impediments to immigrant economic advancement.⁴⁶⁴ Thus, in Chang’s astute reading, what *Native Speaker* demonstrates in its post-1992 reflection of American capitalism is how the *social and economic dimensions of class, most often assumed to operate simultaneously, are alienated from each other*, especially when racial difference disrupts dominant ideologies of American national identity and shatters the myth that capitalism (as “economic freedom”) is synonymous with “democracy” or civic equality.⁴⁶⁵ Lee’s representation of the fragmentation of class spheres, *the cleavage of the economic from the social and the cultural* that it underscores through Mr. Park’s “anti-sociality,” therefore undermines the culturalist epistemology and ethnographic imperatives that Henry himself performs in the novel.

Through this enactment of “intra-class splitting”—where one (economically) belongs and (yet socially) cannot belong to a race-as-class—Mr. Park’s character also offers a literary instantiation of an anti-political “negativity,” an economic refusal of identity politics that cannot be understood through Bersani and Edelman’s ahistorical anti-social definition of politics as a regression to the narcissistic Imaginary. In fact, Mr. Park’s “narcissistic negativity”—shaped, in part, by linguistic alienation and splitting in the Imaginary—challenges the very premise of the queer anti-social thesis: that the Imaginary functions as a lure for unity and an integrated identity.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁶⁴ Chang, 153.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 157.

While the novel does not see “class” as an “effect” of language, as something that can be wished away through literary or aesthetic practice in general, the classed fragmentation that makes Mr. Park turn away from identity politics is, here, not dissociable from language as an overdetermined “system of signification that is structured by the mode of production.”⁴⁶⁶ This system is part of the material reality that is class, reflecting *and* producing Imaginary fragmentations instead of an illusion of plenitude.

There is, however, a formal difficulty that we need to confront while reading into the novel’s approach to multiracial politics and literary representation. How should readers respond to the fact that it is the narrator Henry who decides *the terms of representation* of middlemen Korean businessmen like his father, and of other nameless, gendered, working-class and underclass immigrant subjects who do not want to or cannot represent themselves? As critics You-Me Park and Gayle Wald note, Henry mentions several female Korean (American) characters—his mother, his (nameless) surrogate mother, Kwang’s wife May, and the (nameless) waitress who Kwang picks up—who are denied any meaningful access to the (predominantly male) public sphere.⁴⁶⁷ Do Henry and his author Lee—themselves products of capitalist social relations that devalue labor to maximize profit—risk fixing, stereotyping, or fetishizing these less-than-model minority subjects through their severely limited representation, thereby recommitting the acts of racial, gendered, and classed violence that the novel seeks to expose?

It is important, here, to pause on the distinction between Henry’s voice (the narrating “I”) and the *authorial form*, which establishes him as the novel’s narrator, creates the novel’s characters, and arranges events that Henry describes and that drive the plot. This distinction is a theoretical one, since it is impossible to “separate” Henry’s voice from the implied author’s. And yet I would like to suggest that there is a “diglossic” element in the novel, and that the authorial

⁴⁶⁶ See Eric Schocket, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 22.

⁴⁶⁷ You-me Park and Gayle Wald, “Native Daughters in the Promised Land: Gender, Race, and the Question of Separate Spheres,” *American Literature* 70 (September 1998): 609.

form makes its presence felt in and “outside” Henry’s speech, troubling if not pushing us beyond the limited and limiting point of view that Henry ostensibly represents. The narrating-I of *Native Speaker*, we might say, is split between “speaking” and “being spoken,” performing and being performed by two different “voices” whose literary politics do not exactly mirror each other and are not necessarily identical. This diglossia, in other words, is not reducible to Henry’s reflexivity: it is constituted by the additional “voice” of the authorial form that Henry does not always “hear,” even if he sometimes functions as its agent of utterance. The diglossia serves to show how structures of identification are set in motion in the novel.

Simultaneously, however, Lee’s writing encourages the reader to cultivate a certain detachment from these structures and to question their founding assumptions. Consider, for instance, the passage in the novel where Henry distinguishes his “unofficial” literary practice from the ethnic writing that his profession demands. This is writing that Henry practices in between moments of spying and for his own pleasure:

...sometimes I will write them out now, again, though for myself, *those old strokes*, unofficial versions of any newcomer I see in the street or on the bus or in the demi-shops of the city, the need in me still to *undo* the cipherlike faces scrawled with hard work, and no work, and all trouble. The faces of my father and his workers, and Ahjuhma, and the ever-dimming one of my mother. I will *write out* the face of the young girl I saw yesterday wearily unloading small sacks of basmati in front of her family’s store, a baby wrapped tightly to her back with a sheet of raw cloth, the very sheet being her shirt, the warm hump now her back, her brother or sister the same thing as her weight (my emphasis).⁴⁶⁸

In this passage, Henry describes his own act of writing, of linguistically representing those who are not in a position to be a privileged native informant like him. This is a kind of writing that attempts to evade the routine culturalization of ethnicity. And yet, Lee’s rhetorical construction and formal placement of Henry’s meta-literary reflection betrays anxieties of which Henry seems unaware. On the one hand, writing represents the political possibility of communication of structures of oppression, a realistic “decipherment” or transcription that follows the reading of the

⁴⁶⁸ Lee, 171.

“cipherlike faces” which are, themselves, a kind of “writing” of inequalities faced by his parents, his Korean nanny Ahjuhma, and other immigrants he encounters on the street. On the other hand, the very fact that Henry can, so easily, through a mere repetition of his “old strokes,” “undo” and “write out” the faces of the underclass betrays the novel’s own skepticism around the political efficacy and representational mirroring of this literary realism.

This realism, here, is also an *erasure* of the complexity of circumstances shaping the underclass, a process that quickly reduces complex subjects into abstract signifiers of poverty and dispossession—the worn face or the tired back. Thus, we might say Henry unwittingly critiques his own liberal humanist literary practice, as he speaks of transforming his ocular gaze into what the literary critic Eric Schocket, in a different context, calls the “mirror of sympathy that lies at the heart of the liberal subject whose reciprocal bonds with others now extend beyond the family to encompass fellow citizens of the secular nation-state.”⁴⁶⁹ This mirror, as Schocket and others have argued, may produce emotional responses to sufferings of the classed other. But these responses taking the form of literary “sympathy” or “compassion”—an affective currency that is, in fact, a product of the class divide—often become an end in themselves, circling back to the “feeling” subject, producing neo-liberal individualist solutions to systemic problems. Further, the task of sympathy is as much to “produce” the upper class and/or more privileged sympathizing (and consuming) reader as it is to produce the less privileged “object” of sympathy.⁴⁷⁰ We might say that, through his “unofficial” representation of the immigrant underclass, Henry moves beyond ethnic narcissism (i.e. a cultural preoccupation with his Korean-ness) to a broader diasporic and sympathetic politics of representation. But as images that Henry creates primarily for himself and his implied reader, as products of habit churned out between moments of ethnic

⁴⁶⁹ See Schocket, 6.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid. For a comparable critique of the realist “circle of sympathy” in the context of Dalit literature written by upper caste Indian writers, see Toral Jatin Gajrawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 45-48.

reading and writing, the political consequences of this ostensibly non-narcissistic mode of writing remains uncertain. The fact that the passage is inserted as a brief leisurely digression between acts of ethnic spying also adds to its ironic meta-literary valence.

Native Speaker stages a similarly conflictual relationship between Henry's democratic formulation of an impure/mongrel language of "America"—something that he derives from John Kwang's multi-racial political vision—and its own enactment of the failure of that vision. Although he enters American politics by giving in to the model minority myth, and even as Henry (at least initially) identifies something undilutedly "Korean" about Kwang, the councilman with mayoral ambitions makes it clear that his goal is to create an "American" following that is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual: "This his daily order do the good duty, go out into the street, go into the stores, stop them in the alleyways. Just get in the word. In ten different languages you say *Kwang is like you. You will be an American*" (original italics).⁴⁷¹ Henry tells us that Kwang at once wishes to use and to transcend the myth of Koreans being "devoted" to their families: the councilman takes his workers and his constituency as his family "which in its elemental version must have nothing to do with blood."⁴⁷²

His constituency is made up of innumerable small shopkeepers of color, of "various platoons of Koreans, Indians, Vietnamese, Haitians, Colombians, Nigerians, these brown and yellow whatevers, countless unheard nobodies"⁴⁷³ doing business with each other on the streets of New York City. Kwang also runs a Korean "money club" called the *ggeh*—an informal bank typically catering to Korean immigrants. But Kwang's *ggeh* is unconventional in that it accepts

⁴⁷¹ Lee, 143.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 146.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 93. Kim points out that, by imagining a political leader who can create such a multi-ethnic base, Lee's novel is, in fact, echoing and responding to the acutely felt and publicly discussed absence of such a leader in American politics in the wake of the '92 riots and racial tension in the mid-1990s. See Kim, 237-238.

contributions from and helps immigrants of various other ethnicities.⁴⁷⁴ To counter allegations made against him by his political rival De Roos, Kwang delivers a moving speech to an audience that is an even mix of “Koreans, blacks, Hispanics.”⁴⁷⁵ In this speech, he urges Koreans and blacks to challenge media representations of hostilities between them, to recognize shared as well as different histories of marginalization of the communities, and the displacement of the ethnic resentment produced by racism.⁴⁷⁶

So let’s think together in a different way. Today, here, now. Let us think that for the moment it is not a Korean problem. That it is not a black problem or a brown and yellow problem, that it is not a problem of our peoples, that it is not even ultimately a problem of our mistrust or our ignorance. Let us think it is the problem of a self-hate.⁴⁷⁷

Kwang thus asks blacks and Koreans to come together to forge a minority interracial coalition without forgetting their racial specificities.

Again, such a vision of politics as an interethnic alliance against structural racism cannot be conflated with what Edelman and Bersani discard as politics. At the same time, to celebrate ethnic specificity uncritically would be to ignore how it is constructed by economic and cultural ghettoization on the one hand (always at a remove from what is considered to be “the nation”) and, on the other hand, in relation to grievances of other minority groups. Kwang acknowledges this *constitutive impurity* of ethnicity when he speaks of his own (Korean American) vision of politics as something that is inspired by the “Americanness” of the African American civil rights movement thirty years earlier:

⁴⁷⁴ Lee, 280.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁷⁶ Again, Kim points out that this speech has a lot in common with the Asian American historian Gary Okihiro’s essay “Is Yellow Black or White?,” published a year before the publication of *Native Speaker*. Kwang’s evocation of shared histories, Kim shows, is modeled on Okihiro’s description of Asian Americans and Africans as “kindred people forged in the fire of white supremacy and struggle.” See Kim, 240.

⁴⁷⁷ Lee, 151.

I remember walking these very streets as a young man, watching the crowds and demonstrations. I felt welcomed by the parades of black men and women. A man pulled me right out from the sidewalk and said I should join them. I did. I went along. I tried to feel what they were feeling....the black power in the streets! Their songs and chants! I thought *this* is America!⁴⁷⁸

This zone of interracial borrowing, where Kwang borrows from African Americans' expression of their grievances, paradoxically, shapes Kwang's future "Koreanness." Yet this is a paradox that Henry narrates (or is *made* to narrate) but on which he does not reflect. Instead of seeing the constitutive impurity in ethnic self-assertion, Henry idealizes and culturalizes the latter as the basis of a program of interracial coalition.

