

Race After Identity:
Forms of Racial Configuration in Contemporary North American Literature

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INTRODUCTION

From Identity to Configurations: Enduring Racial Forms

Race After Identity tells the story of race's transformation in the shadow of American empire, through the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Broadly framed, this dissertation investigates how post-1965 multi-ethnic literary discourse articulates racial difference as aesthetic and material mediations between the human and what lies beyond its limits. More specifically, over the course of four chapters, I advance two major arguments. First, that race has become increasingly disarticulated from identity. Recent literary studies of race have theorized a "post-identity" turn that has destabilized essentialist notions of racial identity as the basis of shared politics. However, I argue that these studies nonetheless assume a human-centric subject as the primary locus of racial formation. Intervening in this set of critiques, my dissertation explores how racial difference persists not only beyond stable identities but also beyond a shared human referent. This leads into my second major claim, which is that in the wake of identity, race functions as and through what I term "configurations," that is, the totality of world-building structures and relations within which the subject of identity assumes coherence. At the same time, the concept of "configuration" also designates the formal capacity of aesthetic figuration to extend the material life of race, for it is precisely by tracking the non-thematic *forms* that race takes when it is no longer welded to explicitly racialized *contents*, such as characters or themes, that I theorize the emergence of alternate modes of racial being, embodiment, and sensation residing at the limits of the human. In what follows of this introduction, I outline the three different domains through which multi-ethnic literary discourses and politics of racial difference

have shifted from those articulated through identity *to* configurations: namely, within the intertwined terrains of aesthetics, ideology, and history.

I. Reading for Race: On the Form(alism) of Racial Critique

In her seminal 2008 essay “Racial Form,” Colleen Lye writes, “If there is evidence of a ‘new formalism’ afoot in the discipline of English, ... this much might at first also be said of ethnic studies” (92). The “new formalism” running afoot that Lye refers to is, in fact, an old one, for it broadly designates—what a number of literary critics who might loosely be gathered under its umbrella, alternately, advocates as—a return, recovery, or renewal of reading practices that attend to aesthetic and literary form (see: Wolfson, Rooney, Levinson). For new formalists, such a “turn” to formal analysis is more of a re-turn because they view the field of literary studies as having neglected or “diluted the will to form” (Rooney 28) as a result of the institutional dominance that New Historicism and its methodologies enjoy in the discipline. Perhaps the bluntest formulation of the new formalist lament for what has been lost is Majorie Perloff’s diagnosis that “the governing paradigm for so-called literary study is now taken from anthropology and history” (654). Thus, the central concern that preoccupies new formalism is the constitutive tension between aesthetic *form* and socio-historical *content*. The charge is that, through the rise of and in the wake of New Historicism, reading practices have privileged the mining of literary texts for the latter at the expense of the former through historicist informed methods, such as thematic analysis (Rooney 28) or “reading-as-paraphrase” (30).

If new formalism emerges out of an exhaustion or frustration with the critical treatment of literary texts as merely reflecting or confirming a predetermined set of historical, cultural, or ideological themes, then “neither does it entail a retreat from history or politics” (35) by manifesting the version of “pure” formalism commonly associated with New Criticism (whether

accurate or not). Rather than being reductively set *against* socio-historical contents and thematics, aesthetic form is firmly placed *in relation* to them, whether to problematize, to intervene, or to produce. Thus, the task is to recover “the centrality of form to contextualist and materialist critique” (Levinson 560). To do so, the practitioners of new formalism urge a wide range of strategic recourse. In broad terms, they share an investment in practices of reading that are “corrosive of the facile opposition between form and content, because it must reinvent their relation in every new context” (Rooney 37). More specifically, new formalists also call for the “reassertion of the critical (and self-critical) agency of which artworks are capable when and only when they are ... restored to their original, compositional complexity” (Levinson 560); attention “to the processes and structures of mediation through which particular discourses and whole classes of discourse (literary genres, for example) come to represent the real” (561); and “demand for scrupulous attention to the formal means that establish the conditions of possibility for experience—textual, aesthetic, and every other kind” (562). I will go on to further elaborate how my own project of reading for race is markedly informed by new formalist articulations of *agency, mediation, and conditionality*.

One representative illustration of new formalism at work is Caroline Levine’s recent 2015 monograph *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. In it, Levine seeks to (re)define form as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3) in order to “expand[...] our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience” (2). Doing so allows Levine to contend that rather than conceiving of literary forms as “epiphenomenal responses to social realities” (14), she can instead explore how “literary and social forms come into contact and affect one another, without presuming that one is the ground or cause of the other” (22). The crystallization of new formalist

aims in Levine's study as a mutually constitutive relationship between aesthetic and social forms brings us full circle back to Colleen Lye's critique of the new formalist turn as assuming both an especially urgent and fraught status in the context of ethnic literary studies. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the study of race within literary criticism is more often than not overdetermined by an emphasis on the contents of racial representation rather than its forms. Kandice Chuh critiques the imperative logic of "aboutness" for "preserv[ing] the (racist) epistemologies of (neo)liberalism through a reproductive logic that is utterly unqueer" ("It's Not about Anything" 127), as evidenced by how "a rubric like Asian American literature announces its subject matter as the Asian American rather than the literature" (132). From another angle, Viet Nguyen has illuminated how Asian American literature is conventionally approached as "demonstrat[ing]" and being "symptomatic of" an exclusive politics of either resistance or accommodation (1). Taken together, Chuh and Nguyen highlight that the reading protocols of Asian American literature tend to cast it as only ever being "about" a restrictive political binary of either resistance or accommodation.

According to Lye, in the case of ethnic literature, underattending to its formal constructions results in a "joint elision, symptomatic of a relationship between the underdevelopment of both formalist and historicist approaches to the Asian American text" ("Racial Form" 93). To frame Lye's formulation through its inverse then, it is the ethnic—and even more specifically, Asian American—literary text that possesses a unique capacity to enjoin aesthetic form to its sociohistorical contexts, precisely in the kind of mutual rather than epiphenomenal relationship proposed by Levine. To realize this potential, Lye argues for a "historical formalism" that would conceptualize "race as form rather than as formation" in order to "help us keep in focus how race is an active social relation rather than a transhistorical

abstraction” (“Racial Form” 99). *Race After Identity* is firmly indebted to Lye’s formulation of race as form, and understands such a generative provocation as the springboard from which the project has come into being and subsequently developed. In what follows, I consider precisely what it means and what might be gained by strictly following the presumption that race *is* form, in the sense that it cannot be approached in advance as “an *a priori* determinant” (Lye 96)—that is, the contents—of a literary text (whether and how it is “about” race), but rather, as an “active” and ongoing construction that “reinvents” (to borrow from Rooney) the relations between its representations and context in each and every instance of its formal reading. Here then, also lies my point of departure from Lye. Whereas Lye posits race as historical and social form instead of formation—and indeed insists that “there can be no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic form” (95)—I argue conversely, for the radical (historical, political, material) potential of approaching racial difference *as* aesthetic and literary form.

In this way, I am very much informed by Dorothy Wang’s critical intervention into the landscape of contemporary avant-garde poetics. Pointing out that the recent appeal within literary studies for a return to its aesthetic and formal dimensions can often function as a kind of dog-whistle for a nostalgic fantasy of the discipline as liberated from pesky “identity politics” that have “intruded” into the field from the 1960s onward, Wang urges us to reject precisely this false dichotomy between aesthetic merit and minority representation. To move beyond the “either-or binary of the social versus the literary” (19) in the context of minority literature, Wang mounts a doubled argument in *Thinking Its Presence*: on the one hand, against “the fetishization of racial and ethnic content and identity” (30) by regarding minority literature as “function[ing] mimetically and sociologically as an ethnographic window into another ‘subculture’” (20), and on the other, against the critical tendency to “ignore race by focusing exclusively on formal

properties or other themes in the writing ... to explicitly oppose political and social ‘content’ ... against formal literary concerns” (31). Wang’s method for resolving this impasse is to pay “close attention” to what such literary texts—specifically, poems in her study—“tell us—not so much in their stated content but in their formal manifestations” (35). Doing so ultimately allows us to understand “that it is in the formal and rhetorical manifestations, particularly the linguistic structures, of the poems that one sees evidence of the impress of social and historical influences” (33). My own dissertation project’s intervention into the terrain of racial form in ethnic literary discourse borrows from the pioneering work of Lye and Wang on both of their respective fronts. First, in the insistence on race’s formal dimension as that which cannot be determined *a priori* in the literary text, but rather emerges out of an active construction between representation and context. Second, by approaching the literary presence of race through its aesthetic manifestation rather than explicitly thematized contents.

In bringing together the (re)turn to form as well as the critical racial rejoinders to it within ethnic literary discourse, I argue that we “read for race,” in perhaps a counterintuitive sense of the practice wherein “for” designates less the one-to-one confirmation of content as it does a dynamic construction and reconstruction of its presence. I situate this argument in the vein of Susan Wolfson’s description of “reading for form”—“‘for’ as attention to and as advocacy for such attention” (9). Extending the framework of racial form proffered by Lye and Wang, I elaborate on the three main theses of reading *for* race *as* aesthetic form:

- 1) *Mediation*. In recognizing that literary representations of race hold an indexical, rather than identical, relationship to the real through processes and structures of aesthetic mediation, I strive to remain attentive to how and when social facts about race are imported into engagements with the literary text. Just as a novelistic description of a table

is not, of course, the table itself, so are racial representations enmeshed and situated within the narrative worlds they occupy rather than predominantly belonging to the social context of fact. That is also not to say that literary and social constructions of race exist independently of one another, but only that it is important to track when one informs or “crosses over” into the other. How this might take shape in practice, for example, is to be wary of presuming that a racialized character axiomatically stands in for a real-life minority subject (even if this is indeed true) and then, in turn, make inferences about the character based on the social facts of race. Instead, one might attend to the entire set of formal and literary processes by which the text constructs such a relation of identity. In Chapter One, I argue that whether the novel *Zone One* explicitly confirms the racial identity of the protagonist as black or not is besides the point, for in every other respect, it has already constructed a narrative world so pervasively structured by blackness such that we are lead to infer this identification without its thematic confirmation. The notion that race is as much subject to the internal logic of its narrative construction as the imperatives of its social reality leads me to the next thesis.

- 2) *Agency*. Following Lye, because race is not an *a priori* determinant of and in the literary text, it is less a self-evident textual object as it is a densely composed logic (or, as I term it, “configuration”) formally articulated by the text as a whole. In this way, any racial representation is never simply “about” race, it actively and dynamically *theorizes* race. Reading for race is to move beyond approaching it as indexical social fact (whether it is there or not there), but rather to parse and unpack the elaborate internal logic by which race is constituted in each and every text. This also means that racial logics are unique to specific literary texts, and while may certainly resonate across texts, cannot be

extrapolated from one to the next without sufficient critical analysis. For example, both Chapters Two and Three examine how conventional signifiers and themes of Asian racialization are absent in each of their respective literary texts. However, rather than simply working to uncover these signs, each chapter attempts to re-trace the narrative structures by which the respective text both conceptualizes and reformulates processes of Asian racialization. In Susan Choi's *American Woman*, racial difference is articulated through the phenomenological experience of embodiment as spatial orientation, whereas Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* posits Asian racial formation as produced through palimpsestic histories of unfree labour and fetishized objectification.

- 3) *Conditionality*. Informed by Levine's theorization of the "affordance" of form as "the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space" (6), I inquire into the affordances of racial forms. Racial forms both carry their own affordances (potential uses and latent actions) with them across time and space, as well as afford particular sets of material potentialities through them. In this way, I contend that racial forms open up and condition possibilities for material, political, and social phenomena, specifically centred around modes of being, embodiment, and sensation that contour the edges of the human.

The material and political stakes of reading for racial forms are what I seek to address in the subsequent section in considering race's belated relationship to identity. Put another way, I ask: What might we learn from a (new) formalist approach to ethnic literary texts in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What do aesthetic racial forms afford us? Nothing less, I contend,

than the contemporary reconfiguration of race itself, as giving rise to alternate and emergent forms of racialization in the historical present.

II. Post-Identity and the Limits of the Human

Identity is what hurts and haunts the contemporary racial imaginary. It splits one in two and compulsively repeats with a difference this splitting (Homi Bhabha). It wounds (is the wound of) the minoritarian subject and binds them to such woundedness (Wendy Brown). It refuses proper mourning and melancholically feeds on its own losses (Anne Cheng). To put it lightly then, identity (representation) holds a complicated relationship to racial subjection and its politics (cohesion). The following section seeks to elucidate the rising critique of racial identity in recent years, as primarily drawn from the fields of Asian and black North American literary criticism. In probing the fissures between subjection and its politics, I consider the alternative possibilities for “identity” that such critiques might help illuminate. Although many of the studies I address here theorize divergent diagnoses, explanations, and rejoinders, I loosely gather them together as operating under the broad umbrella of a “post-identity turn” (Christopher Lee). What I contend these post-identity critiques share is the disclosure of racial identity as undergoing a crisis of not merely *political coherence*, but more importantly, how such a crisis throws into sharp relief one of *literary representation*.