There are several moments towards the end of the novel where Henry tells us how he has developed an affinity for the "impurity" of the utterances of Kwang. Here, oral language becomes a dangerous "mirror of sympathy" insofar as Kwang's public performances of linguistic impurity become, for Henry, sites of sympathetic and compassionate connections with less-model immigrants across language, class, race, and generation. Henry "sees" the reflection of Kwang's political vision in his language when the councilman addresses his supporters, speaking simultaneously like "a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between."⁴⁷⁹ And this hybrid tongue, in turn, reminds Henry of the "old laments of my mother and my father...the fitful mumblings of our Ahjuhma, the instant American inventions of her American tongue."⁴⁸⁰ Later in the novel, Henry feels a similar affective tie with the language of workers at a Korean deli:

On the far corner is the daily right is the all-night Korean deli; two workers, a Korean and a Hispanic, are sitting on crates and smoking cigarettes outside. There's no traffic, and when the wind is right, their voices filter up to us. We listen to the earnest attempts of their talk, the bits of their stilted English. I know I would have ridiculed them when I was young: I would cringe and grow ashamed and angry at those funny tones my father and his workers, all that Konglish, Spanglish, Jive. Just talk right, I wanted to yell, just talk right for once in your sorry lives. But now, I think I would give most anything to hear my

⁴⁷⁸ Lee, 195.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 303-304.

father's talk again, the crash and bang and stop of his language, always hurtling by. I will listen to him forever in the streets of this city....I will bear whatever sentence they wish to rain on me, all the volleys of their prayers and curses.⁴⁸¹

Henry thus seemingly embraces the impurity of the Konglish and Spanglish, moving on from his earlier attachment to the norms of standard English to a liberal endorsement of or perhaps even an ethical surrender to an irreparable hybridity.

And yet, this surrender is dubious. As Daniel Kim points out in his essay on *Native Speaker*, while Henry's nostalgic memorialization of a multilingual immigrant creole draws on the African American political and literary tradition of valuing a kind of "vernacular" that speaks to and like "ordinary people,"⁴⁸² Lee's novel never really "shows" us what that vernacular looks like. We never see Kwang or the nameless immigrants actually speaking the language(s) that Henry describes. Kim writes:

...there is a radical disjuncture between the language being described and the language of the narrator. Henry does not speak the Konglish, the Spanglish, or the black English of any of the people he depicts; unable or unwilling to transcribe their speech, he can liken it only to "The strangest chorale," "the most awful and sad opera," or evoke its "crash and bang and stop. . . , always hurtling by."⁴⁸³

In other words, in spite of an idealized attachment to the vernacular, Henry can only describe it as something from which he is forever alienated. Thus, the apparently promising non-assimilatory linguistic mirror fails to achieve anything beyond alienation from the putative objects of sympathy. The mirror of vernacular hybridity thus continues to repel even as Henry "feels" sympathy for its speakers. The mirror of compassion, it turns out, is thoroughly caught up in the mirror of narcissistic alienation.

It is in the context of this compassion-at-a-distance that I want to discuss the ending of the novel, which is set in Lelia's classroom with Lelia and Henry teaching English to their

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 337.

⁴⁸² For a critique of the "powerful dream of the [oral] vernacular" among African American writers, see also Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 90.

⁴⁸³ Kim, 252.

immigrant students. At this point, Henry has quit his job as an ethnic spy and decided to work on his marriage with Lelia. He begins assisting Lelia in her speech therapy classes where she does not attempt to correct the children's mis/use of English. Henry plays the role of a "Speech Monster" who is amusingly ominous and present only to encourage the children to get comfortable with the language: "I gobble up kids but I cower when anyone repeats the day's secret phrase."⁴⁸⁴ Lelia tells them stories in her gentlest voice, not worrying about whether or what they understand: "She wants them to know that there is nothing to fear, she wants to offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show that them it's fine to mess it all up."⁴⁸⁵ This playfully cosmopolitan pedagogic performance ends with Lelia giving out badges to her students, labeling them "good citizens," and calling out their names carefully in a "dozen lovely and native languages."⁴⁸⁶

Various critics have read this final image as one of a progressive politics of change, an acceptance of difference and self-transformation. For instance, Sāmi Ludwig sees Lee ending on a note of hope, where the white woman's understanding mirrors a cognitive, linguistic, and epistemological self-fashioning that is "successful in countless interethnic marriages in the United States but still lacks recognition in the public sphere."⁴⁸⁷ Crystal Parikh reads this scene of teaching/being taught as one that introduces not only a liberal politics but a productive (Derridean) uncertainty "over who is that embodies privilege through knowledge and knowledge through privilege."⁴⁸⁸

I would, however, suggest that we read this scene of instruction by moving away from such sympathetic identifications with Henry and/or Lelia, by simply remembering the position of

⁴⁸⁴ Lee, 349.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Sāmi Ludwig, "Ethnicity as Cognitive Identity: Private and Public Negotiations in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 10 (2007): 239.

⁴⁸⁸ Parikh, 125.

this scene in the novel—after the complete collapse of Kwang’s political vision. The anonymous illegal immigrants—who are part of the *ggeh* and who are finally arrested because of Henry’s betrayal—are revealed to be the threatening supplement to Kwang’s dream of creating an “American” base. Concomitantly, the arrests expose the fetishism involved in the Henry’s dream of the trans-ethnic vernacular and in the couple’s sympathy for the “culture” of their students. As Palimbu-Liu reminds us, this ambiguous interpellation of good citizens occurs in a “safer privatized space” after the narrative “closing off” of a social utopia.⁴⁸⁹ Similarly, Chang points out that the culturalized cosmopolitanism of the mixed-race couple and their somewhat cosmetic operations with language is undermined and haunted by the death of Lelia and Henry’s biracial son Mitt in an act of racist violence: “...Mitt embodies a multicultural ideal. Mitt is killed by a group of white neighborhoods who dog-pile him. The symbolism is obvious: Mitt is suffocated by the weight of whiteness.”⁴⁹⁰ Here, “whiteness” is less the color of actual “white people” and more the hierarchical positions of hegemonic power maintained by whites and non-whites through racial, economic, and/or social capital. Whiteness is no longer simply a racial marker but the systemic motor generating desire for recognition, privilege, and profit historically associated with physiognomic whiteness. Henry, who wishes that his biracial son were “more white”⁴⁹¹ is also implicated in the non-white production of whiteness. Sympathetic identifications with non-white classed others through language and culture keeps this motor of whiteness intact.

Thus, the novel’s steady regression from the promise of an interethnic coalition against white supremacy to the dream of an unrepresentable vernacular to liberal multiculturalism is, to my mind, not utopian but profoundly dystopian. It is for this reason that I disagree with readings

⁴⁸⁹ Palimbu-Liu, 320.

⁴⁹⁰ Chang, 170.

⁴⁹¹ Lee, 285.

that see *Native Speaker* as a “post-political” literary recompense for the failure of politics.⁴⁹² If anything, the novel sees depoliticized deployments of the literary—whether through linguistic narcissism’s disavowal of social differences or through its sympathetic accommodation of difference—as being deeply complicit with the failures of politics.

Conclusion: There is No Interracial (Sexual) Relation

In conclusion, I would like to return to my opening remarks on psychoanalytic, queer, and literary theory’s post-political use of the language of “desire” and desire in “language.” I suggested that, in this discourse, sexual desire functions as the essentially anti-social and anti-normative force that shatters all illusions of identity and meaning. Here, the sexual signifies nothing other than the “failure” of meaning. That is to say, as a concept, “language” or the Other must be understood first and foremost in its sexual dimension, which is also the dimension of conflicting and ambiguous meanings and finally a “lack” of meaning. And literature—as the linguistic domain *par excellence*—is the privileged domain that demonstrates this anti-normative approach to sexuality. Such an approach to sexuality and language also informs Edelman’s “queer” thesis: for him, only negativity in sexuality and language can undermine reproductive heteronormativity—the social quest for (a single) “meaning” through a politics that defines itself through an Imaginary investment in the figure of the Child.

In this chapter, I have suggested that capitalism introduces *linguistic and rhetorical* complexities that reflect not only sexual conflicts but also conflicts of and between other categories of difference like race, class, and gender. Bilingualism and polyglottism become crucial vehicles for the unconscious imprinting of and Imaginary negotiations with these conflicts. By staging a conversation between Lee’s novel and psychoanalytic theory that, in fact, analyses these conflicts through polyglottism, I have tried to suggest that, even if literature is “the unconscious of psychoanalysis,” we cannot assume that all literature, particularly that which is

⁴⁹² Kim, 232.

categorized as “ethnic literature,” is subtended by the primacy of sexual desire or an anti-Imaginary desire for non-meaning. To that end, I have read Lee’s novel as meta-literature that lingers in the Imaginary instead of dismissing it. By analyzing the novel’s engagement with the linguistic production of the racial stereotype through the concept of Imaginary narcissism, I have argued that linguistic desire is less radical than it seems, since it is, in fact, coopted by Imaginary racial politics and mediated by differential narcissistic encounters with otherness driving global capital.

The question of sexuality, however, still lingers: can sexual desire, carried in language, be the sole bearer of radical negativity if language is invaded by other forms of difference? And indeed, how “radical” is such negativity? A critique of reproductive heteronormativity is no doubt indispensable, especially when the logic of reproduction continues to be an instrument of the policing of desires (not only sexual) and bodies (not only those marked “queer”). And yet, reading politics solely in terms of the fantasy of the perfect (white) Child of the Imaginary perpetuates a certain form of color- and class- blindness. The somewhat overwhelming emphasis on the “multiracial child” in the campaigns of ProjectRACE (the multiracial advocacy group I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter) offers a good example. As the main “reason” for the group’s demand for public recognition,⁴⁹³ the deployment of the multiracial poster-child confirms Edelman’s diagnosis: it is the rhetoric and image of the child’s “right” to declare its “heritage” and to claim a better future that fuel the group’s activism. At the same time, though, the same set of demands also problematize Edelman’s claim, since it suggests that not all children are valued equally by the American nation’s laws, policies, and apparatuses of interpellation.

We cannot, however, in order to read *with* the contradictions in Lee’s novel, stop at the level of the politics of cultural recognition. If, following Edelman and Bersani, we shift our focus

⁴⁹³ As the website makes clear: “Project RACE advocates for multiracial children, teens, and adults so they may have the option of marking their entire heritage on forms that require racial and ethnic identification....The word “multiracial” is important so that children have an identity, a correct terminology for who they are.” Accessed on July 24, 2012. http://www.projectrace.com/about_us/.

from the “Child” to “desire,” or in this case from the *multiracial* child to *interracial* desire, *Native Speaker* offers some queer(er) points of reflection. The symbolism of the death of the biracial child Mitt, as Chang notes, is one that undermines any uncritical celebration of the politics of multicultural recognition. But that does not mean that the death here signals a “narcissism unto death” or anti-social retreat in the meaninglessness of desire. The death of Mitt, I want to suggest, foregrounds *both the racial dynamics of (sexual) desire and the impossibility of reciprocity in interracial intimacy* under the racialized and gendered regime that is late capital.

The discourse of multiracialism, as Jared Sexton argues, thrives through a certain romanticization of the interracial couple “in love” and the multiracial child as the “fruit” of that relationship. But this celebration of interracial love is possible only by jettisoning a much older sexual history of interracial relations, of the co-constitution of the very concepts of “race” and “sex” through capitalism. By converting and sanitizing forms of sexual and erotic violence surrounding slavery, colonialism, and their contemporary avatars into harmonious interracial marriage and reproduction, multiracialists *desexualize the racial encounter and deracialize the sexual encounter*. Importantly, sex, for Sexton, is *not anti-normative* by virtue of being anti-social or the producer of non-sense. In fact, that this anti-social aspect of sex is not devoid of power relationships is borne out by the sexual violence carried out by one race over another and by one gender over another.⁴⁹⁴

Thus, analyzing regular acts of miscegenation during slavery, Sexton reaches a compelling conclusion: to see the mulatto or the racial hybrid as a “disruption” of the normalization of the divide between black and white subjects is a weak or myopic argument. Sexton reminds us that the prevalent event of interracial sexual contact in the ante-bellum South did little to counter and, in fact, reinforced the borders and racial inequities between black and

⁴⁹⁴ See Sexton, 153-162. Homosexual desire, contrary to what some critics argue, cannot claim a higher moral ground or ignore hierarchies of race and class. For instance, for a discussion on the homoerotic underpinnings of colonialism, see Joseph Boone, “Vacation Cruises; Or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism,” *PMLA* 110 (1) (1995): 89-107.

white subjects. Contrary to popular belief then, miscegenation and its impure products do not disrupt but actually uphold the normative value of whiteness. That is to say, since the very constructions of “race” and “sex” are co-dependent and determined by the law of maximum profitability, the “permeability” of racial borders through sexual desire is a myth that is “structurally required by the process of racial suture.”⁴⁹⁵ Racial mixing through sex and sexual reproduction is not transgressive *per se*. Historically speaking, the anti-social aspects of sex and sexual violence—disavowed by the ideological propping of “equal” interracial conjugality—have been mobilized by capitalism to buttress the motor of whiteness.

Echoing (or predating) Sexton’s criticism of the interracial romance, *Native Speaker* similarly refuses to idealize the interracial couple or protect their sexual relationship and its offspring from structural racial inequality. The novel foreshadows the failure of Kwang’s vision and Mitt’s death in Henry’s response to the names that Lelia calls him in her letter: “I came to see the list as indicative of her failures as well as mine. What we shared. It was a list of our sad children.”⁴⁹⁶ Although Lelia later apologizes to Henry for calling him, among other names, “illegal alien” and “Yellow Peril: neo-American,” the very absurdity and inaccuracy of these racialized terms (Henry is an American citizen and “Yellow Peril” is a strange anachronism) should alert us to the macrocosmic aspect of Lee’s appropriation of the myth of the interracial heterosexual romance. The interracial couple, in spite of its best intentions, *will* betray the larger political failure of racial harmony. Henry *will* simultaneously desire whiteness and assert his Koreanness. Lelia *will* fetishize her husband when she kisses him for the first time, finding him “definitely Korean” to the taste. Consequently, what Lelia and Henry really “reproduce” together is not the “solution” of/as the angelic biracial child (that illusion of reproductive futurism is shattered through Mitt’s death) but a reflection of a larger (sexualized) racism, what Henry calls

⁴⁹⁵ Sexton, 156.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 14.

their “sad children.”

Sexton, we can perhaps say, echoes Lee’s novel, when he writes:

there is no interracial relationship that is not implicated in the obscene fantasy that taints the reputation of more valid romantic arrangements. That is not to say all implication is identical or equivalent in its political and historical significance....Not a question of whether one is inside or outside the domain but rather of how inhabits an unavoidably corrupted context for which there is no outside.⁴⁹⁷

Like Sexton, Lee does not spare the couple from the taint of interracial violence. The only way that the couple can disavow that violence is by retreating to a privatized realm of language-as-culture.

While referring to the “obscene fantasy” in which the couple is implicated, Sexton revisits Lacan’s famous dictum—“there is no such thing as a sexual relation”⁴⁹⁸—by which Lacan means that sexual intimacy can never not be clouded by the fantasy of the sexual couple’s individual narcissistic projections. Sexton, however, extends this notion of phantasmatic projection by foregrounding the social intrusion of racial hierarchies in individual fantasies:

The tension between race and sexuality reemerges at this point of analysis with more clarity. On the one hand, we can grant that each subject takes up his relation to fantasy in a singular way. On the other, we note that preconscious materials of such fantasies will be mediated by the culture of racialization.⁴⁹⁹

This insistence on seeing the individual through contingent social formations gestures toward a form of non-heteronormative critique that, while theorizing the relationships between language, psyche, and desire, does not reify sexuality and warns against isolating it from other forms of difference.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-73*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 71.

⁴⁹⁹ Sexton, 183.

⁵⁰⁰ Here, Sexton, even as he complicates the notion of “fantasy,” seems to accord a privileged position to (the non-meaning of) the sexual encounter in his reformulation of Lacan’s statement: “There is no (interracial) sexual relationship.” That is to say, because sex is fundamentally anti-relational, it can never be the basis of any relation, including the interracial. See Sexton, 184. But how do we privilege this

There are two moments of interracial coupling in *Native Speaker* that encourages us to think of non-heteronormativity along those lines and without privileging the anti-sociality of sex. The first is Henry's description of himself having sex with Lelia after Mitt's death. As sexual partners, Lelia and Henry "reenact" the death of Mitt, taking turns to "be" the child who has been crushed by whiteness:

During certain nights, I pulled a half-sleeping Lelia back onto my body, right onto my chest....She knew what to do, what to do to me, that I was Mitt, that then she was Mitt, our pile of two as heavy as the balance of those boys who had now grown up. We nearly pressed each other other to death, our swollen lips and eyes, wishing upon ourselves the fall of tears, that great free anger...enough of it piling on at once so that sometimes whether we wanted to or not we made love so hard and gritty we had to say fuck to be telling the very first part of the truth. In the bed, in the space between us, it was about the sad way of all flesh, alive or dead or caught in between, it was about what must happen between people who lose forever the truest moment of their union. Flesh, the pressure, the rhymes of gasps. This was all we could find in each other, this the novel language of our life.⁵⁰¹

At the level of the plot, the violent and suffocating sex between the interracial couple is their affective response to the loss of their son who represented the "truest moment of their union." However, given that Mitt—as the metanarrative symbol of interracial disaccord—is "meant" to die, the violent sex between Lelia and Henry is also a metaphor for the tense relations between race and sexuality in the novel. In the shadow of loveless sex between interracial lovers hovers the unseemly truth of (sexualized) interracial violence.

The second moment I have in mind is when Henry repeats the "truth" about the lovelessness of sexual love but this time through his perception of an *apparently non-sexual* interracial relationship. Referring to the interaction between his father and his black female client at their family store, Henry writes:

I see my father in his white apron, sleeves rolled up. A woman in a dirty coat. They lean in and let each other have it, though the giving's almost in turns. It's like the most awful and sad opera, the strong music of his English, then her black English; her colorful almost elevated, mocking of him, and his grim explosions. They fight like lovers, scarred,

isolated operation of sexual difference (in the Lacanian Real) if, as Sexton himself argues, "racialization and sexualization are inextricable"? See Sexton, 175.

⁵⁰¹ Lee, 106.

knowing. Their song circular and vicious. For she always comes back the next day, and so does he. It's like they are here to torture each other. He can't afford a store anywhere else but where she lives, and she has no other place to buy a good apple or fresh loaf of bread.⁵⁰²

This apparently nonsexual interracial encounter mirrors (or perhaps more accurately, undergirds) the sexual encounter between Henry and Lelia: each “partner” allows the other to have his/her turn to inflict violence. However, this interracial couple, in Henry's unseeing eyes, seems to possess the reflexivity of Lacanian lovers without being in sexual contact: they “know” that love is vicious and that it is a torture. That is to say, the fundamental lovelessness of love is the “knowledge” that this interracial (non)relationship produces without sex.

Thus, if Lacanians argue that human beings are incapable of possessing autonomous identities or relating to each other through the anti-sociality and meaninglessness of sex, *Native Speaker* seems to suggest that such a view of anti-sociality and narcissistic (mis)recognition may have as its own unconscious the fragmented narcissistic Imaginaries of racialized-sexualized populations. Following in the footsteps of this social queer negativity of *Native Speaker*, we can perhaps distend and distort Lacan's dictum and say: there is no interracial (sexual) relation as long as Imaginarized racial hierarchies are mediated through the mirror of language-as-commodity. There is, instead, in the words of Sharon Patricia Holland, “an erotic life of racism,” one that I examine in the final chapter through an exploration of the narcissism of linguistic and networked subjectivities in Delany's novel.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 186.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Imaginary Desires in the Information Age: Erotic Racism in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*

A Final Allegory of Reading

A number of critics reading *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*⁵⁰³ have argued that the novel's representation of promiscuous erotic desire and the constant deferral of meaning offer important literary lessons to narcissistic politics that seeks sameness and ignores difference. The argument goes that, the novel's politics of semiotic deferral mirrors its representations of erotic desire, splitting the narcissistic identitarian subject and permitting her to court difference and otherness. In contrast, I contend that Delany's novel offers an important lesson to post-structuralist literariness as well as contemporary psychoanalytic queer theory that reject the ego and/or the Imaginary to move toward the enigmatic realm of deferral and desire. I argue that the novel shows how deferral may, in fact, be a class privilege, and that desire may, in fact, be a heavily mediated form of individualist and neoliberal consumption of the (racial) other without any regard for the other's material and social history.

In the last chapter, I examined how Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* permits us to scrutinize the reasons for the failures of both post-structuralist and vernacular dreams of a literary democracy under unequal globalization. My reading of the novel also showed how the post-structuralist pairing of desire and desubjectification as the basis of a radical politics rests on a disavowal of the violent transnational histories of the Imaginary imbrications between sexuality, race, class, and gender—commoditized categories of difference sustaining and sustained by global capital.

In this chapter, I turn to of *Stars in My Pocket*—published in 1984 and, therefore, in the

⁵⁰³ Samuel R. Delany, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

heyday of post-structuralist theories of language, literariness, and sexuality—because it is a fitting conclusion to the dissertation that has argued for the need to push the concept of reading *beyond* the literary (the idealization of the linguistic signifier and any particular medium or interface for that matter) into the cultural heterogeneity and structural inequities defining the social. As a number of critics have suggested, Delany’s novel proleptically asks: what does it mean to “read” when the subject of “language” has been profoundly impacted not only by the visual image but also the increasingly pervasive presence of “the digital”? What does it mean to read when (linguistic) subjectivity is also a “networked” subjectivity? And finally, what does it mean to read when it is not language or image but “information” that is the commodity *par excellence* as also the site of production of “fantasy” and “desire”?

Several critics have also read *Stars in My Pocket* as science fiction that exemplifies the Derridean tenets of *différance*, deferral, and supplementarity. It is a text that, Delany scholars argue, advocates an egalitarian politics of reading that moves away from the narcissism of “self presence” toward the ultimately unknowable forms of difference and otherness. I argue against this thesis to suggest that the novel’s relationship with post-structuralism is rendered more complicated by its ties with its own historical conjuncture: on the one hand, the 1980s saw the emergence of the internet and the beginnings of an information economy that was sold to the public as the “tool for freedom...a freedom frontier that by its nature could not be tamed.”⁵⁰⁴ On the other hand, at around the same time, sociologists and economists began to debate if the “new international division of labor” (of which the digital was an important part) was, in fact, a new ruse to continue colonial exploitation of the global South by the global North.⁵⁰⁵ In this chapter, I will argue that Delany offers a “critically narcissistic” reading of post-structuralism’s homogenizing approaches to language, literary ethics, and subjectivity by placing his readers in a

⁵⁰⁴ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 2.

⁵⁰⁵ James Petras, “A New International Division of Labor?,” *MERIP Reports* 94 (February 1981): 28.

fictional rendition of this moment of transition and contradiction. I suggest that, while the novel encapsulates Derridean and Barthesian literary politics, it also offers critiques of the same from two distinct directions. First, the novel reminds us that linguistic and cultural capital are essential to the privileged experiences of deferral, *jouissance*, and the democracy promised by the “writerly” text. Second, by offering a literary reading of the narcissistic constitution of the reading subject in the information economy, Delany also compels us to rethink the very concept of “reading” in terms of the Imaginary effects of technological mediation, in particular the technologization of the erotic. Finally, I contend that the novel’s representation of the “technological Eros” compels us to see post-structuralist conceptions of “desire” not in opposition to but rather in deep complicity with the structural racism that sustains the neoliberal information economy. Such an uncomfortable reading of desire, I contend, is necessary to begin undoing the binary between narcissistic identity and unconscious (“queer”) alterity.