To begin with, I borrow the term “post-identity turn” from Christopher Lee, who persuasively argues that “the idea of Asian American literature was controversial from the start precisely because its foundational understanding of identity was being contested by different groups struggling to define what was still an incipient formation” (5). What Lee reveals then, is the very “post-identity” of Asian American literature from its first identification. Although Lee is certainly right here, I seek to offer snapshots of what I consider to be landmark moments in

which the “foundational” instability of the category of Asian American literature achieves its fullest expression. What is of particular interest to me in tracking the post-identity turn is how the aesthetic legibility of racial identity becomes inextricably bound to a very specific form of political cohesion: namely, resistance, opposition, or counter-hegemony. Beginning with Viet Nguyen’s diagnosis in *Race and Resistance* of a “*crisis of representation* in the Asian American body politic” (8) wrought by less *demographic* and more so *ideological* heterogeneity (6-7), the presumed political cohesion of Asian American identity is increasingly fractured. What is particularly vital about Nguyen’s argument here, however, is the emphasis he places on the synonymous relationship between political and literary representation in regards to racial identity. As Nguyen clarifies, because Asian Americanist critics have conventionally engaged with literary texts through political lens biased toward signs of contestation, resistance, and opposition to hegemonic structures of racism and capitalism, racial form and political resistance have become conflated. Put simply, for the racial subject, its identity (who it is) has become synonymous with its politics (what it does and practices). Conversely then, when representations of resistance are absent from an ethnic literary text, then so is racial identity itself. Why I single out Nguyen’s critique as a flashpoint in the post-identity trajectory is precisely how the question of form becomes foregrounded in his account of Asian American identity. Whereas other Asian Americanist literary critics—for example, in the pioneering work of Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* (who Lee credits with inaugurating the post-identity turn)—strives to identify the political stakes of reading Asian American literature (*why* we should read it and *what* we can gain from doing so), Nguyen probes the politics of *how* we read such literature.

If what Nguyen’s critique brings to our attention is how the forms of racial identity have been thoroughly petrified, legible *as such* only through an increasingly narrow set of political

orientations, then critics in the field propose a range of strategies in response to the “identity crisis” of Asian American representation. Perhaps one of the more trenchant re-articulations of the field comes from Kandice Chuh, who argues that instead of doubling down on identity, Asian Americanist critique reconstitute itself as a “subjectless discourse” in “foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity” (*Imagine Otherwise* 9). As Chuh proposes, in the face of Asian American identity’s increasing diffusion, critics should resist the temptation to “resolve fragmentation by pluralizing its designated referents (as in Asian American literatures and histories)” (21)—what she designates the model of “multiculturalism”—but rather, place “the category ‘Asian American’ under erasure so that its provisional nature and its constructedness cannot be forgotten” (26). For the sake of my purposes here, if what I am attempting to elucidate, is the aesthetic crisis of racial form, by which the conflation of identity and politics (of resistance) serve to displace the former from our literary representations, then Chuh’s critique is particularly instructive. To heed her call for a subjectless discourse would be to curb the desire to simply “fill up” the empty void left by identity’s evacuation via recourse to pluralizing its political cohesions (e.g. to read Asian American literature through the politics of resistance *and* collusion *and* acquiescence, etc. a la Nguyen), but rather, to insist on a critical vigilance toward “the various configurations of power and knowledge” (Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* 11) that facilitate the alternate emergence or submergence of identity itself in the first place (i.e. form rather than formation). These configurations, which produce the very conditions for racial identity, are precisely what the following study seeks to track.

From another angle, Lee’s own approach to the crisis of Asian American identity follows a dialectical process. In *The Semblance of Identity*, Lee argues that rather than either proliferating (Nguyen) or abandoning (Chuh) identity, we “account for how fragments and echoes of

identitarian thinking persist in anti-identity discourses” (8). In order to do so, Lee proposes paying close attention to a discursive figure he terms the “idealized critical subject”:

a composite figure that embodies a set of claims about identity, subjectivity, and oppositional social/political movements. It justifies these movements’ claim to offer a thorough critique of modernity from the perspective of those who have been marginalized and victimized. The idealized critical subject is characterized precisely by its ability to integrate the production of critical knowledge with an effective political praxis. (9)

What is particularly generative about Lee’s idealized critical subject is how it posits aesthetic form (given its discursive existence) as the site through which to track the amorphous shifting of identity (“those who have been marginalized and victimized”) into politics (effective political praxis). In my extension of Lee’s project, it is my hope that in tracing and deconstructing the seemingly imperceptible nodes (discernible only through aesthetic mediation) through which racial identity becomes seamlessly (discursively) alchemized into (and therefore, displaced by) its oppositional political activities, we can, conversely, pry open those seams of racial difference to reveal other forms and configurations—that is, alternate modes of feeling, being, and thinking that accrue ontological thickness (that is, can be “enough” on their own), without depending on relations or structures of “against-ness” to achieve legibility.

In the context of African American literary criticism, we can track a similar representational discontent with racial identity, one specifically precipitated by the historical shifts of the post-Civil Rights movement. Critiquing the naturalized relationship between political resistance (cohesion) and racial legibility (representation) that I have been sketching out under the sign of the post-identity turn, Madhu Dubey identifies postmodernist discourse as responsible for “converting a structural position of relative powerlessness into a desirable ontological condition” such that, in the specific context of African American cultural politics, “material oppression often automatically translates into political opposition” (*Signs* 8-9). What is

indispensible about Dubey's critical intervention in the post-identity turn is her commitment to historicizing the "postmodern condition" as a crisis for African American racial representation. For Dubey, the "postmodern moment is characterized by a widely registered crisis in the category of racial community" (24), as reflected by the increasingly fraught representations of racial community in contemporary African American fiction. However, such a crisis in racial representation is precipitated by a very specific historical constellation of political, economic, and cultural developments in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. They include "the end of legal segregation, expansion of the black middle class, and ascension of black elites to administrative and political power," all of which have served to "strain[...] the idea of a cohesive and singular black community" (Dubey, *Signs* 5). In this sense, Dubey's careful and clarifying historicization can perhaps function as an illuminating rejoinder to the field's more polemical articulations of the nested crises of racial identity, aesthetic form, and political cohesion unfolding under the banner of the post-identity turn.

One such polemic takes the form of Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* in which he argues for the historical periodization of African American literature such that "as a distinct entity," it "would seem to be at an end" (8). More specifically, as Warren explicates, "with the legal demise of Jim Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly ... eroded as well" (2). In brief, for Warren, it was the "legal fact" as well as "lived reality" (42) of Jim Crow that functioned not only as "an imperative to produce" but more importantly, "to consider their literature as a corporate enterprise" (18) for black writers whose literature constituted an imaginative response to such conditions. Conversely then, with the end of legal segregation, the impetus that rendered African American literature *as such*—that is, as a coherent body of literature, which identified and conceive of itself as a shared racial

project—no longer prevails. Although articulated in more polemical terms, Warren explores a similar predicament posed by the entanglement of identity, politics, and literary representation that Dubey takes care to historicize in her study. That is, with the demise of the legal, political, and material constraints that African Americans shared, and therefore, had to protest as a community, the basis for imagining and conceiving of themselves as a cohesive racial identity becomes increasingly fractured.

However, in departing from Dubey, for Warren, it is the question of literary and aesthetic form that assumes particular urgency in the post-identity turn. According to Dubey, although the historical conditions of the production of African American literature has been transformed—such transformations, in turn, as “registered” (19) in its fictions and novels since the 1970s—its form remains by and large intact, which is precisely what allows the tracking of these historical shifts in the first place. In short, although we might be perhaps witnessing an emergent phase of African American literature—that is, something called “postmodern African American fiction”—the affixing of “postmodern” to “African American literature” functions as a modifier that might amend but ultimately does not destabilize the foundational parameters of the latter category. In that sense, what seems then, in fact, generative about Warren’s polemic is precisely the emphasis it necessarily places on the question of aesthetic form. If, in Dubey’s argument, the shifting status of being a minority is accounted for by—and therefore, contained within—the more or less stable category of “minority literature,” then Warren probes the perhaps slightly more radical possibility of something like a distinctly African American aesthetic form, given that the category and status of literature itself is transformed by its minority prefix (such that the shifting status of being a minority would portend the end of minority literature itself). Echoing the resonant anxiety shared by Nguyen prior, in the Asian American context, Warren extends the

former's critique to ask: If minority literature is not writing *against* something, then does it even count *as such*? Even more importantly perhaps, what then *is* minority literature apart from that against which it has defined itself?

The question of how to conceptualize African American aesthetic form outside of socio-historical referents of oppression, suffering, or subjection is more recently articulated by Stephen Best in *None Like Us*, through his denaturalization of “the assumed conjecture between belonging and a history of subjection” (1). Critiquing what he terms the “melancholy historicism” that has taken hold of the field of black studies, which understands “slavery as the scene of the crime and that scene of the crime as a scene of origin” in order to “shore up a notion of black selfhood that is grounded in a kind of lost black sociality, in black sociality's groundedness in horror” (22), Best instead theorizes an “aesthetics of the intransmissible,” that is, a set of aesthetic values and sensibilities within contemporary black literary and cultural productions that offer the possibility of a “we” as “structured by and given in its own negation and refusal” (22). In Best's project then, we can observe the extension and realization of post-identity critique that I have been tracking thus far. In pointing out that blackness has been uniquely grounded in a sociality produced through the shared experience of slavery and its afterlife (such as Jim Crow), Best interrogates the presumed political cohesion of racial identity. For Best, severing black identity's melancholic ties to the recovery of its wholeness as always and only circuited through the historical scene of slavery results in theorizing blackness as contingent on its own erasure. As he puts it, “what ‘we’ share is the open secret of ‘our’ impossibility” (22). While recognizing the important distinctions specific to their respective fields of study in Asian and African American literature, I contend that Best proffers an analogous version of Chuh's “subjectless discourse.” What I mean to point out is the structural,

if not thematic, resonances between Chuh's and Best's respective approaches to the crisis of racial identity when confronted with its political diffusion and disunity. Both critics offer a model of racial subjectivity premised on its own provisionality, negation, and impossibility.

Perhaps more importantly, however, what Best's articulation of an aesthetics of intransmissibility opens up is the question of literary representation when racial identity is no longer premised on a presumed political cohesion. To reiterate my previous claim regarding Nguyen, if within literary representations, racial identity has become overdetermined, even synonymous, with its politics, then what aesthetic forms are we left with once we disarticulate identity from politics? How, in short, is racial difference legible once cleaved from a politics of resistance constituted in response to a collective history of oppression and subjection? To circle back to Dubey and Lee, what both critical analyses suggest is the persistence of racial difference and its capacity to endure within the dialectical relationship between identity and its antithesis. Just as Lee posits the "idealized critical subject" as "an archive of post-identity as the rupture of identitarian thought from within, at the very scenes of its articulation" (13), Dubey contends that the "sharp distinctions between 'modernist identity politics' such as nationalism and the 'new' postmodern politics of difference unravel under closer inspection" (*Signs* 33) because "1960s black cultural nationalism ... emerges as a crucial constituent of postmodernism, with its stress on vernacular culture and racial particularity calculated to displace high modern ideals of universal culture" (36). What both Lee and Dubey expose, therefore, is the tenacious hold of the politics of identity at the very scene of its supposed dissolution. To slightly reframe the issue, I contend that such a pervasive recourse to racial difference and particularity as constants throughout the dialectical unfolding of identity and post-identity indexes precisely the enduring quality of race in the wake of identitarian discourse and politics. Thus, my emphasis departs

from critics such as Chuh and Best, who advocate for identity's negation as the condition of its possibility, as well as Dubey and Lee, who remain attentive to the sustained tension between identity's presence and absence. Instead, I inquire into alternate forms of racial difference— aesthetic and material configurations—which both produce the conditions for identity's emergence as well as live on beyond the racial subject's undoing.

To uncover the potential forms that race takes when it is no longer identified as a cohesive set of politics forged to protest and resist melancholic histories of subjection, I turn to a consideration of alternate materialities of the human. In what follows, I provide more of a note on methodology rather than an explication of any particular body of theory in the “nonhuman turn.” As I have been alluding to so far, the nonhuman turn informs much of my exploration of racial difference following the post-identity turn. Still in its nascent stages, the “nonhuman turn” functions as a somewhat loose umbrella category for a multitude of disparate critical discourses, paradigms, and methods in the twenty-first century. Known by a number of different iterations, such as the “ontological turn,” the “material turn,” and the “postlinguistic turn,” what the widely ranging theoretical and methodological commitments gathered under the nonhuman turn share is an insistence “that the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman” (Grusin ix-x). Part and parcel of the nonhuman turn's critique of human exceptionalism is the turn away from “representational theories,” such as social constructivism, which tend to locate “agency, meaning, and value of nature” in “cultural, social, or ideological inscription or construction” (xi). Thus, “[p]ractitioners of the nonhuman turn find problematic the emphasis of constructivism on the social or cultural constructions of the human subject because, taken to its logical extreme, it strips the world of any ontological or agential status” (xi).