Stars in My Pocket opens with a prologue (“A World Apart”) narrated from the point of view of Rat Korga, an underprivileged, sexually marginalized, homeless, and emotionally troubled human male in a planet called Rhyonon. In the prologue, we see Korga undergoing a psycho-somatic procedure called “Radical Anxiety Termination.” The procedure appears to be violently disciplinary in that it converts Korga into “Rat Korga,” into a slave with severely constricted psychic freedom, one that prevents him from making “new kinds of decisions...without instructions.”⁵⁰⁶ Readers are not told why Korga “chooses” this procedure. In a very Foucauldian fashion, Delany blurs the boundaries between “coercion” and “choice,” underscoring the ideological and material forces behind Korga’s decision to lobotomize himself. Korga—described by the anxiety terminators (or government psychiatrists) as “ugly as mud,” someone with “aberrant sexual proclivities,” and a “burden to yourself, to your city, to your

⁵⁰⁶ Delany, 5.

geosector”⁵⁰⁷—undergoes the procedure to avoid being ostracized and to be deemed socially more acceptable. Radical Anxiety Termination may therefore be seen as a kind of “conversion therapy” that supposedly disciplines the non-conforming or “aberrant” subject into a worthy citizen. At the same time, the process is also “necessary” since the conversion allows Korga to survive in Rhyonon. It is only as a “Rat” that he can make a living by selling himself to labor projects on the planet. Over the next 20 years, Rat Korga is sold to three different labor projects and is even, for a short while, illegally employed as a sex slave.

While the prologue offers little by way of exposition—readers are thrown into Rat Korga’s travails without an introduction—it does foreground the pervasive presence of an economy that we may call the digital or information economy. It is in the prologue that readers first learn about General Information (GI), an informational “virtual commons,” or an interplanetary data transfer system that communicates neurally with the inhabitants of the worlds connected to it. Information in the GI is controlled by an invisible organization called the Web which surveys over the two broad political organizations, the Family and the Sygn, which are competing to assert supremacy. While the Sygn encourages cultivation of ambiguity, experimentation, and otherness, the Family is attached to purist notions of traditions and authenticity. Most of the planets claim allegiance to either of the two organizations, with Rhyonon undecided but leaning toward the Family.

The dictatorial government of Rhyonon, we are told, has resisted connecting with this dominant mode of information exchange facilitated by the Web, and yet, the planet is not so much “disconnected” from GI as it is the seamy underside of the infrastructure digital commons. For instance, Rat Korga’s first job is at a polar desert “research station,” where “at the printed orders of the computer console in the research station vestibule, he carried small machines

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

strapped to his side to an information relay outpost fourteen kilometers away....”⁵⁰⁸ Rat Korga’s second job is in an industrial yard where he has to clean and lubricate seven engines: “Unlike the polar station, he was fed twice a day, washed every three days, and his work togs changed biweekly. Around him, thousands of rats serviced the great city full of machines, called Muct.”⁵⁰⁹ Through these descriptions of the menial labors of Rat Korga as well as his deplorable living conditions, Delany represents Rhyonon as an oppressive regime that is at once industrial and post-industrial, “a world apart” at the fringes of an information economy whose “immateriality” relies on the material labors and oppression of “Third World” workers. The prologue ends with the destruction of Rhyonon in a mysterious explosion, and the laboring Rat Korga is trapped in a sub-refrigerated storage crypt during the seventeen-hour conflagration. There are rumors that Rhyonon was destroyed in a “Cultural Fugue” (a term that seems to suggest the destruction of a culturally and technologically conflicted world that by the Web does not “interfere” with) and that the “Xlv” (a mysterious race yet to be communicated with) were sighted at the time of the explosion.

In the novel’s second and longest section (“Monologues: Visible and Invisible Persons Distributed in Space”), the scene shifts from Rhyonon to the southern regions of the planet of Velm, home to Delany’s central character and narrator Marq Dyeth. In contrast with Rhyonon, southern Velm (and the city of Morgre) is the site of intra- and interspecies collaboration and harmony and non-heteronormative reproductive and erotic practices. Morgre appears to be the democratic and queer antithesis of the dictatorial and heterosexist regime of Rhyonon. Marq also describes Morgre as a post-industrial city built on information and simulation. Unlike in Rhyonon, the inhabitants of Morgre rely on GI for their day-to-day needs. As an Industrial Diplomat, an equivalent of an interstellar cultural translator, Marq is also a privileged cosmopolitan migrant who shuttles between worlds, trading in the “business” of information,

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 13.

cultural difference, and otherness. His social and professional position as a diplomat allows him to bypass the Web's general discouragement of interstellar travels. It is during his travels that Marq hears about the destruction of Rhyonon and of the possibility of a survivor.

There are two main events that follow in this section of the novel: first, the Web's officers (called the "spiders") inform Marq that Rat Korga has been rescued from Rhynon's debris and fitted with prosthetic appendages and a neural device that will allow him to connect with GI and therefore with other worlds and species. First, the Web not only informs Marq of Rat Korga's rescue and transformation but also convinces him that the cyborg asylee is, in fact, his ideal erotic object and the two should therefore meet in Morgre. Delany describes Rat Korga's visit to Morgre in great detail, including detailed descriptions of interspecies meals, public sex, and a dragon "hunt" that ends with a celebratory song. Throughout this section, the novel repeatedly emphasizes the Velmians' capacity for appreciating linguistic and cultural differences in interspecies and intercultural communication as well as the limits of translatability of difference. The second and concluding event of the novel is the abrupt termination of Rat Korga's visit to Morgre and of his interspecies homosexual relationship with Marq. For reasons not entirely clear but that appear to be partially motivated by public curiosity around Rat Korga's otherness, the destruction of Rhyonon, and anxieties that his "dangerous" presence might bring Cultural Fugue to Velm, the Web decides to transfer him to an unspecified location. The novel ends with an epilogue in which Marq mourns the loss of Rat Korga whom he sees not so much as the object of his desire as "desire" itself.

In his analysis of *Stars in My Pocket*, Carl Freedman argues that, although Rat Korga and Marq belong to vastly different worlds in terms of class and race, these differences, far from being obstacles to the erotic union, "are precisely what their union is based on: not through an attempt to *reduce* difference, nor to accept it with liberal toleration, but in an active embracing of difference with unimaginably keen enthusiasm."⁵¹⁰ For Freedman, erotic desire in the novel

⁵¹⁰ Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000),

becomes the means of forging a politics of otherness, “the basis of the peaceful egalitarianism it upholds.”⁵¹¹ This notion of desire as the *desire for alterity*—is the cornerstone of Velm’s cultural, semiotic, and sexual politics. Having aligned itself with the Sygn—and, indeed, opposed to the Family’s (and Rhyonon’s) puritanical bid for purity, authenticity, heterosexual reproduction—southern Velm appears to be a multi-species queer haven, whose inhabitants are avid poststructuralists. As Delany’s protagonist Marq notes:

To arrive on a world at dawn, despite GI’s preliminary scatter of information, is to read the whole roster of signs you are used to for morning over the expanse of what you see, and at the same time, see those meanings start to transpire as one begins to see the possibilities—a world of possibilities clear behind them.⁵¹²

And then later: “Words, the Web, woman, world—all of these have their nebulous position in a cloud of shifting meanings.”⁵¹³ Such reflections on the fluidity of meaning are uttered by Marq on numerous occasions in the novel. As an Industrial Diplomat, it is Marq’s duty to supply “appropriate contextual material”⁵¹⁴ to facilitate intercultural dialogues. However, at the same time, as a cosmopolitan Industrial Diplomat often “between worlds,” he is also particularly sensitive to the contingency of meaning.

The Velmians’ knowledge of semiotic instability and hence of the mutable nature of identity is also mirrored by their interspecies and erotic politics: here, humans cohabit peacefully with a superior species called the evelmi in a society in which sexual desire has been decoupled from reproduction and child rearing and in which sexual variation is, in fact, the norm. This emphasis on desire and difference has also led Velmians to forge new linguistic practices that reject conventional sexual diphormism. While Velmians still use pronouns that seem gendered,

162.

⁵¹¹ Delany, xiii.

⁵¹² Ibid., 335.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 339.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 159.

“she” to refer to all citizens regardless of their biological gender. And the pronoun “he” is used only when the speaking subject is referring to someone who triggers desire in her. By moving away from conventional “egg-and-sperm relations” to “nurture streams” created through interspecies hybridity, adoption, and cloning,⁵¹⁵ Velmians have created a social structure that encourages both species to experience erotic desire without the encumbrance of monogamy or the privatization of desire. The novel offers several descriptions of Marq’s (and Rat Korga’s) experiences in Velm’s “runs,” which are public spaces demarcated for anonymous intra- and interspecies sex and other forms of erotic exchange. In this way, erotic desire becomes the basis of “reading” alterity in Velm, a reading practice that privileges otherness and difference over identity. As Madhu Dubey argues, through such a representation of a politics of *différance* and desire, Delany echoes anti-humanist reading practices, showing how the subject is (de)constituted through its encounter with otherness and “within a differential ‘play of signs’.”⁵¹⁶

This affinity between reading, otherness, and desubjectification are raised most provocatively in the novel’s famous dragon-hunting scene. Dragons, we are told, are flying creatures native to Velm that are biologically close to the evelmi. Dragons, we also learn, are objects of great fascination insofar as they are objects of the human and evelmi hunters’ desire. In this context, “hunting” does not mean killing or injuring, nor does it mean having sex with the dragon. Instead, the hunter shoots a radar bow that captures “a pretty complete mapping of the dragon’s cerebral responses and, after a lot of translation, plays it back on your own [the human or evelmi] cerebral surface.”⁵¹⁷ Delany describes this moment of connection as a highly immersive and erotic experience for the hunter who has a chance to “become” a dragon for a few seconds and to explore drives and instincts unknown to humans. Although it is an experience

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁵¹⁶ Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 220.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 248.

mediated by technologies of simulation and translation, dragon hunting gives us a powerful image of the human “knowing” or “reading” the dragon’s alterity to which s/he would not otherwise have access. Marq, for instance, narrates his experience of “becoming dragon” as a moment that simultaneously offers exhilarating control and disorientation: “It’s the feeling you can control your dragon’s body which is so strange, though it’s only because you know so well all she knows so well.”⁵¹⁸ Delany’s erotically charged representation of mediated dragon hunting, critics have therefore noted, offers an opportunity for the hunting/reading subject to “split” herself in order to embrace difference.⁵¹⁹ Such an interpretation might also seem to gain support from Rat Korga’s realization while dragon hunting for the first time: “‘It’s like reading,’ he said, ‘It’s like reading a—!’”⁵²⁰

Such an analysis of *Stars in My Pocket* as a mirror of post-structuralist literariness may be compelling. However, I would like to offer an alternative reading, one that takes the novel’s performance as well as its critique of the politics of desire and *différance* seriously. In chapter three, I argued that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE* is a critically narcissistic text that anticipates later reflections on the relationship between Imaginary subjectivation and visibility, in particular the cinematic mode of production. I suggested that *DICTEE*’s attention to the multi-tiered Imaginary politics of the cinematic image offers a serious rethinking of post-structuralist and avant-garde discoveries of literary “subversion” and desubjectivation. In this chapter, I would like to suggest that Delany’s text, published three years after Cha’s text, “reads” in a similar vein. However, what troubles the novel’s own evocation of a post-structuralist utopia is its representation of Imaginaries mediated by the information economy of the Web. That is to say, it is neither language nor image but “information” that is *the most valuable commodity* and that produces and sustains the Imaginaries of “networked” egos. Or, we might say that language and

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 246.