If what the post-identity turn has thrown into crisis are precisely issues that revolve around the discursive and representational (il)legibility of race, particularly in regards to the troubled status of a cohesive and coherent racial subject—the representational possibility of this subject as contingent upon its own discursive impossibility—then such a turn to the ontological, the material, and the postlinguistic would seem especially fruitful.

For the purposes of my project, the critical discourses and methods that inform my analyses in the next four chapters are drawn primarily from the fields of biopolitics, new materialism, affect, phenomenology, and eco-criticism. What unites my investment in these “nonhuman” paradigms, however, is not an exploration of the racial dimensions of the nonhuman as much as an extended meditation on the inhuman process of racialization itself. Although this distinction runs the risk of sounding like a bit of a pedantic quibble, what I hope to emphasize is a similar argument made by Dana Luciano and Mel Chen in the context of theorizing “Queer Inhumanisms” (in a special issue of *GLQ*) when they write, “questions of objectification and dehumanization ... already anticipate the contemporary ‘nonhuman turn’” (186). To underscore their crucial reminder then, we should be cognizant that histories of social violence—whether in relation to race, colonialism, queerness, etc.—are rife with dynamics of subjection, trauma, and injury that *already* illuminate the inhuman heart of liberal humanism; in other words, how “the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman.” Therefore, instead of appealing to animals, plants, or objects, we can perhaps also locate nonhumanist critique through marginalized and unfree subjects who have been historically and in the present-day denied their full humanity. What I take away from Luciano and Chen’s formulation here and how I am informed in my own practice in the following chapters is to

approach studies in biopolitics, phenomenology, affect, and new materialism as offering a set of helpful languages and lens in understanding contemporary forms of racial violence in the historical present. Thus, they are analytical tools that I use in the service of theorizing and retheorizing race. However, my primary commitment is not to the significance of the nonhuman turn itself (as reflected in my lack of loyalty to any one particular strand within it throughout this project) but rather, the insights it might illuminate about racial difference.

In seeking to bring nonhuman critique to bear on questions of racial difference and identity formation, I contribute to a burgeoning field of humanistic inquiry that marshals theories of affect, biopolitics, phenomenology, and new materialism in the service of developing and enriching racial, anti-colonial, queer of colour, and (what Rachel C. Lee terms) “femiqueer” scholarship on identities of difference and histories of violence. Such studies include, but are by no means limited to: “Necropolitics” by Achille Mbembe (2003), *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed (2006), *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* by Donna V. Jones (2011), *Racial Indigestion* by Kyla Tompkins (2012), *Habeas Viscus* by Alexander Weheliye (2014), *Sensational Flesh* by Amber Jamilla Musser (2014), *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America* by Rachel C. Lee (2014), “Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative” by Zakiyyah Jackson (2016), *The Right to Maim* by Jasbir Puar (2017), *Ornamentalism* by Anne Cheng (2019), and *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* by Alys Eve Weinbaum (2019). To be sure, this list is intended to be far more eclectic than exhaustive; however, I mention these works because, although not all of them are explicitly cited and referred to in the specific chapters, they nonetheless all play a formative role in my own attempt to understand how race itself, as the central object of inquiry, has been fundamentally transformed in its encounter with nonhuman material conditions (rather than the other way around). Thus, I join these scholars in articulating

what Amber Jamilla Musser insightfully characterizes as “a strong platform for thinking about difference ontologically” (“*Habeas Viscus*” 159) without “reifying identitarian categories and falling back into the difficulties of inclusion and wounded subjectivity” (158-9). Extending Musser’s formulation here, I also situate my own and these other critical endeavours within a persistent genealogy of racial, feminist, queer, and postcolonial critiques of liberal humanism and the politics of inclusion and recognition that attend it, such as in the works of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Wendy Brown, Iyko Day, and Homi Bhabha (to name some of the interlocutors in the following chapters). In this way then, it is therefore my contention that the relationship of analytical usefulness between racialization and the limits of the human is mutual and co-constitutive. The methods of the nonhuman turn can tell us something new or different that we might not have previously considered in regards to race, but even more importantly, the nonhuman turn cannot fully realize its own theoretical potential without racial critique.

The reason why I feel hesitant to use the terms “nonhuman,” “posthuman,”¹ “inhuman,”² “a-human,”³ or even “parahuman,”⁴ etc. in the context of this project is because, as the following chapters elucidate, *race invokes the human*, in the fullest sense of that phrasing. Race is, of course, a human-made (social) concept, and yet, at the same time, racialization also constitutes a

¹ As Grusin clarifies, “Unlike the posthuman turn with which it is often confused, the nonhuman turn does not make a claim about teleology or progress in which we begin with the human and see a transformation from the human to the posthuman, after or beyond the human” (ix).

² Luciano and Chen’s chosen term due to its “homonymic echo”; as they write, “Resonating against ‘inhumane,’ inhuman points to the violence that the category of the human contains within itself” (196).

³ Another term proposed by Luciano and Chen for its association with the “aspiration of becoming-minoritarian,” so that *a-human* designates “agnostic to the human as such” (196).

⁴ In *Ariel’s Ecology*, Monique Allewaert theorizes the term and concept “parahumanity” to describe “the slave and maroon persons who seventeenth- through nineteenth-century Anglo- European colonists typically proposed were not legally or conceptually equivalent to human beings while at the same time not being precisely inhuman. They were thus beside the human—they were *parahuman*” (6).

form-giving “technology” (Jackson) that makes—and therefore, precedes—the human. Whereas social constructivist accounts of racial formation posit it as ascribing social meaning to biological distinctions between different types of human bodies (Omi and Winant 55), what I theorize instead throughout the following chapters is the notion of “racial configuration,” that is, racialization as a mediating process between human and inhuman forces (such as affect, inanimacy, devitalization, disembodiment, abstraction, inorganicism, etc.) that contours—or, to use my own term, configures—biological life and matter into a “proper” human form. Race, to put it another way, is the frame that snaps the human into sharp focus, renders it legible *as such* in the first place. Since the human, in this account, is what resides at the very heart of race (rather than the other way around), it seems misleading to designate such a project as “nonhuman” or its other synonymous modifiers. The compromise I strike then is to deploy language that signals precisely race’s mediating capacity, by emphasizing what it reveals at the “limits,” “edges” or “contours” of the human. It is precisely such an insistence on the inhuman rupturing *and* suturing (configuration) of the human that race constitutes, which illustrates the urgency of racial critique’s intervention within the nonhuman turn. If race is the irreducible hinge that illuminates the relationality between the human and what lies beyond it, then it also functions as the analytical lens that allows us to bridge and trace the circulations between “old” (Marxist) and “new” materialisms; the liberal politics of humanism and neoliberal divestments of slow death; and the discursive as well as ontological circuits of difference. As Rachel Lee concisely puts it, what a sustained critical inquiry into the biological processes of racial formation reveals is precisely that “nature is always already culturally altered; culture is always already composed of material nature” (11). In this sense then, it is only when the nonhuman turn turns to racial

difference that it is capable of fulfilling its own promise of offering “new” material and ontological approaches to existing discursive, ideological, and social identities of the human.

III. Post-1965: The Racial Afterlives of American Empire

It seems perhaps fitting that the following section, which addresses the historical shifts that are consonant with racialization’s trajectory from identity to configuration, is also the most speculative, given the dissertation project’s interrogation of literary form’s indexical relationship to socio-historical realities. In lieu of a precise historicization of multi-ethnic literary articulations of racial configurations—what particular events precipitated such imaginaries, why literary narratives registered or responded to them, etc.—I offer a series of sketches that I hope can provide historical context against and along which the previous literary and ideological shifts that I have detailed are unfolding. To begin, I wish to make a self-consciously provocative claim that, in its admittedly arbitrary nature, should be taken less as historical verification than a diagnostic analytic for defamiliarizing protocols of periodization in order to reveal the fissures that inhere in dominant narratives of literary history. I propose designating the year 1965 as a distinct period marker for the body of ethnic literature at the centre of my critical inquiry, in articulating alternate materialities of racial difference. The year 1965 constitutes a watershed juncture in ethnic literary and political history for two distinct and significant reasons. First, 1965 marks the emergence of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), in large part institutionalized through the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS) by Amiri Baraka.⁵

⁵ As Smethurst explains, BARTS, in its symbolic importance, “was tremendously inspirational as the first major black nationalist art institution of the 1960s with a national reputation” (150-1) and thus, “in imparting a certain sort of national status to the Black Arts movement” (153), was often regarded as “the center of vanguard black literary, theatrical, and, to a lesser extent, musical activity” (151). However, Smethurst has also detailed the difficulties of properly periodizing the BAM, due to the literary and political precedents from which it originated as well as the lasting influences it left on the aesthetic and cultural productions that followed it. His monograph provides a fuller explanation of the problems with

Second, the year designates the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which, in abolishing previous immigration exclusions and quotas based on (racialized) national origins, ushered in unprecedented and ethnically diverse waves of Asian immigration to and settlement in the U.S. I contend that it is precisely the *simultaneity* of the respective shifts indexed by the Black Arts Movement and the Immigration and Nationality Act that 1965 brings together, which has irrevocably reconfigured the discourse and politics of racial difference in the historical present.

In his foundational study, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, James Smethurst provides a clear overview of the aims and ideologies that united the Black Arts Movement. The common thread, despite the cultural and ideological divergences within it, was not merely “a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation, entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny” (15), but that, crucially, political-cultural activity was a central vehicle for seizing and exercising self-determination. Thus, a major aspect of the Black Arts Movement “was an emphasis on the need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures” (15).⁶ And yet, as Margo Crawford reminds us in *Black Post-Blackness*, the Black Arts Movements hardly constituted a straightforward ideological paradigm that posited authentic racial identity as an essentialized basis for a separate and distinct nationalist cultural tradition. Instead, theorizing the concept of “black post-blackness,” defined as a “wide horizon of shaping and unshaping blackness” (2), Crawford contends that it is the “often illegible mood of both the

periodization, particularly the first chapter, “Foreground and Underground: The Left, Nationalism, and the Origins of the Black Arts Matrix.”

⁶ As Smethurst insists, while “the political-cultural formation known as the New Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance certainly used the arts as an instrument to attempt to dismantle racism and Jim Crow ... never before ... was such artistic activity made an absolute political priority and linked to the equally emphatic drive for the development and exercise of black self-determination within a large black political-cultural movement in the United States” (15-6).

1970s second wave of the BAM and the early twenty-first century that makes the black collective romance inseparable from frustration with a black collective sensibility” (6). However, whether substantiated or undone, black racial difference nonetheless becomes articulated (and as such, interrogated) as inextricably bound up with and foundationally attached to the notion of a politically and culturally distinct (i.e. national) identity through the Black Arts Movement.

Consonant with the rise of the Black Arts Movement, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was passed that very same year. As Min Hyoung Song emphasizes in *The Children of 1965*, “it is difficult to overstate the importance of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act” (31). This is because, as he notes, the 1965 Immigration Act, in facilitating unprecedented numbers and classes (of the skilled or professional-managerial stratum) of Asian presence in the U.S. resulted in the creation of an “Asian American mainstream” (35). However, in *Ends of Empire*, Jodi Kim forcefully contextualizes the 1965 Immigration Act through its historical enmeshment within the Cold War, which she defines as “a geopolitical, cultural, and epistemological project of gendered racial formation and imperialism undergirding U.S. global hegemony” (4) that was crucially staged and “triangulated in Asia” (8). Intervening in the dominant narrative of Asian American history as one premised on the “exclusion of Asians from the United States through restrictive immigration legislation,” Kim argues that “the relative ‘inclusion’ of Asians in the Cold War era through a different set of immigration acts” constitutes *not* “a progressive, liberal democratic correction or reversal of a previously racist era, but ... an imperial governmentality whose logic is one of *expulsion* (out of Asia) rather than an inclusion–exclusion dyad” (21). Under Kim’s framework then, the emergence of a post-1965 “Asian American mainstream” is, in fact, crucially “symptomatic of U.S. imperial Cold War presence in Asia and gendered racial formations both ‘here’ in the United States and over ‘there’ in Asia”

(Kim 19). At the risk of schematizing, I follow Kim in approaching the 1965 Immigration Act as both inductive and symptomatic of the formation of U.S. empire—through militarism, occupation, and displacement—in the late-twentieth century and, due to its “*protracted afterlife*” (Kim 4), into that of the twenty-first.

In contending that the Black Arts Movement and the 1965 Immigration Act constitutes an illuminating convergence for understanding twenty-first-century ethnic literary re-articulations of the discourses and politics of racial difference, I depart from accounts of the politics of solidarity forged between racialized minorities within the U.S. nation-state and the anti-colonial movements beyond it. For example, in *Soul Power*, Cynthia Young details the formation of a “U.S. Third World Left,” composed of leftists of colour drawn from a range of anticolonial, antiracist, and anticapitalist movements—from the New Left and civil rights to the countercultural and Black Arts—that “created cultural, material, and ideological links to the Third World as a mode through which to contest U.S. economic, racial, and cultural arrangements” (3). The U.S. Third World Left, who, “inspired by events in the decolonizing world, saw their own plight in global terms” (2), did so precisely by “[l]inking the social justice struggles of U.S. peoples of color to liberation struggles in Africa and Asia” (4). In contrast, my investment in what 1965 augurs probes the contradiction prompted by, on the one hand, aesthetic and cultural projects of racial fashioning as a national identity, and on the other, the intensification of a “‘return’ to the metropole” (Kim 22) of those residual effects produced by U.S. military intervention. I argue that projects of racial nationalism,⁷ in contending with the

⁷ While my focus has been on the BAM thus far, as Smethurst points out, “various sorts of African American cultural nationalism energized and inspired Chicana/o and Asian American artists, shaping their politics and poetics” (286). For more, see Chapter Five, “Bandung World: The West Coast, the Black Arts Movement, and the Development of Revolutionary Nationalism, Cultural Nationalism, Third

increasingly visible presence and rem(a)inders of empire, registered these disjunctures and tensions in such a way that racial difference itself becomes subject to material reconfiguration. Put another way, in my account, 1965 stages less a relationship of identification or recognition between the subjects of racial nationalism and those of empire than a *splintering* between on the one hand, race as the cultivation of identity (here), and on the other, the racialization that inheres in imperial logics of occupation and displacement (over there). In registering such fractures of American empire, the discourses and politics of race were transformed. Thus, the convergence between the Black Arts Movement and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act reveals an ontological split between national racial logics and those produced through overseas intervention, resulting in a consequent shift in the nature and process of racialization itself.

It is my contention that the body of multi-ethnic literature in this dissertation project constitutes a *post-1965 archive of the racial afterlives of U.S. empire*. Deploying “racial afterlives” as an analytic, I aim to track how the stresses and aftershocks produced through race’s (re)configuration by U.S. empire continue to be diffused into and registered by the twenty-first-century ethnic literary landscape. In recent years, Saidiya Hartman has influentially defined the “afterlife of slavery” as the ways in which “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago,” which take the form of “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (*Lose Your Mother* 6). Building on Hartman’s definition of “afterlife” as the determinations produced by a political arithmetic and calculus entrenched in, but extending far beyond the formal conclusion of, the historical event itself, I seek to investigate the affective, material, and phenomenological states that inhere between life and its antithesis.

Worldism, and Multiculturalism.” Thus, even though I take 1965 as a point of emergence for the BAM, I also approach it as ushering in a number of other racial nationalisms.

Thus, in the chapters that follow, I offer an alternate vocabulary for the racialized interstitial forms of life materially configured by and reconfigured in the wake of U.S. empire in Asia, as discerned through ambivalent processes of inanimacy, disembodiment, inorganicism, devitalization, and abstraction, among others.

IV. Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I offer a range of case studies of twenty-first-century ethnic literary texts that reflect back on and re-imagine how the decades of the late 1960s and the 1970s have crucially informed the historical present. In some cases, that reflection is explicitly thematized, and in others, it takes more oblique forms. Chapter One, “After Life: Apocalypse and the Ends of Race in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*” turns to the zombie genre, whose emergence dovetails with the formal conclusion of the civil rights movement (1968), to lay out the foundational questions and stakes of the project. Whitehead’s zombie novel, featuring a protagonist who is not identified as black until the narrative’s end, stages precisely the methodological limitations of reading for race in a seemingly deracinated literary context. On the one hand, the novel could be approached through the generic conventions of horror that subordinate the particularity of racial identity to the universal urgency of apocalypse (the human “us” versus the zombie “them”). On the other hand, the late revelation of the protagonist’s identity can be retroactively applied to the narrative to essentialize its politics or themes as having been racially coded all along. However, forging a path beyond post-racial transcendence (in the wake of Civil Rights) and essentialist reduction, I argue that blackness narratively structures the world of the novel, both in advance of the revelation of the protagonist’s individuated racial identity and following the collective destruction of a zombie apocalypse. Bringing together critical accounts of black embodiment from Hortense Spillers, Saidiya

Hartman and Zakiyyah Jackson with those of the affects of animacy from Mel Chen and Sara Ahmed, I contend that the racial form of the text inheres in the temporal capacity of flesh, as the intermediate boundary between the subject and its external environment, to signify racial difference long “before” and “after” the fully animated human subject.

My second chapter, “Racial Injury and Feminist Phenomenology in Susan Choi’s *American Woman*,” extends the question of race’s disarticulation from identity beyond the context of material embodiment to that of political recognition. I inquire into the possibilities of political justice if an essential subject can no longer be counted on to register racial violence and its injuries. Jenny Shimada, the Japanese American protagonist of Choi’s novel, displays very little interiority through which to discern her racial identity, which would seem to mark the limits of claiming political redress for the traumas of her family history, that is, the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. If there is no coherent subject to speak its injuries, then how can racial violence be registered or repaired? Drawing on the philosophy of phenomenology from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sara Ahmed, I contend that Jenny’s racial opacity invokes the unfinished political project of 1970’s Women’s Liberation (its slogan being “the personal is the political”) to reconfigure the relationship between individuated identification and collective consciousness along more perceptually continuous lines. In doing so, I offer a phenomenological account of race that relocates its formations from an interiorized subjectivity to the spatial coordinates by which the embodied subject orients herself.

Whereas the first chapters investigate the non-identitarian formations of racial difference within the U.S. nation-state, the final two turns to racial configurations in a transnational context, across the Pacific and the Americas, respectively. Chapter Three, “Curatorial Technique, Coolie Labour, and Factory Work in Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*,” investigates the racialized

contradictions of self-making under the catastrophic combination of capitalism, biopolitics, and environmental devastation that together comprise a condition of what Lauren Berlant terms “slow death.” Bringing together theories of biopower in the work of Michel Foucault and Asian North American political economy in those of Colleen Lye and Iyko Day, I argue that techniques of subjectivization under slow death require a constant “curation of the self,” by which the subject maximizes its capacity for biological life. However, such curatorial technique hinges precisely on the fetishization of racial difference—enfolded within multiple historical iterations of Asian labour—that casts it as an object-ifying quality both desired and disavowed by the properly curated human subject. Extending the previous chapter’s emphasis on the social transformations of the 1970’s, I turn to how discourses and ideologies of organicity, inhering in the macrobiotic diet and natural foods movements of that decade, recursively animates dystopian imaginaries of the sensorial dimensions of material life that render it human.

My fourth and final chapter, “The Carceral Ecologies of Settler Colonial Capitalism in Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision*” concludes the dissertation by bringing together the threads of race, form, and the limits of the human to bear on the comparative racialization of blackness, Asian-ness, and Indigeneity across the Canada-U.S. border. Closely reading Clements’ play alongside studies in racial capitalism, I contend that black, Asian, and Indigenous communities are racialized according to their differential relationships to land, labour, and incarceration. Whereas black North Americans are subject to mass incarceration as a result of enforced dispossession from the land, Indigenous populations are managed and confined *through* their conflation with a “primitive” natural landscape, as demonstrated by the encampment of the “Indian reservation.” Triangulated through blackness and Indigeneity, Asian North American racialization possesses a flexible relationship to land and labour, such that the environmental

mobility of Asian subjects is constrained insofar as they can provide labour-on-demand, as evidenced by the conscripted agricultural labour of displaced and incarcerated Japanese/Japanese Canadians during World War II.

Through these case studies of the racial afterlives of American empire, *Race After Identity* intervenes in critical accounts of racial formation on a number of fronts. It enriches theories of literary representation by tracking the non-thematic forms that race takes when it is disarticulated from explicitly racialized characters, themes, or narratives. It revises social accounts of racial formation by identifying the formal capacity of aesthetic figuration to extend the material life of race. From temporal and spatial structures to material and natural environments, these racial configurations re-imagine narrative worlds both in advance of and following human-centric notions of identity. Most important perhaps, such a project, by relocating race from the human subject to its worldly coordinates, carves out a fresh path for reading the racial politics of identity beyond either its abstraction into post-racial universality or reduction into essentialist particularity.

CHAPTER ONE

After Life: Apocalypse and the Ends of Race

in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

In a narrative “twist” characterized less by shock and disruption than by an anticlimactic, perhaps even tedious, affective quality, the last few pages of Colson Whitehead’s zombie novel *Zone One* reveal its protagonist Mark Spitz to be black. Up until that point, due to the racial identity of his “nicknamesake”—the white American nine-time-gold-medalist Olympian swimmer—and because, as per literary convention, characters are usually assumed to be white unless explicitly identified as otherwise, the racial unmarkedness—if not outright whiteness—of Whitehead’s protagonist has been presumed throughout. Such a minor revelation, which confirms the incidental rather than integral status of Mark Spitz’s racial identity to the workings of plot, appears wholly appropriate to the imperative of genre here. After all, how much can the blackness or racialization otherwise of the protagonist-hero really matter in a zombie apocalypse when the survival of humanity itself is at stake? Mark Spitz himself seems to suggest as much during the singular instance in which he contemplates his racial identity, directly following a conversation between him and his friend, Gary:

Mark Spitz explained the reference of his sobriquet to Gary, adding, ‘Plus the black-people-can’t-swim-thing.’

‘They can’t? You can’t?’

‘I can. A lot of us can. Could. It’s a stereotype.’

‘I hadn’t heard that. But you have to learn how to swim sometime.’

‘I tread water perfectly.’

He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines, but he did not press his friend. Chalk it up to morphine. There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them. Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other? (287-8)

What lies at the heart of this scene is a constitutive contradiction concerning racial difference: *it is identified, and given meaning, through its very obsolescence*. Due to the generic imperatives of the novel (zombie apocalypse), Mark Spitz's self-identification of blackness, in the exact moment of revelation, raises the very question of its significance within the context of the "new" world in which he has found himself ("There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them"). To put it simply, Mark Spitz is identified as black only to remind us that blackness no longer means anything. What this contradiction encapsulates, and what this scene stages, is a familiar binary between particularity (essentialism) and universalism (abstraction) in which the representational logic of racial difference often becomes trapped. On the one hand, blackness is reductively relegated to cultural essentialism, given that Mark Spitz's racial identity is revealed specifically through a pernicious stereotype concerning black people's inability to swim. On the other hand, the racial particularity of blackness is dismissed and elided ("he did not press his friend") in favour of more pressingly universal concerns, that is, surviving the zombie apocalypse. It is in light of such a universalism that one can look back and regard the particularity of blackness *as such* ("Would the old bigotries be reborn as well"); or, to put it another way, it is by virtue of its future absence that blackness can be present or emerges at all.

The troubled status of blackness here as accruing legibility through its own purported obsolescence partially signals what African American literary criticism has identified as a widespread waning in the political cohesion of black racial identity, precipitated by the post-Civil Rights period. In this sense, although Whitehead's novel firmly belongs within a longstanding tradition of the zombie genre,¹ it can also be situated within a genealogy of post-

¹ As a revealing coincidence, the genesis of the American zombie genre is generally credited to George Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*, which was released in 1968, also the period marker for the end

1970's postmodern African American fiction, in which, as Madhu Dubey points out in *Signs and Cities*, "claims to represent racial community have become highly fraught" (5). Dubey historicizes the rise of postmodernism within African American literary discourse as the result of a "constellation of political, economic, and cultural developments" (*Signs* 24) that have taken place following the transformations of the Civil Rights movement. They include how various national and global phenomena, such as "the shift from a Fordist to a flexible regime of accumulation, industrial restructuring, and the scaling down of the welfare state" (24) have combined to throw the social category of African American community into crisis, a crisis that is, in turn, registered in literature. In addition, the political transformations wrought by Civil Rights, such as "legal desegregation, affirmative action legislation, increased black electoral participation, and incorporation of black elites into bureaucratic governance" (30) have increasingly eroded the cohesion of communitarian racial interests, with the result that the "distinguishing feature of black politics in the postmodern era is that race no longer forms the singular axial principle of all political projects affecting African-Americans" (30). Dubey's historicized account of postmodern blackness helps to contextualize why the novel imagines the potential obsolescence of racial identity to be contingent on and induced by a shifting paradigm of community and group interests ("There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them").

In a less historicized and more formal account of the waning of racial identity as predicated on a cohesive and shared set of political investments, in *What Was African American Literature?*, Kenneth Warren asks after the continued status of African American literature itself following the end of legal segregation. According to Warren, "with the legal demise of Jim

of the Civil Rights movement. Such a historical resonance between the emergence of the zombie and the transformation of black racial politics further supports my overarching argument about Whitehead's deployment of the zombie tradition as a means to interrogate the identitarian status of blackness in the wake of Civil Rights.

Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly ... eroded as well”

(2). The issue that Warren raises is primarily a formal one that extends from the political shifts tracked by Dubey. If racial identity as premised on the presumed sense of political cohesion among African Americans becomes increasingly destabilized by the historical conditions of “postmodernism,” then what does that bode for *aesthetic representations* of black difference? How can blackness be represented within literature at all under such conditions? Whereas Dubey contends that identity’s representation is subject to a dialectical logic by which postmodern imaginaries of anti-essentialism are always haunted by an earlier iteration of 1960’s black nationalism that stressed racial authenticity and particularity (34), Warren provokes the radical notion that the very *form* of identity might no longer hold. That is, for Warren, the lack of political cohesion for racial identity has produced one of aesthetic and representational incoherence. In *None Like Us*, Stephen Best recently argues that such opacity is precisely the formal innovation of black racial difference. Theorizing an “aesthetics of the intransmissible,” Best contends that contemporary works of black literature and art offer up a set of “aesthetic values and sensibilities that ... strive to forge critical possibilities by way of a kind of apocalypticism, or self-eclipse” in order to register how “blackness or black culture ... can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal” (22). If Dubey reveals the racial politics of anti-essentialism to be continuously ruptured from within by identitarian claims, then both Warren and Best articulate the unmooring of blackness from identity, that is, its own erasure or negation as the very condition of its (aesthetic) emergence into view at all.

Condensed within the late minor revelation of Mark Spitz’s racial identity, therefore, is a staging of what we might call the “post-identity” of blackness. The erosion of communitarian investments in the post-Civil Rights era has destabilized the political cohesion and

representational coherence of black racial identity such that racial difference is no longer grounded in identitarian discourse or politics. Indeed, the possibility raised by the novel is whether black racial difference matters at all in the face of shifting paradigms of political threat and belonging (“There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them”). However, the very raising of such a question at all is also its own rejoinder. To raise the question of the potential obsolescence of blackness is to, at the same time, affirm its persistence, however spectrally, as an empty signifier that although severed from its previous referents continues to haunt, by signifying some hazy future not yet entirely sharpened into focus (“Would the old bigotries be reborn as well?”). What this hazy *something* might be or constitutes is precisely the object of inquiry at the centre of the chapter at hand.

While Best beautifully clarifies the “critical possibilities” of the kind of black obsolescence staged by Whitehead here—as indexing the paradoxical conditions of blackness as that which is structured by its very impossibility—I extend on and depart from his emphasis on “aesthetic values and sensibilities” to explore the affective, ontological, and phenomenological conditions of racial “apocalypticism or self-eclipse.” In order to probe and make sense of the enduring contradiction Whitehead presents us with in this late scene of minor racial revelation, in which black difference is prefigured through its own obsolescence such that its imagined erasure produces the conditions of its emergence, I aim to theorize the notion of “race after life” (race-as-afterlife) in a literalized sense. What happens when the “after-life” is less what follows a life already lived but the very condition of living itself? What does it mean to live life as if it is already “over”? More importantly, what are the affective, biological, and material forms of such an interstitial existence between life and death? What modes of being, embodiment, and

sensation attend or constitute racial difference when it becomes unmoored from the politics of identity and, instead, re-articulated as an apocalyptic (or zombie) form of life itself?

To track the post-identitarian forms that racial difference takes in *Zone One*, my argument is divided into three main moves in what follows of this chapter. I begin with a brief foray into not so much the zombie genre itself, but the genres of criticism that have developed in response to it by tracking a critical divide within zombie critique. The first, which I identify as belonging to the allegorical, is a tendency to read the zombie as “walking allegories” for identities of difference (“things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked”). In these readings, the zombie is a cultural icon, *par excellence*, for representing the return-of-the-repressed contents of hegemonic structures of power and thus, symbolizes, alternately, the alienated worker or mindless consumer, the stateless migrant, the colonial and racialized slave, or even figures of queerness and disability. However, I argue that such allegorical readings, in rendering one form of marginalization analogic to another, can result in the reduction, and thus consequent erasure, of the specificity of racial difference itself. The second strand of zombie critique seeks to rectify such essentialism by insisting on the figure of the zombie as racialized through a biopolitical logic that distinguishes between life worth preserving and its opposite, the un-dead that requires and justifies killing. However, the move to unveil, beneath racism, an overriding or “ultimate” logic of differentiation (one attached to life itself) results in the misrecognition of biological matter as anterior to technologies of racialization.

In order to forge a path beyond race’s essentialist reduction and universalist elision, my second section considers how flesh might function as a site for recovering an anti-essentialist ontological account of race. Bringing together the work of Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Jackson, and Mel Chen to bear on a third figure specific to Whitehead’s unique re-visioning of the zombie

genre, the stragglers, I argue that their simultaneous paralysis and interstitial status between the living and the un-dead reveals the production of a logic of racialization. It is one which functions as and through a “de-animating re-humanization,” in which the reduction of animate qualities is not synonymous with de-humanization. Rather, the stragglers’ inanimacy render them a particular kind of human life, one characterized by an infinite malleability and plasticity. In this way, racialization is reconstituted as a technology, not of merely demarcation and exclusion, but for disciplining and moulding biological life into human(ized) forms.

The third and final move of my argument turns to Mark Spitz, as the character who bears the closest kinship with the stragglers’ condition. I contend that his defining feature of mediocrity can be conceptualized as the affective and phenomenological equivalent to the racial logic of anti-essentialist ontology articulated through the stragglers. Under the apocalyptic discourse of the novel, which provides its critique of capitalism through recourse to structures of inversion by which the end of the world reveals the normal functioning of the system as dysfunctional, Mark Spitz’s mediocrity stubbornly thwarts such eschatological transformation. Instead, the breakdown of the world around him merely reinforces the identically mediocre—that is, racialized—nature of his life prior to and following the apocalypse. In this light, Mark Spitz’s late minor revelation of his racial identity to Gary can be more properly understood as a red herring, for his blackness has suffused and constituted the narrative world all along. Finally, I conclude through an excursion into both the limits and possibilities that Whitehead’s racial intervention holds for the work of the zombie genre itself.

I. Zombie Forms: The Allegories and Biopolitics of Race

Infecting popular culture, zombies have walked out of the frame of their cinematic origins and into graphic and literary novels, television series, video games, and more to populate

our every media. However, the pervasive imaginary of the zombie manifests not only as discrete figurations of the cultural anxieties *du jour*, but also characterizes the very systems and structures of our contemporary way of life. Terming it “zombie capitalism” (Harman), critics point to the thoroughly “un-dead” states of 21st-century financial institutions and economic systems, as reanimated by the dead ideas of market rationality (Quiggin 2) and “incapable of fulfilling any positive function, but representing a threat to everything else” (Harman 12). It is of course no coincidence that these two phenomena are co-contemporaneous: the proliferation of zombie figures *within* popular culture and the ongoing zombie-fication *of* the system of capitalism. Much critical discourse has productively mined Marx’s classic formulation of the monstrosity of capital, as “dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (*Capital, Volume I* 342). Informed by such Marxist critique, studies of the zombie genre have long identified the intimate relationship between zombies and capitalism. Summing up the history of zombie critique, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry elucidate the “common interpretation of the zombie as capitalist icon” *par excellence*, for functioning as “a dual image of capitalist enslavement: the zombie ... represents ... the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system” (99). However, as the zombie plague increasingly infects our media cultures, so has its critique continued to develop.

In recent years, a number of critics have complicated the critical narrative of the zombie as racially unmarked capitalist icons of labour or consumption. Illuminating its folklore origins in Haitian plantation society, racial critiques of the zombie amend and enrich normative Marxist accounts by cautioning against an “easy equivalence between racialized slavery and contemporary economic practices” (Hurley 312). Instead, insisting on its inextricability from the

“traumatic racial histories that American modernity would rather forget,” such as the transatlantic slave trade, they theorize the zombie as “a racially marked embodiment of pastness” (Hurley 312). Thus, for critics attentive to the racialized dimensions of the zombie, its presence evokes not just economic but also “racial panic” (Canavan 433), by allegorizing “the racial binary in which the (white) citizen-subject is opposed against nonwhite life, ... that anti-life which is always inimically and hopelessly Other, which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed” (433). Extending this line of critique even further, others have joined in to claim the zombie “in terms made evident by transnational queer and disability perspectives” (Chen, “Lurching” 24), as figures “so translucently modeled on racialized disability that there is a rehearsal of cognitive and physical disability in their specific movements, their cognitive fog, their labile moods, their missing limbs” (27). Or, from another perspective, “roving and highly mobile” (Fojas 61) zombies conjure up the threat of global migrant labour in a doubled sense: on the one hand, they embody “economic refugees the world over” (61), and on the other, they initiate the transformation of “ordinary citizens [into] stateless refugees as a consequence of the zombie apocalypse” (61). If they can alternately figure capital, race, queerness, disability, and statelessness, depending on the context, then perhaps what zombies symbolize is less the specificity of these different identities so much as difference itself.

Intervening in the historical and contemporary landscape of zombie critique, what I am interested in tracking through the zombie is not so much the various identities that it figures or subtends as its seemingly boundless capacity for figuration itself. It is my contention that as a monstrous embodiment of the different differences that haunt our cultural imaginaries (class, race, sexuality, disability, and citizenship), the zombie has much to tell us about the *form* of difference itself (its representations, its productions, its internal discourses) as well as the

contents—that is, *identities*—of those differences. To undertake such an investigation, we must turn back to a canonical study in (film) horror, Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993), and in particular, the chapter dedicated to the master predecessor of the contemporary American zombie genre, George Romero's "living dead" trilogy (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*). In "Contagious Allegories: George Romero," Shaviro writes:

These strange beings, at once alive and dead, grotesquely literal and blatantly artificial, cannot be encompassed by any ordinary logic of representation. In their compulsive, wavering, deorganicized movements, the zombies are *allegorical* and *mimetic* figures. They are allegorical in the sense that allegory always implies the loss or death of its object. An allegory is not a representation, but an overt materialization of the unbridgeable distance that representation seeks to cover over and efface. (87)

What Shaviro seeks to get at by characterizing zombies as "allegorical figures" is their propensity for literality ("overt materialization" in the stead of "representation"). Thus, for him, zombies "do not mirror or represent social forces; they are directly animated and possessed ... by such forces" (87). Put another way, zombies are not mere passive reflections of the things we fearfully imagine, but rather their walking embodiments, of our fears "made real." Extending Shaviro's claim here about the allegorical nature of zombies even further, I wish to interpret the zombie as "pure" allegory, that is, as figures that allegorize the very operations of allegory itself. Their literal quality, as abstract social forces re-animated—that is, given material form—render zombies an apt site for exploring the constitutive contradictions of what I term "racial allegories," for illuminating how the work of allegorizing identities of difference hinges precisely on their simultaneous intensification (materialization, embodiment)—resulting in reductive essentialism—and elision (loss, death, effacement) in lieu of postracial universality.

To turn back to Whitehead's zombie novel, the particular frame of difference at play here, as given through the narrative premise of minor revelation, is that of racial identity. If, as I am contending following from Shaviro, the zombie figure necessarily conjures up the logic of

allegory itself (more so than the particular contents of *what* is being allegorized), then how is it working in and through the text at hand? What does the revelation at its heart reveal, in turn, about the possibilities and limits of allegorizing racial difference through the formal conventions of horror? If we view genre fiction as a hyperbolic extension of—rather than radical break from—realism, then what might the racial allegories of the zombie genre tell us about the fraught relationship between racial identity and literary representation more generally? To begin, let us consider the temporal significance of the novel’s racial revelation more closely. Given the narrative positioning of Mark Spitz’s self-identification as occurring at the closing of the novel, (and relatedly, given that we have been led to identifying him as white up to that point), the force of the revelation necessarily produces a temporal condition of retrospection. Following Mark Spitz’s reveal, we are tempted to “go back” from that precise moment and armed with our present knowledge, retrospectively trawl for clues or signs from among the portions of “before we knew” in order to confirm what we *now* know. To put it another way, the revelation implicitly tasks us (as a kind of reader-detective) with retrospectively establishing correspondence or continuity between the time of not-knowing to that of now-knowing. And is not such a logic of correspondency and equivalency precisely that of the domain of allegory?

Given that the presence of the zombies alert us to the prevailing operations of allegory at play in the novel—that is, we know they are standing in for *something* (most likely racially unmarked labourers or consumers unless otherwise specified)—the narrative force of the revelation retrospectively render the zombies walking allegories of racial difference (in addition to capitalist alienation). That is to say, the zombies allegorize the return of the repressed racial history that has, in fact, been there all along, “hidden” in plain sight to threaten until the minor reveal. Consider, for example, what I take to be a representative reading from Jessica Hurley:

Like the generic zombie, Mark Spitz is originally black before being resurfaced as white and then revealed to have been black all along; his surface, like the zombie's, betrays both a history of whitening, of postracialization, and the failure of that history successfully to banish race from the visible surface. ... This late-in-the-game revelation of blackness as something that has always been present connects Mark Spitz to the history of the zombie in American pop culture. (321-2).