⁵¹⁹ See Freedman, 158. See Dubey, 220.

⁵²⁰ Delany, 248.

image—the two mediums that form the matrix of subjectivation and the development of semiotic habits—have been differentially “imaginarized” by the information economy. In the next section, I argue that, even as Velmians thrive through their desire for alterity and negation of cultural and racial essentialism, the novel suggests that the phantasmatic constitution of alterity is itself an Imaginary process that is shaped by the information economy and its underlying logic of the privatization of desire.

Imaginary Fantasy, “Technological Eros,” and (Dis)simulation

In his book, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology*, philosopher and media theorist André Nusselder argues that Lacan’s notion of the Imaginary offers a useful model to analyze subjectivity in the digital era. Nusselder concedes that the realm of the digital needs to be understood at three related registers: the *matrix*, as the “noumenal” dimension of codified objects consisting of zeros and ones; *cyberspace*, as the “phenomenal” mental space of the conceptualization or representation of code objects; and the *interface* or the computer screen as their crucial medium. Nusselder’s central thesis is that, as the interface, the screen functions in cyberspace as a psychological space, as the screen of fantasy: “Since the world as a database (the matrix) cannot appear to us (in cyberspace) without media that open it up (interfaces), the interface, I claim, has a similar status to that of fantasy in Lacanian theory.”⁵²¹ Reminding us of Lacan’s own emphasis on the narcissistic Imaginary in his cybernetic account of Symbolic discourse,⁵²² Nusselder argues that this retreat into the Imaginary is worth investigating because

⁵²¹ André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 5.

⁵²² As Lacan notes, “At this point we come upon a precious fact revealed to us by cybernetics—there is something in the symbolic function of human discourse that cannot be eliminated, and that is the role played by it in the Imaginary.” See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 319. See Nusselder, 69. Here, I should note that a number of theorists like Lydia Liu and Katherine Hayles have read the digital entirely in terms of “the unconscious.” According to both Liu and Hayles, the Symbolic Other *is* the cybernetic machine. In their reading of Lacan, what we call “language” is actually the result of many unconscious semiautonomous agents running simple “programs.” And to “read” is to “decode,” which is a process that does not seek a stable ground of meaning but instead investigates the “decoder’s construction as a “cyborg.” See Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 161. See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We*

fantasy can be empowering and a useful site of experimentation for the development of the self. The interface, as the stage for private fantasies, “is a vital window for being in the world.”⁵²³ In the form of a private interface, the digital Imaginary, we might say, behaves somewhat like the “pre-social” mirror image, contributing to the networked ego’s self-perception and augments the self’s ability to interact with the world outside. .

However, this conventional notion of the Imaginary as a private retreat is complicated by Nusselder’s turn to postmodern theories of mediation. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of the phantasmatic potential of information under commodity capitalism and sociologist Manuel Castell’s notion of “real virtuality,” Nusselder also argues that external “simulation” is a key strategy of producing Imaginary fantasies that seem private. In the information age, the real is increasingly replaced by externally simulated or virtual versions that *build* private fantasies: “In the culture of ‘real virtuality,’ the strict difference between physical and virtual space is hard to maintain. Virtual and physical spaces appear to blend, by which we are...clearly in the ‘mediated environment’ of the simulated tradition....”⁵²⁴ In other words, while the interface seemingly maintains a *private* fantasy, the simulated production of that fantasy is mediated by a *social public* and comes from *without*. Finally, for Nusselder, there is a fundamental link between fantasy, technological mediation, and erotic desire: “It is the desire to (re)find our Other Half—that which we are missing, what lies beyond the limits of our possibilities—that motivates our use of technology. Thus we can speak of a technological Eros.”⁵²⁵ Nusselder’s argument is not just that there is such a thing as technological Eros but that Eros is unavoidably technological in the

Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 45-48.

⁵²³ Nusselder, 12.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 26.

information age.⁵²⁶

Written a quarter of a century before *Interface Fantasy*, Delany's novel also insists on rethinking subjectivity in relation to a digital or information economy of interfaces and simulations. As a fictionalization of the early years of the internet, the novel prognosticates that interactions between the (reading) subject and "information command" cannot be avoided.⁵²⁷ Simultaneously, the novel suggests that the effects of these encounters between the subject and digital interfaces cannot be decontextualized or idealized. That is to say, Delany's novel grapples with the need to see information and data not so much as reflections of the cybernetic neural unconscious (or of the fact that we are now "all" cyborgs) but as commodities that are implicated in the Imaginary dimensions of uneven globalization, epistemic violence, and the heterogeneous effects of reading and being read. To elaborate on this fragmented Imaginary (or multiple Imaginaries) of information, we need to return to the novel, specifically to its representation of the Web and General Information.

The Web in Delany's novel functions as a kind of interface or gatekeeper to GI, which is the novel's rendition of something like "cyberspace."⁵²⁸ As I mentioned above, in the southern planet of Velm and in the "urban complex" of Morgre, information offered by GI is an integral part of the inhabitants' everyday meaning making practices. In spite of his awareness of what digital post-humanist Katherine Hayles would later call the "flickering signifier in the chain of

⁵²⁶ The popularity of dating, marriage, and cruising websites and applications as well as the online sex industry would certainly seem to point toward this technologization of Eros.

⁵²⁷ Here, I am thinking of recent literary critiques that see the information economy as the "death" of reading. For instance, Gayatri Spivak writes in her introduction to *Aesthetic Education in an Era of Uneven Globalization*, "Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control. Information command has ruined knowing and reading. Therefore we don't really know what to do with information." See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 1.

⁵²⁸ Interestingly, the term "cyberspace" was first used in a short story by William Gibson in 1982 and then in his novel *Neuromancer*, also published in 1984. See William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).

signification,”⁵²⁹ Marq accesses GI to seek information about cultures, meanings of individual worlds, and details about Rhyonon’s destruction. Although Marq is convinced that “History is one area that GI is notoriously poor at imparting,”⁵³⁰ he is completely reliant on the information offered by the Web and is rarely disconnected from it.

This aspect of GI as a commodity that is constantly consumed is further emphasized through Marq’s willful participation in the fantasy of “wholeness” promoted by the Web. Early on in the novel, Marq speaks of his attraction to Free Kantor, a “free data-transfer point” not far from his home planet, where GI offers an “image” of unlimited information:

Does Free-Kantor or, indeed, any free-data transfer point contain all the information in the human universe? Far from it. On such a scale, data quantity itself is more fuzzy-edged than population. But in the way that an urban complex soon becomes a kind of intensified sampling of the products and produce a geosector around it, so a free-data transfer point becomes a kind of partial city against the night, an image of a city without a city’s substance, gaining what solidity it possesses from endlessly cross-filed data webs.⁵³¹

This informational logic of simulation is part and parcel of the “materiality” of the city teeming with virtual images. For example, we learn that, in Morgre, holographic projections called “photo calls” have replaced telephone calls;⁵³² its residents living below ground-level do not see the sky but can, instead, project “holoramas” outside their windows;⁵³³ and artificial climates are created with the help of “mobile environmental simulation units.”⁵³⁴ Thus, as in Baudrillard’s (and Nusselder’s) analysis, Imaginary (mis)recognition seems to be inseparable from the (dis)simulation of the hyperreal in Morgre’s postmodern “infoscape.”

This transformation of the Imaginary “mirror” into the “smooth operational surface of

⁵²⁹ Hayles, 47.

⁵³⁰ Delany, 64.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 69.

⁵³² Ibid., 103.

⁵³³ Ibid., 105.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 164.

communication”⁵³⁵ is made starkly visible in the novel’s representation of “technological Eros,” in the Web’s production of the fantasy of the elusive object of desire. Delany’s Web not only produces simulations of urbanity for private consumption but also extends to, or rather *constructs*, the private realm of erotic fantasy. As an uncanny “personification” of the current logic of data collection, simulation, and fantasy driving online dating websites, the Web spider Japril tells Marq that Rat Korga is his “perfect match”: “Besides being the single survivor of Rhyonon, Korga happens to be your perfect erotic object—out to about seven decimal places....out to about nine decimal places, you happen to be Rat’s.”⁵³⁶

What are we to make of the novel’s representation of the Web through these mysterious spiders who are both erotic match-makers and controllers of the interstellar flow of information? Let us recall that *Stars in My Pocket* was written during an important moment of technological transition, when ARPANET—originally designed by the US Department of Defense in the shadow of the Cold War to control the flow of information between military installations and as a form of defense against possible nuclear attacks from the Soviet Union⁵³⁷—was on its way to becoming a civilian network that we now call the “internet.” It is this geopolitical dimension of the origins of cyberspace that the novel constantly emphasizes through the appearances and activities of the spiders. In other words, in Delany’s cybertopia, it is not enough to think of screens, displays, holoramas and so on as individual and privatized “interfaces” of fantasy, self-development, or erotic desire. Rather, the reader is constantly reminded of political and trans-galactic forces “behind” the interface, of entities that govern the conditions and relations of the production of information and its attendant fantasies that include, especially, the erotic. The

⁵³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 127.

⁵³⁶ Delany, 166.

⁵³⁷ Friedrich Kittler, “Cold War Networks or Kaiserstr. 2, Neubelsberg,” in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (London and New York: Routledge), 184.

spiders, we might say, represent the *mode of production* that typically masks the labors that create the interface as well as regulatory techniques behind the construction and commoditization of “perfect” objects of desire. Thus, the Imaginary fantasy produced by the interface does not only yield an “image” for private consumption out of a language of “zeros and ones”—its Imaginary quality is characterized by its capacity to alienate the consumer (Marq) from the labors (of Rat Korga) that produce the image.

But are these postmodern simulations of erotic desire equally available to *all* consumers of information? If, as I have argued in chapters one and two, the narcissistic Imaginary is manifestly fragmented by colonial and post-colonial capital, is the Baudrillardian surface of simulation able to mend those cracks?

Reading, *Jouissance*, and Informational Imperialism

As I mentioned above, it is in the Prologue that we encounter General Information for the first time, as a network to which the inhabitants of Rhyonon have very little access. When Rat Korga encounters GI through a glove-like prosthesis supplied by his mistress, the network has a profound effect on his consciousness: “The new condition was not so much an alternate voice loud enough to drown the voices of childhood as it was a web, a text weaving endlessly about him, erupting into and falling from consciousness, prompting memory and obliterating it...”⁵³⁸ This encounter between Rat Korga and information (as a kind of language) creates a split in his consciousness—“a doubled voice” that makes a stutter “in his mind.”⁵³⁹ While this scene of reading has been interpreted as an instance of Delany’s anti-humanism (indicating that language is that which decenters egoic stability)⁵⁴⁰—I will suggest that we nuance it further by paying attention to the oppressive social context from within which Rat Korga enters the “informational

⁵³⁸ Delany, 34.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁴⁰ This is, for instance, Madu Dubey’s reading. See Dubey, 220.

unconscious.”

As GI alienates Rat Korga from himself, that exposure also alerts him and Delany’s readers to the differential nature of “splitting in language.” As he begins reading GI using the glove—which he “hears” as a “voice” in his head—Rat Korga is compelled to listen to another voice from the past, a voice calling him

“...stupid, stupid, stupid...”—that had begun sometime in unremembered childhood whenever he’d been asked questions he could not answer, that had continued whenever he’d been asked questions he’d had to answer “no,” and that had finally come whenever he’d been asked any questions at all or even had to ask them....⁵⁴¹

Here, it is important to note that the haunting sense of injury produced by the first voice cannot be subsumed or exorcised by the decentering produced by GI. At the most, as a slave, Rat Korga can use GI to reflect on the process of production of the sense of injury attached to the word “stupid.” GI tells him that “stupidity”—as the lack of a desire to read—is not an “innate” trait but a socially induced process:

“Stupidity” is a process or strategy by which a human, in response *to social denigration of the information she or he puts out*, commits him—or herself to taking in no more than information that she or he can put out. (Not to be confused with ignorance, or lack of data.) Since such a situation is impossible to achieve because of the nature of mind/perception itself in its relation to the functioning body, *a continuing downward spiral of functionality and/or information dissemination results* (my emphasis).⁵⁴²

Here, reading allows Korga to realize that the modality of the subject’s reading of language-as-information is, in part, determined by the social *value* placed on the subject’s semiotic habits. If information put out by the subject is continually denigrated by the social, then that denigration might produce silence, hesitation, or withdrawal that is socially read as “stupidity.”

Could we not argue that this “downward spiral of functionality and/or information dissemination” caused by social denigration is another name for “the unbearable (narcissistic) insularity” that Fanon describes in the colonized subject? As I showed in chapter two, for Fanon, language is inseparable from the Imaginary affect of narcissism produced by the colonial mode of

⁵⁴¹ Delany, 29.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 29.

production. As cultural and social capital, language, for Fanon, becomes a mirror image of the colonizer that the colonized simultaneously must and can never approximate. Writing thirty years after Fanon, Delany asks us to consider the persistence of such “older” forms of Imaginary mirroring in the information age. Rat Korga’s entry into the language of GI as a “digital slave” raises the specter of colonial narcissism in the form of (the wound of) a downward spiral of functionality, as an ideological construction of “stupidity” that obfuscates the violent mismatch between the information put out by the subaltern subject and social speculum of information. That is to say, Rat Korga’s “decentering” or “shattering” in the information economy is profoundly marked by the ideological Imaginary matrix from within which GI is accessed.⁵⁴³

Therefore, while southern Velm is represented as a post-structuralist utopia, Marq’s reflections on *différance* and his desire to “disorient” himself through an information “overload”⁵⁴⁴ must be distinguished from the disorientation imposed on Rat Korga at Rhyonon. If Marq’s “splitting” is an effect of his privileged position as a cosmopolitan ID and confident consumer of the information economy in a post-industrial world, then Rat Korga’s violent experience of meaning is inextricable from his Imaginary fragmentation, perhaps as a member of what Carolyn Cartier and others have called the category of the “information have-less”—a social, political, and economic category of rural-to-urban workers “who populate the vast gray zone of...[the] digital divide” in still-industrial nations.⁵⁴⁵ Like the information have-less who can access information intermittently and only through low-end digital technologies, Rat Korga is able to access GI in Rhyonon only through the prosthetic glove that is soon taken away from him.

The social, cultural, and economic capital grounding both the post-structuralist politics of

⁵⁴³ Delany, here, is also alluding to Frederick Douglass’s descriptions of his experience of reading and losing his desire to read when the “dark night of slavery” closes in on him, of the times when Douglass feels that learning to read is both a blessing and a curse. See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 24-38.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁴⁵ Carolyn Cartier, Manuel Castells, and Jack Linchuan Qiu, “The Information Have-Less: Inequality, Mobility, and Translocal Networks in Chinese Cities,” *Studies in Comparative Development* Volume 40, Issue 2 (Summer 2005): 9-34.

reading as well as the post-industrial consumption of information is brought out remarkably through a scene in which Delany describes Rat Korga reading from within his severely circumscribed information Imaginary. In the Prologue, when his mistress instructs him to familiarize himself with canonical literary works, Rat Korga reminds her that he is illiterate. This impediment, however, is overcome by using the prosthetic glove. It is GI that trains, or actually reads “for,” Rat Korga. As his mistress informs him, “The library broadcast takes care of imprinting the text on your mind. In half a second.”⁵⁴⁶ Rat Korga therefore reads but without possessing the cultural resources to interpret what he reads. Reading, for him, is synonymous with being “given” information that he comprehends only partially: “Understood them? Perhaps some phrases here, some few lines there.”⁵⁴⁷ Interestingly, the partial and profoundly mediated nature of the reading notwithstanding, Rat Korga experiences something new as the glove “feeds” him with an experimental literary text: “a cascade of names, numbers, isolated phrases, and single hieroglyphs that created a kind of hypnotic, sensual experience in itself, unrelated to anything that he had read before, but which, as much as any other affect now inscribed behind the bone of his forehead, had been produced *by* the reading.”⁵⁴⁸ Delany, here, seems to come close to the Barthesian notion of textual *jouissance*. At the same time, the experience appears to be a technologically-mediated and cultural privilege that the illiterate Rat Korga can only catch a glimpse of from the “outside” without the necessary linguistic or literary “skills.” For Rat Korga, *jouissance* can only be a simulation achieved through the digital prosthesis.

That the apparently democratic ideology of treating the literary text as the site of indeterminacy and sensual pleasure need not be radically non-identitarian or inconsonant with cultural capital and technological gentrification is also suggested by the novel’s repeated references to the tyrant-poet Vondramach Okk. We learn from Marq that Okk was the most

⁵⁴⁶ Delany., 40.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

renowned poet amongst the habitable worlds as well as a figurehead of the Family—the political organization with rigidly essentialist and identitarian principles. Okk’s haunting presence also troubles the post-structuralist politics of the Dyeth family: we learn that Marq’s grandmother Gyllda Dyeth was bequeathed property by none other than Okk herself. Okk is particularly remembered for her participatory poems, in which the reader is not just a consumer but a producer of the text. Okk’s poems are often combinations of visual and phonetic alliterations preserved in “books” that are simultaneously screens with hypertexts and projection devices. Reading Okk’s poems necessitate entering the “mobile” multi-media realm of the digital and moving beyond the “fixity” of the printed sign.⁵⁴⁹ Thus, Okk’s political identitarianism exists in (apparent) tension with the form and content of her digital-literary texts that seem to exemplify Barthes’s writerly text. And yet, while explaining the structure of a poem by Okk to visitors from another planet, Marq himself pauses to doubt the readers’ participation promised by its hybrid textual-electronic form:

“...this one is from her series of participatory poems. She added to the sequence all her life. Its title translates “The Strange”...or maybe better, “The Awkward.” But the word can also mean ‘The Exotic,’ or simply ‘Another Person’—or also, ‘Another System....she provides one half-line and a single letter that you have to work into a word into your own version of a second-half line...” But how could anyone who didn’t know Vondramach Okk’s private tongue appreciate the participatory works?⁵⁵⁰

It would be impossible, in other words, to participate in these poems without some access to Okk’s “private tongue,” her linguistic narcissism, valued and stored as “information” by the Web. Participation in Okk’s texts requires a technological and ideological interpellation that acquaints the reader with the rules and terms of the “language game” created and played by Okk. Simultaneously, the transition from print technology to digital technology or electronic textuality *per se* does not promise freedom from the author-function of Okk. As Madhu Dubey points out in her reading of *Stars in My Pocket*:

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

The dynamic form of Okk's poems does little to democratize her discourse or to displace the modernist cult of the author as creator of a private and original style. As Okk's case demonstrates, innovation at the formal and technological levels can be equally compatible with modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, and in neither case can it guarantee politically subversive effects.⁵⁵¹

Thus, even as Okk's works seemingly perform the "death of the author," she emerges as a neo-imperialistic force in the novel whose literary-political legacy not only dominates Velm's cultural landscape but also impacts the (re)subjectivation of Rat Korga after the genocide on Rhyonon. After Rat Korga is rescued from Rhyonon, the spiders decide that he can be made socially presentable (and commoditized as Marq's erotic object) only after several bodily modifications and by being fitted with prosthetic "rings" belonging to Okk. It is through these rings that Rat Korga can "regain" consciousness and stay connected with GI. As Robert Reid-Pharr writes, "the rings that will allow him [Rat Korga] to reenter the self-consciousness that we most often refer to as civilization, rings originally crafted for the vicious, imperious, world-shattering tyrant, Vondramach Okk—they also work to control him...."⁵⁵² It is only through the privileges bestowed by Okk's imperialistic rings that Rat Korga gains the temporary and precarious right to become a "woman" and experience life, leisure, and erotic practices in Velm.

If the novel's staging of the Okk's writerly texts simultaneously disavows and reveals the racial and class hierarchies behind the literary and cultural politics of desire and deferral, Delany's depiction of hunting-as-reading also demands a reappraisal for similar reasons. Although Delany's description is no doubt aesthetically pleasing and powerful, there are questions that linger to make this celebration of reading less utopian. What does it mean to "become dragon" for leisure and entertainment? Given that the hunters/readers are always deemed racially "more intelligent" than the hunted or the read (the evelmis hunt humans and humans hunt the dragons), what are the racial or species politics of this knowledge production

⁵⁵¹ Dubey, 216.

⁵⁵² Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Clean: Death and Desire in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*," *American Literature* 83 (June 2011): 396.

about the (“inferior”) other? And finally, how do the hunted feel about being hunted? The hunting episode raises but does not answer these questions.

But once again, it is clear that the splitting of the hunter—that is inseparable from the pleasures of consumption (since the hunter “captures” or consumes the other-as-commodity at leisure)—is in stark contrast with the fragmentation, the “doubling” that Rat Korga experiences in his earlier moments of illiteracy, during his comprehension of “stupidity” through the matrix of GI.⁵⁵³ Splitting, here, is something that the hunter “willingly” chooses for pleasure, which presupposes that the ego enjoys at least an initial sense of presence and mastery (however illusory). Yet Rat Korga faces only confusion as he identifies “hunting” with “reading,” caught as he is between memories of slavery in oppressive and conflagrated Rhyonon and the precarious promise of citizenship in Velm. On the one hand, through the interpellative powers of Okk’s rings, Rat Korga has perhaps begun to be “converted” to the neo-colonial ideology of reading to experience *jouissance* at the expense of the other. Yet, on the other hand, as an underprivileged other who has never read to consume this way before, Rat Korga is unable to find an analogy to this act of reading: “It’s like reading a—!” He cannot (yet) fully grasp what this form of reading—this practice of “shattering” the self by exercising consumer choice—is “like.” Thus, in my view, Delany’s dragon hunting scene at once performs and critiques the unconscious privilege that marks the post-structuralist rhetoric of splitting of the reading subject. In the last section of this chapter, I will use the questions raised by the dragon hunting scene to rethink more generally the role of erotic desire and desire for alterity in the novel.

Contact, Networking, and the Neo-liberal Unconscious

In his analysis of *Stars in My Pocket*, GerShun Avilez suggests that the novel’s representation of the “runs”—the socially legitimized sites of public sex in Morgre—anticipate

⁵⁵³ This is where I disagree with Dubey’s reading of the scene. For her, the splitting of the reading subject in the hunting scene exemplifies Delany’s anti-humanism. See Dubey, 220.