In Hurley's illuminating and irrefutable reading, one that the novel itself clearly solicits, Mark Spitz's late blackness renders him a stand-in for the zombies—as “the black double of the zombie” (324)—who themselves stand in for the repressed racial traumas of American modernity as constituted through a racist “history of whitening ... and the failure of that history successfully to banish race from the visible surface.” Contagious allegories, indeed. To extend this representative framework a little further, such a reading of the zombies as allegorizing racial difference (as allegorizing Mark Spitz's blackness) encourage a re-turn to and re-view of other seemingly deracinated signifiers throughout the novel as posing similar racial allegories. For instance, the terming of the post-apocalyptic re-establishment of a centralized governmental order as “reconstruction” takes on a doubled meaning as a simultaneously coded reference to the period of fraught racial politics that followed the legal abolition of slavery in the aftermath of the Civil War. The racialized allusion to the “other” Reconstruction is rendered explicit when Mark Spitz notes the difficulty of enforcing the prohibitions against looting enacted by the fledgling government: “The civilians in the camps could be policed as most never left the perimeter, but untold Americans still walked the great out there, beyond order's embrace, like slaves who didn't know they'd been emancipated” (Whitehead 48). In light of the reference to formal Emancipation, we can interpret the prevalence of Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (PASD) among survivors in the new world as symptomatic of the ineluctable intrusion of the traumatic racial “past” (homophone of PASD) into reconstructionist projects of nationalist modernity. Furthermore, even Mark Spitz's efforts to “sweep” and clear reclaimed sections of New York

City (Zone One) of remaining straggler and skel zombies—repeatedly depicted through the language of urban re-settlement and characterized by tensions between “native” (zombie) populations and “immigrant” newcomers—might allude to the Great Migration. Taken together, through these racial allegories, Whitehead’s zombie apocalypse functions as a parable for, what Saidiya Hartman terms in *Lose Your Mother* as, the “afterlife of slavery”—that is, the history of chattel slavery constitutive of American modernity itself, as one (re)constructed through its continued incursions into the contemporary present, the state-sanctioned attempts to erase it, and the ultimate impossibility of doing so.²

As such a reading makes clear, allegory is key. However, it is purely by virtue of Mark Spitz’s revelation that the racial allegory of enslavement can be retrospectively recontextualized *as such*. To put it another way, the temporal condition of Mark Spitz’s racial identification is such that it produces a narrative doubling effect. Because his blackness is lately revealed, we can either “keep going” to understand the novel as we have before we knew (the zombie apocalypse as critique of capitalism) *or* we can “go back” to reconceptualize what we knew in light of what we now know (the zombie apocalypse become racial parable). The doubled interpretations as contemporaneous results precisely from the temporal positioning of racial identification specific to Whitehead’s novel, as opposed to the more common literary convention of explicitly identifying

² Such a reading would position *Zone One* within an African American literary tradition in which specifically supernatural forces or monstrous figures index the afterlife of slavery, how the history of enslavement stubbornly refuses to “stay dead,” and instead, its horrifying intrusion into the present. The most prominent example is, of course, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, but for more entries in the genre, see: Madhu Dubey’s article on the subject, “Speculative Fictions of Slavery.” For a related, although not the same, critique of how such literary texts on the afterlife of slavery might be charged with representational (via historical) reductionism, see Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* and more specifically, Chapter Three, “The Future of the Past.” Crucially, my point differs from Warren’s in that whereas he accuses neo-slave narratives of trafficking in a kind of reductive presentism (he terms it the “presentness of the past” [86]), I am arguing that the formal device of allegory, when used to represent or read racial identity in speculative generic contexts, reductively essentializes racial difference and particularity. My thanks to Sandy Alexandre’s generosity in so helpfully pointing out Whitehead’s inheritance of this literary tradition and its implications.

a character's race at the outset of the narrative. The ghostly doubling of both what the zombies are (racialized) and are not (racially unmarked), depending on which way we identity Mark Spitz (both black and not-black), unfolds through the logic of allegory as effecting the simultaneous presence and absence of the very thing it seeks to represent. Take, for example, the retrospective reading of the zombies as perhaps allegorizing the traumatic history of enslavement. By raising the spectre of enslavement, we are, at the same time reminded, that such an allegory is just that: constituted by taking material (racial difference) from elsewhere (the moment of revelation) and re-inserting it back into the "unbridgeable distance" of representation (the zombies). Put simply, by "seeing"/reading *now* that which was not there *before*, the late manifestation of racial difference carries within itself what it might potentially have been, its own absence. Recalling Shaviro's formulation of allegory as "always impl[ying] the loss or death of its object," we can affirm that the racial allegory, in the very instance of substantiating the presence of racial difference, erases precisely its own object, that of race.

Thus far, under my framework of racial allegory, we have been (uncomfortably and problematically) presuming whiteness to be synonymous with being racially unmarked. That it, if Mark Spitz has not been explicitly identified as black for the majority of the novel, then he is racially unmarked and therefore presumed to be white. Of course, this raises the possibility of identifying our protagonist as racially unmarked without, by extension, slipping into white-washing him. What would this reading look like and portend? How do we make sense of the zombies then? What specific kind of difference or otherness might they allegorize within such a context? The novel seems to offer precisely its own gloss on the ambiguous role and function of racial difference. To refer back to the pivotal scene with which I began the chapter, recall that it is Gary's implied racism that triggers Mark Spitz's racial identification. However, in the very

moment of revelation, Mark Spitz also dismisses and relegates to insignificance the emergent spectre of racial tension (“he did not press his friend”). Instead, he contemplates “There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them.” The narrative logic as articulated by Mark Spitz is as follows: the previous order of human division through racial differentiation has been superseded by the prevailing and more urgent mechanism of differentiation and othering—namely, the human versus zombie biopoliticized divide. Of course, as a number of commentators have astutely pointed out, it is precisely the zombie genre that illuminates for us the inextricability between racial and biopolitical violence; that, contrary to what Mark Spitz would believe, the apocalypse hardly forces us to choose between either/or, and instead, reveals precisely the contingency between the both of them.

In a commendable effort to link together the biopolitical to the racial—and to rectify the elision of racial analyses within the anti-capitalist-oriented strain of zombie scholarship—critics have argued that “the biopolitical origins of the zombie imaginary” forces a contention with the “historical and ongoing colonial violence of which the zombie has always ever been only the thinnest sublimation” (433). To put it concisely, this strand of zombie critique mines how “[z]ombie apocalypses ... repackage the violence of colonial race war in a form that is ideologically safer” (439) in order to ultimately posit that, in such a generic context, the biopolitical *is* racial. Although a welcome corrective, the nature of the “is,” that is, the exact relationship between biopolitical and racial violence begins to unravel under pressure. The slippage between the two is made clear by how critical discourse ambivalently characterizes their relationship to one another, even within the internal logic of their respective arguments. Consider Gerry Canavan’s claim, arising from the assertion that zombies are self-evidently kill-able targets, “To shift briefly into a biopolitical register, this is a hyperreal metaphorization of the

racial logic that enforces modernity's distinction between that mode of "civilized" living native to the political subject and *zoë*, bare life" (437). Or: "Here again we find the zombies allegorizing the racial forms of exclusion and extermination that already surround us" (442). In another instance, Jessica Hurley argues, "The zombie has become an everyday locus of the operations of biopower in contemporary culture ... [a]nd these operations are always constructed around racial distinctions" (311). And then further on in her essay: "Biopower operates through a racial logic that is fundamentally synchronic and reliant on a regime of visibility: no matter the complexities of racial formation over time, or the impossibility of locating an essentialized "race" in physical markers such as skin tone or eye shape, a biopolitical regime insists that, like the shambling zombie, we know racial difference when we see it" (329). Taken together, we can conclude variously: the biopolitical distinction between life and death "metaphorizes" or "allegorizes" racial and colonial logics of extermination; racial violence can "shift" into a "biopolitical register"; racial distinctions ground operations of biopower; racial logics are the medium through which biopower operates; biopolitical regimes deploy race in order to enforce visible differences. Without belabouring the point any further, the question arises: So which is it? Is biopolitical extermination an allegory for racial and colonial logics, or is it the opposite? Is racial violence an extension or function of biopolitics, or is it the other way around? Is one the primary grounding of the other? Or are they two different "versions" of the same logic? It seems to me that the confusing slippage between biopolitics and racism within zombie critique is perhaps inherited from the very theoretical origins of biopower and biopolitics.

As Alexander Weheliye persuasively argues in *Habeas Viscus*, his critical intervention in studies of biopower and biopolitics via black feminist theory, "bare life and biopolitics discourse aspires to transcend racialization via recourse to absolute biological matter that no longer allows

for portioning of humanity or locating certain forms of racism in an unidentified elsewhere” (4).

In closely reading Foucault’s argument in *Society Must Be Defended*, Weheliye explicates:

Because Foucault fails to probe the decidedly undemonic ground of his argument, he uncritically embraces an ontological differentiation between ethnic racism and biopolitical racism, leaving the door open for the naturalization of racial categories and the existence of a biological sphere that is not always already subject to ethnic racism. ... Put bluntly, there exists no significant difference between ethnic and biological racism in the way Foucault imagines ... Nevertheless, it appears as if Foucault can only authenticate the uniqueness and novelty of European biopolitical racism by conjuring the antithetical spirits of racisms always already situated in a primitive elsewhere. (59-60)

Two particularly salient points from Weheliye’s critique bears emphasizing. First, Foucauldian biopolitical discourse aims to distinguish between two different modes of racism: ethnic and biological, when in fact they are one and the same. Second, this impulse toward differentiation and prioritization (of European biopolitical racism over “primitive” forms of racism that exist “back then” and “over there”) simultaneously results in the conflation between biopoliticization and racialization as well as the transcendence of the latter by the former. To put it simply, bare life and biopolitical discourse inadvertently posits a “more” fundamental and biologically-inflected substrate that subsumes and thus takes precedence over technologies of racism or racial differentiation in the dispensation of violence under biopolitical regimes. Given the ambiguous framing of race in Foucault’s originary theorization of biopower and biopolitics, it is perhaps not so surprising that zombie critical discourse evinces similar confusions when theorizing the relationship between racial violence and biopolitical extermination. In attempting to link them together, in suggesting that zombie biopolitics is racism in another register (or in allegory, or in operation, etc.), biopolitical critiques of the zombie conflate the two, resulting in the conceptual displacement race from the equation. Thus, race is now doubly erased in the critical context of the zombie genre, for biopolitical critique aims to recuperate racial differentiation from its allegorization or particularization (as one kind of difference easily substituted by another) by

insisting on its primacy as the politicized division of biological matter into different forms of life (*bios* vs. *zoe*, living vs. un-dead, securitized vs. kill-able, etc.). However, in doing so, it inadvertently envisions “an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization” (4), as if racial difference constitutes social and political ascriptions to self-evident biological categories (e.g. bare life) instead of the ontological grounding that enables the very politicization of the biological in the first place (the emergence of life itself).

II. The Racial Ontology of Flesh

If the problems of both racial allegory and biopolitics share a tendency to misconstrue the enduring quality of racial difference, either through an essentialism that reduces (overt materialization) and ultimately undermines its own object (the loss of specificity that renders it substitutable for another difference) *or* through recourse to an ontologically anterior biological zone, then what seems to be needed is an account of racialization that approximates an anti-essentialist ontology. That is, we require an account of race that can illuminate how pervasively it saturates the grounding of the human and the forms of biological life that attend it while resisting the reductive equivocation of racial difference into fixed and essentialized signs. From here, I contend that *Zone One* provides an anti-essentialist ontological framework of racial difference by casting flesh as a particularly illuminating category of racialization. As I have already demonstrated, Mark Spitz’s minor revelation of blackness offers an untenable dichotomy for reading for race in the novel: either we allegorize the zombies as the repressed figures of blackness that return to haunt or we biopoliticize them as forms of biological life that transcend previous racial orders. Thus, instead of focusing on the racial identity of either Mark Spitz or the zombies, I turn to a third category that appears in the novel.

As an innovative spin on the genre, Whitehead offers a unique invention in the form of the “stragglers,” a specific kind of zombie in the novel distinguished from the more terrifying conventional monstrosities—known as “skels”—that are ceaselessly driven by their hunger for human flesh such that “[c]ut off their feet, chop off their legs, and they’d gnash the air as they heaved themselves forward by their splintered fingernails, looking for some ankle action” (Whitehead 60). In striking contrast, the “aberrant one percent” stragglers, instead of lurching around and eating humans, “did not move, and that’s what made them a suitable objective for civilian units. They were a succession of imponderable tableaux, the malfunctioning stragglers and the places they chose to haunt throughout the Zone and beyond. An army of mannequins, limbs adjusted by an inscrutable hand” (60). As the novel explains, the stragglers are usually found frozen in the most quotidian of acts and settings, such as “[s]lipping a disc into the game machine. Crotch-down on the yoga mat. Spooning bran from a bowl. Surfing the dead web. Yawning. Stretching. Flossing. Wound down and alone in their habitat” (62). In other words, alarmingly human, for all intents and purposes. As the novel concisely puts it, “Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment” (62). If the “standard-issue” (60) skel zombies “mark the demarcation between life (that is worth living) and unlife (that needs killing)” (Canavan 433), then the “malfunctioning stragglers” elide and frustrate such a neat division between life and its antithesis. The comparison of the stragglers to “mannequins” is especially telling in this case, for as anthropomorphized objects or simulations³—synthetic materials fashioned into a legibly human form—they would seem to occupy a thoroughly ambivalent category between human life (that requires preservation) and nonhuman un-life (that requires elimination).

³ A note here that mannequins are often called upon to perform *as* human substitutes; for example, when teaching CPR or at nuclear testing sites.