Delany's later writings on 1970s gay male subculture in New York City, particularly his ethnographic essay *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.⁵⁵⁴ A nostalgic and powerful critique of the gentrification of Manhattan in the late twentieth century, *Times Square Red* records casual sexual encounters that took place in New York's porn theaters and public bathrooms before they were shut down by the city administration in the name of "urban development." The first half of Delany's book is his homage to these spaces, the "geo-historical analogues"⁵⁵⁵ for the runs described in *Stars in My Pocket*. In the second half of *Times Square Red*, Delany invites his readers to think of these anonymous erotic encounters as a form of "contact" that allows a certain transgression (however temporary) of class and racial hierarchies.⁵⁵⁶ Importantly, as a form of encountering the social other (or a means of "reading" the social other), contact is distinguished from "networking," which Delany describes as another form of encountering the other but through professional channels and by keeping one's social boundaries intact.⁵⁵⁷

But can we, in fact, see Marq's runs, his temporary inter-class and interracial erotic relation with Rat Korga, and indeed the general relational ethics of desire in southern Velm in *Stars in My Pocket*, as a pre-figuration of "contact" (defined in opposition to "networking") in *Times Square Red*? How should we distinguish between "contact" and "networking" in the novel where citizen-subjects establishing public erotic contact are, in fact, always privately "connected" to the network of General Information? And finally, given our observation above—that, desire and fantasy in the novel are always-mediated by (private access to) the technological Imaginary—can we necessarily speak of contact, motivated by and spurring desire, as a

⁵⁵⁴ GerShun Avilez, "Cartographies of Desire: Mapping Queer Space in the Fiction of Samuel Delany and Darieck Scott," *Callaloo* 34 (Winter 2011): 128. See also Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York City: New York University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵⁵ Avilez, 128.

⁵⁵⁶ Although sexual contact is not the only way that these cross-class encounters take place, sharing (sexual) pleasure, for Delany, does seem to be the exemplary method for establishing contacts. See Delany, 126.

⁵⁵⁷ Delany, 129.

democratic phenomenon or a democratic practice of reading the social other?

Before I address these questions, I need to digress to recent discussion where desiring “contact” (in the form of public sex) is opposed to (once again, privatized and narcissistic) “networking.” In his book *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*,⁵⁵⁸ queer theorist Tim Dean revisits the notion of “contact” to develop a theory of ethical “openness” to alterity through public sex. Dean argues that, as the exemplary form of “contact,” public sex allows us to reflect on “how one treats the other and, more specifically, how treats his or her own otherness.”⁵⁵⁹ Following Delany’s distinction between “contact” and “networking” in *Times Square Red*, Dean espouses public sex as the radical alternative to the privatization of intimacy increasingly promoted by technologies under late capital. Paradoxically, even as Dean admits that the internet and media images of idealized masculinity have been central to the development of contemporary subcultures of public sex,⁵⁶⁰ he blames “the invention of video, DVD, and Internet technologies”⁵⁶¹ for the neo-liberal privatization of erotic desire. In other words, what marks Dean’s support for public sex is a strange ambivalence toward technology and mediation. On the one hand, Dean inadvertently admits that our innermost fantasies and unconscious desires are products of our technologically mediated encounters with otherness. On the other hand, there is a strange utopian impulse of hanging on to “contact” as a “non-technological” or an unmediated encounter with otherness. If online cruising is an egotistical exercise that commoditizes the other but does not want “contact” with the other, public sex (in Dean’s argument) allows precisely that possibility of a non-narcissistic surrender to alterity.

⁵⁵⁸ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁵⁵⁹ Dean, 177.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 186.

But what exactly is achieved by this “ethical openness to alterity”? Dean claims this ethical disposition has two goals: first, public sex is a means of encountering and reading but not appropriating otherness.⁵⁶² “Contact” is therefore about “protecting” the stranger’s otherness. However, public cruising is simultaneously a means of encountering something “alien” *within* one’s own sexuality. It is through “contact” that the self is enlightened about otherness *within* the self.⁵⁶³

Here, we need to parse out what Dean means by “alterity.” Even as he promotes public sex as a means of enabling interclass and/or interracial contact, Dean is not really interested in a materialist reading of other’s otherness. That is to say, erotic contact is not meant to generate any understanding of the social and economic circumstances—racial discrimination and/or indigence, for instance—that produce the otherness as a form of “embodied difference” or a kind of *habitus* for the other.⁵⁶⁴ While the “transgression” of class or racial hierarchies seems to be a “byproduct” of public sex, Dean makes it clear that, by “otherness,” he does not *actually* mean social categories of difference like race, class, or gender. Maintaining a “conceptual distinction between otherness and (social) difference,”⁵⁶⁵ Dean finally admits that by “otherness,” he means the “alterity of the unconscious.”⁵⁶⁶ That is to say, the goal of contact has *really* been to accede to the alterity of the unconscious by somehow “suspending” the everyday effects of social categories of difference. But whose “unconscious” exactly is Dean referring to? There is a confusion to be noted here. Towards the end of his book, Dean relies on the work of psychoanalyst Jean

⁵⁶² Ibid., 179.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁶⁴ This was, for instance, Friedrich Engels’s somewhat problematic claim when he advocated “sex love” as form of historical materialism. As a form of non-monogamous and often inter-class contact, “sex love” is the basis of reading the material circumstances of the classed other. For a discussion, see James Arnett, “Sex Love and Sensuous Activity in the Work of Historical Materialism,” *Mediations* Volume 25. Accessed on March 06, 2013. <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/sex-love-and-sensuous-activity>.

⁵⁶⁵ Dean, 206.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 207.

Laplanche⁵⁶⁷ to suggest that, ultimately, having “contact” is to expose oneself not to the eroticized other’s consciousness (or Imaginary ego) but to a primarily sexual *unconscious* of the eroticized object: “the opening of the self to the enigma of the other’s unconscious is perpetually reactivated in moments of what following...Delany, I have been calling contact.”⁵⁶⁸

However, Dean contradicts himself immediately before this when he calls the eroticized other merely an intermediary who facilitates “contact” between the cruising subject and the alterity of his *own* unconscious: “Contact with the alterity of the unconscious requires the mediation—we might say, the *provocation*—of another person who may or may not be a stranger and who may or may not inhabit a different social register from oneself.”⁵⁶⁹ What begins as a protest against social inequity and capitalism’s privatization of desire in Dean’s book ends as a deliberately non-purposive drive to dip into the “sexual unconscious” (it does not seem to matter *whose* unconscious it is anymore) with little regard for the history or material circumstances of the “mediator” or “provocateur.” By initially promising a democratic encounter *between* social others and then finally seeking refuge in the now-familiar “queer” shibboleth of the “unconscious”—where the “hunted” social other is merely a titillation and whose individual history is irrelevant—*Unlimited Intimacy* makes “contact” a form of leisurely “hunting” that is ethically and politically rather dubious.

In contrast, in spite of his own nostalgic theorization in *Times Square Red*, Delany’s novel refuses to idealize the ethical promise of “contact” in the information age, undoing the narcissism/desire binary that undergirds Dean’s later appropriation of Delany. In this context, it would be useful to reiterate that Marq’s desire for Rat Korga is an effect of the mediation of the

⁵⁶⁷ Dean draws on Laplanche’s thesis that the child’s sexual unconscious is an effect of “enigmatic signifiers” received from his parents. See Dean, 207-208. See also my discussion of Laplanche and Dolto in chapter one.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 207.

Web. The spiders rescue Rat Korga and provide him with functioning prostheses that offer him sight and mobility. Thus, the *productive* power of the Web, its capacity to generate the image of Marq's fantasy, is inscribed onto Rat Korga's body and is literally grafted into his skin. As Avilez reminds us in his reading of *Stars in My Pocket*:

In effect, this "erotic object" is always a creation, a contrived construction that is only made possible through manipulation and artifice. Additionally, Rat Korga is only Marq's perfect erotic object because [the spider] Japril "assures" him that the stranger is....In making this point, I aim to elucidate the argument that Delany is proffering about erotic relationships: circuits of desire—regardless of their specific nature or the individuals involved—cannot be experienced, imagined, or analyzed without recourse to discourses of power and control.⁵⁷⁰

In other words, Marq has been "educated" to desire someone like Rat Korga. Moreover, Marq is not attracted to Rat Korga "the individual" but to *part-objects* that (the Web assures him) will stir his desire. After Rat Korga's removal, Marq tells the spider Japril that these part-objects include specifically "bitten nails in humans and strong claws in evelmi."⁵⁷¹ Interestingly, in retrospect, readers can locate Marq's erotic preferences in his description of one his "earliest memories" early on in the novel: this is a scene where Marq (presumably an infant) watches a "nail-biting" Mongolian child playing with dirt in a nursery and smiling at him until he is carefully picked up by the "black claw" of an evelmi parent.⁵⁷² This reconstructed scene of interracial harmony serves as a kernel of sorts for Marq's interracial and interspecies desire. Delany, however, is careful to suggest that this "memory" may not be of an "actual" event but may in fact also be a product of the Web's mediation. The "memory" of the interracial bond between the nail-biting child and the strong-clawed evelmi, as we learn, is triggered in Marq by a "disorientation" caused by an information overload in the Web.⁵⁷³

I point to this memory to suggest that interracial or interspecies harmony defined through

⁵⁷⁰ Avilez, 127-128.

⁵⁷¹ Delany, 340.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 74-76.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 74.

an image of privileged human-evelmi “families” may well be an “implantation” of the Web that makes erotic desire seemingly “autonomous” and free from the grips of the spiders. If we return to Jared Sexton’s important argument fleshed out in chapter four—that the myth of racial transgression through “interracial desire” (represented through images of interracial families) is structurally necessary for the process of “racial suture” under late capitalism—we can say that the implantation of a similar myth amongst privileged Velmians would also aim to produce a comparable “planetary suture” while the Web exerts blatantly bio-political control over other planets like Rhyonon and their populations.

That the Web succeeds in convincing Marq of his erotic “autonomy” is evident from his final individualist retreat into the “excess” of his own desire after the Web kidnaps Rat Korga:

“...what I am talking about, Japril, is information, some of it logical, some of it mythical, some of it in error, and much of it, yes no doubt merely wrong or right. But it’s information beautiful yet useless to anyone but me, information with an appetite at its base as all information has, yet information to confound the Web and not to be found in any of its informational archives.”

“Mmmm,” Japril said. “I wouldn’t doubt that.”⁵⁷⁴

By capitulating to the ruse of autonomous desire, Marq is, in fact, deeply implicated in the insidious racial inequality that the Web keeps in place. We should note that what Marq laments is not the loss of Rat Korga but the compendium of part-objects that Rat Korga embodied: the slave-cyborg’s “knuckles and nails and mouth and knees and jaw and genitals...and a roughness to his voice” resolve the “dispersed yearnings that have mauled”⁵⁷⁵ the ID Marq Dyeth who, much like the psychoanalytic queer theorist, theorizes desire as something that defies “networking.”

Indeed, it is also telling that we never hear Rat Korga speaking of desire in the same register. Instead, as he is being fashioned into a cyborg to become the cause of Marq’s desire, the semi-conscious Rat Korga blurts out rebelliously: “You have taken away my world....What have you given me?....What have you taken away?....I had a world?....What world will you give

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 342.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 343.

me?...you *must* give me a world. Or I may take ten, thirty, or a hundred.”⁵⁷⁶ Rat Korga’s desire for a “world” after surviving racial and sexual abuse and a genocide cannot be accommodated with the neoliberal rhetoric of desire espoused by Marq.⁵⁷⁷ Paradoxically, it is this desire for survival that is also fetishized by the privileged Velmians who wish to “consume” (a part of) Rat Korga. As a butcher in Morgre tells him: “You survived—what that must have required from you! What it must have meant for you. And what it means to us....We are all famished for a taste of that survival, Rat Korga.”⁵⁷⁸ The Velmian butcher then proceeds to slice off a part of Rat Korga’s flesh to “appease our hunger”⁵⁷⁹ and also to use his genetic material to start a “wondrous pedigree.”⁵⁸⁰

While Marq is upset at this cannibalistic gesture of his fellow Velmian, this remarkable scene gives us a moment to reconsider queer Velm’s ostensible uncoupling of erotic desire from reproduction. As I noted above, readers are invited to read southern Velm as a “progressive” society because its citizens no longer bind sexuality and erotic desire to reproduction. However, a less queer scenario emerges with the Web’s production of Rat Korga as the racialized survivor. The novel demands that we read “desire” in terms of racialized part-objects: to see desire as desire for part of the abstracted and fetishized racialized other. The act of desiring itself takes on the form of privileged and selective *consumption* of “bits” of Rat Korga—a consumption that guarantees a regeneration and “reproduction” of the forms of privilege that sustain the “queer” subjects and communities in Velm. Thus, the butcher’s act of consumption and reproduction

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 163-164.

⁵⁷⁷ Reid-Pharr speaks of Rat Korga’s desire as a “pre-subjective” Eros that is domesticated by the Web’s neo-liberalism. However, by calling it “Eros,” Reid-Pharr risks reifying the sexual, the “messy” desire of the gay man. The transformation is synonymous with “socialization entails the curbing of Eros, or to follow the logic of Delany, the maiming and blinding of the individual so that “he” can be seen, known, and desired within society.” See Reid-Pharr, 397.

⁵⁷⁸ Delany, 279.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 280.

becomes a “mirror,” an externalization of the mechanics of Marq’s desire for Rat Korga, an Imaginary appropriation that Marq refuses to recognize. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that instead of looking for Rat Korga, worrying about his safety, or protesting the Web’s structural racism, Marq laments the loss of the part-objects fuelling his desire: “All I can look for now, when I have the energy, is lost desire itself.”⁵⁸¹ Like the queer theorist of “desire,” Marq turns the alterity of “the [racialized] desired one into a kind of melancholic digestif.”⁵⁸²

Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I have suggested that Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket* is a profoundly proleptic meditation on the politics of reading in an information age characterized by unequal globalization. I have argued that the novel offers a compelling rethinking of the role of information technology in the formation of subjectivity where “the [domestic] scene and the mirror [of Imaginary narcissism]” have been transformed, somewhat unevenly, by “a screen and network...an immanent surface where operations unfold.”⁵⁸³ Delany’s representation of this transformation, I have suggested, recasts anti-humanist accounts of the “splitting” of the subject as a differential experience, contingent on social categories of difference that cannot be ignored through ahistorical appeals either to a post-structuralist politics of “desire” or to an immanently egalitarian “digital unconscious.” I have also suggested that the novel’s representation of the privatization of desire in the information age offers a much-needed critique of the insidiously neo-liberal and unreflexive narcissism of (queer) theory that assumes that unconscious sexual desire and splitting, by definition, are non-discriminatory and anti-identitarian.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 344.

⁵⁸² Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 50.

⁵⁸³ Baudrillard, 127.

This “critical narcissism” of *Stars in My Pocket* is perhaps best summed up in Delany’s 1990 afterword to the novel. Delany writes:

I think that any time when there was such a notion of a centered subject, especially when related to the white, western, patriarchal nuclear family, not only was it an ideological mirage, it was a mirage that necessarily grew up to mask the psychological, economic, and material oppression of an “other”—often (though not necessarily) a tyrannized member of the same family. (“We are centered and healthy: he/she/it/they are not...”)⁵⁸⁴

Here, Delany critiques what post-structuralism critiques: the myth of the “centered” subject with an autonomous and identitarian subject. Echoing the Derridean’s critique of metaphysics of presence as well as the Lacanian’s rejection of the ego, Delany also points out that the discourse of the centered subject is often mobilized in a eugenic fashion to mark certain others who are not as “centered.”

However, Delany’s endorsement of the decentering of the subject is immediately qualified by the following sentence:

And I feel that the times and places where the “fragmented subject” is at its healthiest, happiest, and most creative is precisely at those times *where society and economics contrive* (1) to make questions of unity and centeredness irrelevant, and (2) to distance that subject as much as possible from such oppressions (my emphasis).⁵⁸⁵

I want to note Delany’s subtle but firm shift in tone here: post-structuralist and queer critiques of ideologies of self-presence and identity may be legitimate. But the wholesale rejection of a desire for cohesion and/or stability is also an effect of a narcissistic *illusion*.⁵⁸⁶ It is a self-deception that masks the economic and social privileges secured by the International Division of Labor—privileges that allow the staging of a generalizable “fragmentation” as an ethical and aesthetic discovery.

Thus, in my argument, Delany’s diasporic tendency lies in his attention to the socio-

⁵⁸⁴ Delany, 356.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 54.

economic constraints on apprehending and desiring absolute alterity, on the ethical decision to celebrate fragmentation under information-as-capital. I have also suggested that, through his representation of promiscuous queer desire, Delany proposes an Imaginary politics of reading that resonates with the politics of *DICTEE* and *Native Speaker*. Ultimately, Delany's "queer" narcissism is less about subversive "gay" desire and more about the awareness of power relationships that structure exchanges across linguistic, national, cultural, and species boundaries.

AFTERWORD

In her 1993 essay “Echo,” Gayatri Spivak argues that Freud’s own assumptions in his essay “On Narcissism” have made the term “narcissism” prone to sexist and racist misuse in cultural criticism. Although Freud describes narcissism as an intermediate stage affecting all subjects, what make its psychoanalytic “rediscovery” politically dubious and exploitable are Freud’s speculations, taking on the authority of “observations.” According to Freud, women are more narcissistic than men and, in its primary and unadulterated form, narcissism is to be located in the “megalomania” of “children” and “primitive people.”⁵⁸⁷ Spivak’s “Echo” thus takes on the daunting task of reevaluating narcissism from a feminist and post-colonial perspective.

First, by returning to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Spivak reconfigures the implications of what it means to be “narcissistic.” Through her reading of Ovid’s account of Narcissus, she shifts the emphasis from self-absorption to *self-knowledge*. Ovid’s Narcissus, Spivak points out, *recognizes* himself in the water, *knows* that his love for himself will not be “reciprocated,” and longs for his own death. Spivak’s reading therefore explodes the myth of narcissistic self-absorption by proposing that what is “narcissistic” is, in fact, the desire for self-dissolution that stems from an awareness of the limits of self-love.

Second, Spivak’s essay attempts to trace the itinerary of the mis- and non-represented “subaltern” Echo in literary and psychoanalytic accounts. Spivak reminds us that representations and theories of narcissism in literature, psychoanalysis, and cultural criticism have failed to foreground the importance of Echo—the nymph that Narcissus scorns but cannot avoid—in this story of self-knowledge. If the predicament of Narcissus has everything to do with the “mortiferous” knowledge that the self-love (or “identity”) is inadequate, then the account of Narcissus (that is always-already also an account of Echo), Spivak points out, is a “story of

⁵⁸⁷ See Freud, “On Narcissism,” 74-88. For Spivak’s critique, see Spivak, “Echo,” 20-21.

punishment that is finally a dubious reward quite outside the borders of the self.”⁵⁸⁸ In Spivak’s view, through her repetition of Narcissus’s speech and her continual deferral of her “own” response, Echo represents a “bad response,” a proto-feminist potential that undermines the patriarchal and gendered punishment meted out to her. Wary of the use of psychoanalysis for generalized cultural diagnoses, Spivak is interested in treating Echo-Narcissus as an “ethical” pair constituting a “shuttle”⁵⁸⁹ for a post-colonial and feminist reading practice that is also influenced by Marxism and deconstruction.

This shuttle, we might say, is a “structure” of consciousness insofar as it always begins with an avowal of the complexity of one’s social position and identity in relation to social categories of difference. For instance, Spivak acknowledges the material effects of the category of “class” that separates Spivak-as-Narcissus “from the women at the bottom.” Simultaneously, the category of “woman” also links her to the subaltern women that she cannot fully identify with. Thus, as a structure with variables, Spivak’s reading practice feels ethically compelled to acknowledge and move beyond identitarian formulations to “the precarious moment of the Ovidian Narcissus; in order not to speak for, speak to, listen to, but respond to the subaltern sister.”⁵⁹⁰ In this formulation, as the gendered but shifting position of subalternity, Echo represents a moment of “undoing” of narcissism as the quest for self-regard that governs the writing as well as reading of the literary text.⁵⁹¹ It is a “voice” that the script of Ovid’s text does not reveal intentionally, a voice “that remains,” and lies midway between the irretrievable

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 27-28.

⁵⁹¹ In another comparable assessment of the reader-critic’s narcissism, Saidiya Hartmann notes that benumbing spectacles of violence in slave narratives invite a “narcissistic identification that obliterates the other.” That is to say, the reader-critic has to be aware that “empathy” might, in fact, be a narcissistic identification that takes her further away from the experiences of the subaltern. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

subaltern's speech and phallogentric Euro-American discourse in which the critic herself is grounded. In other words, the structure of narcissism, as represented by "Echo," emphasizes both the necessity and limits of identity politics.

Inspired by Spivak's "Echo," this dissertation has tried to rethink narcissistic subjectivation from post-colonial and diasporic contexts. Although I began the dissertation with a conventional understanding of the narcissistic mirror stage—one that Spivak herself is critical of—I did so to suggest that it can be politically generative to pry open the concept through uncertainties and shifts in Lacan's thoughts and through the contributions of Dolto, Fanon, and Goux. Through a comparative analysis of their contributions, I have suggested that we see the Symbolic not as a realm that the subject enters after narcissism in the mirror stage, but rather as *integral to* the formation of "images" responsible for the affective, economic, and political dimensions the Imaginary. That is to say, instead of the standard chronological narrative, I have interpreted the structure of narcissism in terms of an intimate, repeatable, and dialectical interaction between Imaginary otherness and Symbolic Otherness, between the alterities of "image" and "language" that dominant interpretations of Imaginary narcissism and the Symbolic cure have overlooked so far. I have suggested that the psychoanalytic Imaginary lends itself to a reading that crosses the confines of individual desire to conceptualize "identification" neither as illusory plenitude nor entirely in terms of the specular, but rather as a Fanonesque narcissistic "wound." Additionally, I have demonstrated how this intangible wound, as a form of vulnerability, is both universal and specific in its modality, generated and worked on by socially mediated mirrors of language, visuality, and information.

Finally, to demonstrate what I have called a critically narcissistic reading practice, the dissertation has turned to post-colonial and diasporic literary texts written from within what Lacan would perhaps dismiss as the "American way of life": Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*, Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. My argument, here, is that these texts can be seen as meta-critical reflections on mirroring,

narcissism, and (mis)reading in ways that allow us to move beyond the unconscious privileges buttressed by the ethics of a Symbolic cure. These texts, in my reading, collectively suggest the following: if the Imaginary is shaped by a complex, inadvertent, and inevitable exchange between the senses, the language of affect, and the social, then critical narcissism is not an anti-social solipsistic mode, but the very site where politics and aesthetics join hands.

Additionally, in contrast with the current literary trend to move away from symptomatic reading and interpretation (and towards models of “immanent” and “surface reading”), these texts have allowed me to argue that what needs to be rethought is the very nature of the textual “symptom,” the textual “unconscious,” and their relationship with the Imaginary conditions of production and consumption of the cultural text in question. If, as Lacanian analysts suggest, it is the *analyst* who has “the responsibility for half the symptom,” then, the textual symptom that gestures toward the unconscious of the text is not something that is necessarily “buried” or “inherent” in the text. Rather, the symptom is something that is to be understood through the intermedial zone of exchange/encounter between the narcissisms shaping the text and the reader-critic’s ground of reading. This approach to reading, however, is not meant to liberate the cultural texts from the pressures of the social or to encourage infinite polysemy or meaninglessness, but rather to point to the material and historical determinants of the global-local networks within which the analysis or reading-as-exchange takes place.

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