As further evidence for the stragglers' liminal positionality between human and un-dead, Mark Spitz offers the telling observation that he "had noticed on numerous occasions that while the regular skels got referred to as *it*, the stragglers were awarded male and female pronouns, and he wondered what that meant" (Whitehead 102). The matrix of abjected flesh, gendering, and human-ization through which the stragglers take form recalls Hortense Spillers influential formulation of "female flesh 'ungendered'" (68) as an ontological condition produced through the captivity and enslavement of African subjects in the New World. As Spillers argues, the trans-Atlantic slave trade constituted a "*theft of the body*" so "willful and violent" that under such conditions "we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*" (67). Elaborating further on the "profitable 'atomizing'" of the captive body, as carried out through torture, mutilation, and dismemberment inflicted on flesh, Spillers writes: "But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (67). For Spillers, the violent protocols of enslavement regard and transform the captive body into bare, undifferentiated flesh, bereft of social conceptualizations such as gendering. Thus, in the context of the stragglers, their proximity to human-ness—and conversely, distance from dehumanized and dead object status ("*it*")—is indexed by their being "awarded male and female pronouns."

However, as Saidiya Hartman crucially reveals, the "gift" of humanity can be a fraught if not outrightly painful one. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman poses the question, "However, suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it?" (5). In addition, she reinforces her

interest in “the ways that the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind, and oppress” (5). Elaborating on Hartman’s claims, Zakiyyah Jackson further clarifies, “Too often, our conception of anti-blackness is defined by the specter of ‘denied humanity,’ ‘dehumanization,’ or ‘exclusion,’ yet, as Saidiya Hartman has identified ... the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved’s humanity rather than the denial of it. Thus, humanization is not an antidote to slavery’s violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human” (96). Combining Hartman’s and Jackson’s insights that proffering the “gift” of humanity can serve to further oppress rather than liberate by remoulding the ontological conditions of human-ness sheds light on Mark Spitz’s observation of the differential forms of torture that skels and stragglers are subjected to by the humans tasked with their disposal in the post-apocalyptic wasteland:

Skel mutilation was another popular amusement ... A neutralized skel was a perfect stage for one’s sadism, whether you were a dabbler, merely taking your time in terminating the thing before you, pruning a finger here or an ear there ...

The stragglers posed for a picture and never moved again, trapped in a snapshot of their lives. In their paralysis, they invited a more perplexing variety of abuse. One might draw a Hitler mustache on one, or jab a sponsor cigarette between a straggler’s lips. Administer a wedgie. They didn’t flinch. They took it. And then they were deactivated—beheaded or got their brains blown out. (Whitehead 102)

The language that suffuses the distinction between skels and stragglers repeatedly reaffirms the former’s dehumanization and the latter’s more ambivalent positionality. While the mutilation of the more traditional zombie might constitute a stage for playing out one’s sadistic fantasies, their dehumanized and objectified status is never in question. That the field of “interaction” between humans and skels is one thoroughly structured by the latter’s “termination” reinforces their “thing-ness.” In correspondence, the forms of sadism inflicted upon the skels are carried out by the “detachment” of body parts (“pruning a finger here or an ear there”), manifesting a logic of elimination, reduction, or subtraction. However, as Mark Spitz points out, for the gendered and

human-ized stragglers, it is precisely their state of de-animation or inanimacy (“in their paralysis”) that paradoxically renders them susceptible to “a more perplexing variety of abuse.”

As Mel Chen importantly reminds us, animacy and human-ness are not necessarily synonymous because the production of the latter crucially depends on “leaky” reconfigurations of the former. In *Animacies*, Chen argues that the concept of animacy—a set of notions designating “a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness” (2)—serves to “theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness” (3). According to Chen, the ordering of an animacy hierarchy, into which inanimate objects, plants, nonhuman animals, and humans are placed, is a matter of biopolitical governance (*Animacies* 30). Under such governance, dehumanization designates a doubled process: sometimes, “the *removal* of qualities especially cherished as human; at other times, ... the more active *making* of an object” (43). Therefore, dehumanization can take place through either the *reduction* of animacy or a *re-distribution* of animacy, such that “humans are blended with objects” (40), and transmogrified, along the animacy hierarchy. If, in Chen’s account, dehumanization is disarticulated from inanimacy—or rather, the reduction of human qualities of animacy may produce alternate forms and reconfigurations of animacies—then the stragglers are not merely de-humanized (in the same way the skels are) through their paralysis, but more accurately, *re-humanized*, rendered an alchemized condition of human-ness *and* something else/other; in short, an other *kind* of human.

That the varieties of abuse the stragglers are subjected to reside in the realm of the quotidian, the humorous, the minor spectacle (rather than grotesquely spectacular) draws attention to what Hartman reveals as “the convergence of terror and enjoyment” that characterizes the affective life of chattel slavery. As Hartman elaborates, “From the vantage point of the everyday relations of slavery, enjoyment, broadly speaking, defined the parameters

of racial relations” in the sense that “to take delight in, to use, and to possess are inextricably linked” (*Scenes* 23). Under chattel slavery, “enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the possession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body” (Hartman, *Scenes* 26). It is precisely because the “figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked” that the “economy of enjoyment” is inextricably founded on the “elasticity of blackness” (25-6). Hartman’s theorization of black racialization as predicated less on an exclusive calculus of suffering, repression, and elimination (“pruning”) than on economies of enjoyment, incitement, and fungibility can be brought to bear on the “more perplexing variety of abuse” inflicted on the stragglers. Drawing a mustache, simulating smoking, “administering” a wedgie on and to those inert figures belong in the realm of the “innocent amusements” that require and index the infinite capacities of enslaved bodies to “invite” and “take it” without flinching. Put another way, the violence of captivity and possession does not exclusively inhere in the removal or excision of flesh but rather, its rendering into infinitely malleable matter.

Further developing the concept of “elasticity,” that is, the infinitely figurative capacities of enslaved subjectivities, which the violations of slavery both depended on and produced, Jackson contends, “Arguably, plasticization is the fundamental violation of enslavement: not any one particular form of violence—animalization or objectification, for instance—but rather coerced formlessness as a mode of domination and the *unheimlich* existence that is its result” (117). Extending her previous argument via Hartman regarding the particular *kind* of human that slavery produces, Jackson forcefully argues, “*Slavery’s technologies were not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity*” (117). Thus, according to Jackson:

[S]lavery's violence is not the reduction of humans to the rank of animals but rather the transmogrification of the black(ened)'s being. More accurately, the black body, *in its humanity*, is turned into a form of infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, a plastic upon which projects of humanization *and* animalization rest. This work is accomplished by the ontological position of blackness not as a sociological subjectivity or identity but as a matrix for forms of modern subjecthood and subjectivity.” (127)

The notion of blackness as constituting an ontological condition of plasticity for forms of modern subjecthood and subjectivity resonates with Weheliye's theorization of “racializing assemblages.” In critiquing bare life and biopolitics discourse for a tendency “to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization,” Weheliye proposes “racializing assemblages” as a framework for conceptualizing “race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (4). Taken together, Jackson's conception of black racialization as ontological plasticization and Weheliye's racializing assemblages as disciplining humanity into various degrees of human-ness serve to exceed the binary of particularity versus universalism, respectively attached to the allegorical and biopolitical accounts of racialization discussed in the previous section. Social theories of racial formation conventionally posit racialization as a technology for marking and making sense of (i.e. interpreting) biological distinctions by ascribing social and political meanings to them, such as Foucault's definition of racism as “primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die” (*SMBD* 254). However, as the problematic of racial allegorization raises, grounding racialization in an interpretive logic of intensification (essentializing biological classifications, introducing a break between life and death, etc.) often results in the elision of the very object of representation (race). Allegories proliferate and one kind of difference becomes too-easily substituted for another. Instead, Jackson and Weheliye propose conceptualizing racialization as a technology for producing

different kinds of human-ness. In this sense, racialization functions as a figurative capacity (to echo Hartman again) that produces and contours specific forms of life.

In the context of *Zone One* then, the stragglers, as a site through which flesh becomes plasticized, condense a logic of racialization for the production of a particular *kind* of human life and subjectivity. As I have argued, it is the stragglers' *simultaneous* inanimacy *and* proximity to human-ness—indexed by their gendering—that situates them within an economy of enjoyment, which, in turn, (re)produces them as black racialized humans, one characterized by infinite malleability and plasticity. Put another way, the precise logic or matrix of racialization, as articulated by the stragglers, unfolds through a “de-animating re-humanization,” by which racial subjectivity denotes a plastic form of life paradoxically animated by an inexhaustible receptivity. The concatenations of (in)animacy, plasticization of flesh, and (re)humanization through which the stragglers take form departs from the conventional zombie allegorization of racial difference that I previously critiqued. In this synecdochal reading, race is not merely an identificatory mechanism for introducing or marking a break in human life, and thus, a form of differentiation that can be substituted for another. Instead, racialization constitutes a technology for moulding life itself into differently human-ized forms.

III. Breaking Habit: The Affective World of Racial Mediocrity

What, then, do we make of the fact that it is consistently the stragglers to which Mark Spitz himself bears a threatening resemblance? Throughout his time in the post-apocalyptic wasteland, it is not the skels into which Mark Spitz fearfully imagines himself transforming, but the stragglers. As his temporary lover during his travails, Mim, exhorts him in response to his hopelessness for continuing on, ““Have to keep on moving, honey. You stay in one spot, you’re just another straggler”” (Whitehead 247). In another instance, when he stumbles upon a chain

restaurant that he often frequented with his family as a child, he realizes, “[h]e was a ghost. A straggler” (192). Contemplating his nostalgia for the uniform familiarity of the different locations in the franchise, Mark Spitz entertains the idea that, if turned into a zombie, he might return to haunt the restaurant, “The standard-issue skel possessed no room for improvisation, of course. ... But what kind of straggler would he make? What did he love, what place had been important to him? ... Maybe he’d come here” (192). In “A Zombie Manifesto,” Lauro and Embry point out, “Whereas the vampire and even the intangible ghost retain their mental faculties, and the werewolf may become irrational, bestial only part of time, only the zombie has completely lost its mind, becoming a blank—animate, but wholly devoid of consciousness” (89). Thus, unlike its monstrous kin, the zombie presents a unique challenge for the possibility of material and cognitive identification with them. It makes sense then that, as Mark Spitz readily admits, the speculative exercise of imagining himself as a “standard” zombie leaves “no room for improvisation.” If it is the stragglers rather than skels—posing as both dangerous threat and enticing possibility—into whom he regularly fantasizes about transforming, then they are also the very figures to whom he bears the closest kinship and resemblance.

The allusion to a relationship of correspondence or equivalence between Mark Spitz and the stragglers serves to recast the former’s defining characteristic of mediocrity in a new light. As Mark Spitz is described, “He was a thorough, inveterate B. ... He studied for hours and there it waited for him, circled in red ink, oddly welcoming, silently forgiving. Or he refused to open his books and gorged instead on a prime-time platter of sitcoms: he’d still get a B. It was a little play he performed each week and he hit his marks instinctively, stalking the boards of mediocrity” (Whitehead 69-70). Indeed, Mark Spitz’s aptitude for the “well-executed muddle” (11) is precisely what imbues him with the qualities and skills for surviving the end of the world

in an utterly inglorious manner, approximating that of a “seemingly unsnuffable human cockroach[...]" (39). Given that Mark Spitz is a double for not the skel zombies but the stragglers, his paradoxically exceptional unexceptionality can be recast as the affective and phenomenological equivalence of the racial logic condensed in and manifested by the latter. For example, the description of Mark Spitz’s talent for mediocrity is suffused with language that presents a conflicting account of animacy:

He’d never had trouble with the American checklist, having successfully executed all the hurdles of his life’s stages, from preschool to junior high to college, with unwavering competence and nary a wobble into exceptionality or failure. He possessed a strange facility for the mandatory. ... He nailed milestone after developmental milestone, as if every twitch were coached. ... He was their *typical*, he was their *most*, he was their *average* ... (10-11)

The paradox of Mark Spitz’s mediocrity, as a form of exceptional unexceptionalism in being the “most” “typical,” is relayed through oxymoronic structures of animacy, mobility, and movement by which he performs it. He “executes” hurdles “unwaveringly,” he does not “wobble” into either success or failure, and he “nails” milestones with a “twitch” that is habitual (“trained”). Perhaps most telling of all, in being described as “a strange facility for the mandatory,” his mediocrity is imbued with an uncanny quality of unerring repetition, where the connotation of ability provided by “facility” is immediately undermined by the de-animating and in-agentic effects of compulsion, as associated with “mandatory.” Taken together, the ambivalent modes of animation denoted by “unwavering execution,” “wobble,” and “twitch” relegate them to a state that resides somewhere between inertia and dynamism. The suffusion of Mark Spitz’s mediocrity with recursive iterations of ambiguous animacy serves to further reinforce his resemblance to and doubling of the stragglers’ racialized condition of paralyzed plasticity.

To propose Mark Spitz’s mediocrity as an affective and phenomenological condition, I turn to Sara Ahmed’s work on “habit.” In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that since habit

“refers to dispositions, and tendencies, acquired by the frequent repetition of an act” (130), the habitual constitutes a paradox in that it performs actions repeatedly and therefore “orients” us “toward” something, but that at the same time, through its very repetition congeals into a perceived given-ness that seems to “trail behind” the very action as an after-thought. Under such a framework, whiteness can be conceptualized as a “bad habit” (129):

White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’ actions: they do not get “stressed” in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness goes “unnoticed.” ... Whiteness lags behind such bodies. ... By not having to encounter being white as an obstacle, given that whiteness is “in line” with what is already given, bodies that pass as white move easily, and this motility is extended by what they move toward. (132)

This critical account of habit as a repetitive movement both oriented toward and trailing behind an action provides a useful framework for recontextualizing the paradox of mediocrity. As Ahmed points out, the habitual is constituted through the “stress” of actions that paradoxically renders it effortless, as already given or predetermined. In other words, a repetition of movements that somehow appears to be a condition of being at rest. In regards to whiteness, the phenomenology of habit illuminates the paradoxical condition of how being “in line” with what is already given, in turn, extends the ease and trajectory of movement. To reframe Whitehead through Ahmed, we can see how the ambiguous motility of mediocrity casts it as a kind of “bad habit.” As we gather from Mark Spitz, his mediocrity lies “in wait for him” regardless of his intentional efforts, which, in turn, helps him to “hit his marks instinctively.” In this sense, mediocrity is a habit toward which his body is oriented (in line with) and simultaneously that which lags or trails behind him (extending the line). Furthermore, the ambiguous (in)animacy of the habitual, as a series of animated actions that, in their repetition, congeals into inertia (lies in wait for him) echoes the oxymoronic structure of mediocrity’s de-animating and in-agentic movements, as a repertoire of “wobbles” and “twitches.”

If Mark Spitz's mediocrity constitutes an affective and phenomenological condition—one aligned with “bad habit”—then it is, at the same time, thoroughly racialized through its relationship of correspondence with the stragglers' plasticized inanimacy. In order to further limn the racial logic by which mediocrity functions, it would be instructive to turn to a comparative account of how Mark Spitz and his friend, Gary, are differentially transformed by the world's ending. If it is commonplace to observe that capitalism is a broken system, a perversion of the “natural order,” then the zombie genre often levels such an anti-capitalist critique through recourse to a neo-Darwinian discourse of “survival of the un-fittest.” Under the conditions of the zombie apocalypse, it is those very qualities and skills cultivated by a lifetime of middle-class existence that are most unsuited for surviving an anarchic wasteland in which life has been stripped bare of its material comforts. Conversely, it is often those very individuals perceived to be “dysfunctional” under a capitalist order who end up functioning perfectly, and indeed, thriving, in a zombie apocalypse. In *Zone One*, the character who most aptly embodies such an anti-capitalist critique of bourgeois dysfunction is Gary, who refuses to distinguish between the zombies and those who have been killed by them:

Gary made no such distinction; with few exceptions, they were equally detestable. The dead had paid their mortgages on time ... The dead had graduated with admirable GPAs, configured monthly contributions to worthy causes, judiciously apportioned their 401(k)s across diverse sectors according to the wisdom of their dead licensed financial advisers ... In short, they had been honed and trained so thoroughly by that extinguished world that they were doomed in this new one. Gary was unmoved. From the man's description of his life before, the portrait Mark Spitz gathered was of a misfit befuddled and banished by the signs and systems of straight life. Then came Last Night, transforming them all. In Gary's case, latent talents announced themselves. He prided himself on how effortlessly he had grasped and mastered the new rules, as if he had waited for the introduction of hell his whole life. (31)

It is telling that the “straight life” that so eluded Gary before the apocalypse is one thoroughly structured by capital and financialization. It is precisely the dead population's “honing” and

“training” in “useless” financial and monetary aptitude that so thoroughly dooms them in a world inverted and turned upside down, in which the “latent talents” required to survive it were those “banished” under systems of capitalism.

Of particular note here in regards to Gary’s “metamorphosis” is the inverted structure of temporality that it invokes and substantiates, as evidenced by Mark Spitz’s perception that the former “had waited for the introduction of hell his whole life.” To wait in anticipation for (straight) life to end in order to begin “really living” is to refuse the linear temporality of a “natural” life-cycle that commences at birth and concludes with death. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman argues that queer temporality counters chrononormativity and chronobiopolitics, which describes processes of population management that are carried out by synchronizing individual bodies “not only with one another but also with larger temporal schemae” such that they “experience belonging itself as natural” (4). In turn, “failures or refusals to inhabit middle- and upper-middle-class habitus” can be figured as queer temporalities because they “appear as, precisely, asynchrony, or time out of joint” (Freeman 19). Taking a cue from Freeman, we might say that Gary, in his straight life, appears “asynchronous and out of joint” with the chrononormativity of “mortgages paid on time,” institutionalized “graduations,” and “monthly contributions,” all of which serve to naturalize the rhythms of capitalism as somatic experiences of belonging (3). Thus, the transformative reversal induced by *Last Night*, by which he reveals himself as having been latently synchronized to the new world all along, constitutes a queer temporality that exposes and denaturalizes the routines of capitalism. Such a queer temporality, in Gary’s case, is one characterized by a mode of suspended inversion—that is, to mark and pass time (waited his whole life) in order to reach not life’s end but precisely its very beginning.

Is not this queer structure of temporality opposed exactly to the one of racial obsolescence with which I began the chapter? Recall that Mark Spitz's minor and late revelation posits black racial difference as paradoxically emerging only through its own imagined vanishment. Thus, we might say that whereas blackness is retrospective in temporal structure, substantiated always after the fact (in its absence), queer anti-capitalism appears to be engendered prospectively, perpetually in anticipation of and forward-looking to its own beginning. Correspondingly, then, the temporal logic evinced by Mark Spitz's Last Night transformation is structurally different from that of Gary's. In contrast to Gary's expression of latent talents, Mark Spitz remains, by and large, utterly unchanged by the apocalypse:

This was his world now, in all its sublime crumminess, where intellect and ingenuity and talent were as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity. ... Beauty could not thrive, and the awful was too commonplace to be of consequence. Only in the middle was there safety. ... He was a mediocre man. He had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect. He asked himself: How can I die? I was always like this. Now I am more me. (Whitehead 182-3)

The paradox here is that Mark Spitz's eschatological "transformation" is decidedly not one: his life prior to the apocalypse would appear neatly identical to the one after the world's end. In short, Mark Spitz thwarts the very logic of apocalypse. As he affirms, "I was always like this. Now I am more me." Tellingly, it is specifically his mediocrity that renders Mark Spitz ineligible for the structure of inversion of Gary's Last Night revelation, upon which a queer temporal critique of capitalism depends. As I contended earlier, Mark Spitz's mediocrity constitutes a racialized affective and phenomenological condition of ambiguous (in)animacy. However, here, Mark Spitz's recognition that it is not himself who is transformed into mediocrity, but rather, the world ("Now the world was mediocre") raises the possibility of how racialized affect and phenomenology might constitute environmental conditions external to the individuated subject.

If the Last Night conversion into “middle-ness” inheres not in Mark Spitz himself but is projected outward to everyone and everything surrounding him, then such a process also confirms and clarifies his own enduring mediocrity (“I am more me”). Thus, what Last Night entails is in fact a racialization of the worldly structural conditions around Mark Spitz, which, in turn, further corroborates his own racialized being. For racial subjects—in contrast to, say, the victims of capitalism (even as one can, of course, occupy both positions simultaneously)—the end of the world is experienced less as an inheritance (of their latent birthright, as in the case of Gary), but rather as an anticlimactic confirmation or externalization of what has been inside them, that is, constitutive, all along. Put another way, the “end times” have always been one’s own time, such is the condition of precisely racial (identity’s) obsolescence. Thus, the explicit revelation of Mark Spitz’s racial identity to Gary is a red herring. The moment of “revelation” simply confirms what has been true all along: Mark Spitz’s racial difference constitutes an affective and phenomenological condition that precedes, and remains long after, its explicit identification, which, in turn, illuminates how racialization inheres as a technology for producing life—in its (re)human-ized forms—as we know it.

From here I conclude by turning to the novel’s end, that is, in what follows after Mark Spitz’s “reveal,” in order to consider the racial excesses, and potential, of genre explored by *Zone One*. In the novel’s conclusion, as Mark Spitz returns to Fort Wonton following Gary’s death, he witnesses the collapse of the newly-erected wall protecting the cleared sections of the city from the terrifying zombie horde beyond its borders. The vision of the aggregated zombies that he observes breaching and “reclaiming” Zone One is the perverse nightmare of a multicultural and postracial futurity, as “[e]very race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. As it had been before, per the myth of this melting-

pot city” (303). However, such a vision of the dead re-imagined as a multiracial citizenry is immediately undermined by the assertion, “Now they were mostly mouths and fingers, fingers for extracting entrails from soft cavities, and mouths to rend and devour in pieces the distinct human faces they captured, that these faces might become less distinct, de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh, rendered anonymous like them, the dead” (303-4). In the nightmarish vision of the zombie horde that overwhelms Zone One, we can discern precisely the tension between the allegorization and biopoliticization of racial difference staged throughout the novel.

On the one hand, the allusion to a “melting-pot” of classed, cultural, and racial pluralities raises the possibility of the zombie horde as walking allegories of the very differences being represented (and melted together). Thus, their recapture of the city signifies their inability to stay dead and away, how such various iterations of difference, whether class, culture, or race, can only be temporarily banished, but always returns, in the last, to devour those that refuse to recognize them. On the other hand, the subsequent anonymizing of the zombie horde simultaneously suggests a common biopoliticized imperative that binds and re-organizes their differences (into “a single Us now, reviling a single Them”). The identities that the dead might have held in life give way to indistinct mouths and fingers or “de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh,” signalling the recourse to an anterior biological substrate that enfolds and takes precedence over social frames of differentiation. In the face of such a threat, the political task ahead is to attend to life’s precarity and flesh’s woundings that predispose and consign targetted populations to death. Whether allegorical or biopolitical, the return of the zombie horde nonetheless suggests a reversion to genre, that the novel has successfully bound the surplus of racial difference articulated earlier and faithfully snapped back into proper form.

However, the enduring lesson imparted by the novel reminds us that instead of focusing on the contents of the differences expressed (what particular identity the zombies represent or what “really” lies beneath racial division), we would do better to pay attention to the forms they take (plastic, in/animate, retrospective). In this vein, it is Mark Spitz’s somatic and sensorial response to Zone One’s collapse that may be more telling than the occurrence itself:

He was smiling because he hadn’t felt this alive in months. Ever since he left the fortune-teller’s, as the kinetics of the artillery hammered through his boots, shuddered into his bones, and sought synchrony with his heart’s thump, he’d entered a state of tremulous euphoria. He was an old tenement radiator sheathed in chipped paint, knocking and whistling in the corner as it filled with steam heat. The sensation peaked the instant the wall collapsed and, in its ebb, he was the owner of a woeful recognition: It was not the dead that passed through the barrier but the wasteland itself, the territory he had kept at bay since the farmhouse. It embraced him; he slid inside it. (311-2)

That Mark Spitz is smiling not out of gladness or joy, but rather, due to the sensorial experience of “live-ness” (“he hadn’t felt this alive in months”) signifies that his response to the course of events is less emotional than it is affective.⁴ More importantly, the affect, as a range of liveliness, registered here manifests precisely through the ambiguous (in)animacies that similarly characterize his mediocrity. The references of “shudders” and “tremors” once again invoke minor movements that reside in an ambivalently animated state between involuntary effect and autonomous action. The return to affect and sensation is perhaps most crystallized in the reigning comparison of Mark Spitz to a “knocking and whistling” steam-filled radiator. The recurrence here of a diffuse and ephemeral form of liveliness recalls the roiling animacy (“peaking” and “ebbing”) of stragglerhood, that is, the plasticization of flesh through their very paralysis. Furthermore, the circuiting of human sensations through machinic agency reinforces the

⁴ As Brian Massumi argues in *Parables for the Virtual*, “the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image’s effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. ... What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity” (24).

stragglers' racial logic of de-animating re-humanization, by which a different kind of human is produced by biological and sensorial reduction.

Thus, the re-animation of the zombies at the novel's end that we thought we had already laid to rest, instead of signalling the generic binding of race's surplus beyond either allegory or biopoliticization, indexes a far more disturbing prospect. This prospect is one which reverses a chrononormative logic, such that it is precisely the temporal schemae of a zombie-fied world that seeks to be synchronized to racialized subjectivity ("sought synchrony with his heart's thump") rather than the other way around. The result is a radical dissolution of the boundary between subject and environment, such that racialization circulates back and forth between one and the other ("It embraced him; he slid inside it."). Paradoxically, then, formlessness, in lagging behind racial difference, might precisely be what moves us toward its forms.

CHAPTER TWO

Racial Injury and Feminist Phenomenology

in Susan Choi's *American Woman*

Jenny Shimada, the Japanese American protagonist of Susan Choi's novel *American Woman*, is a troubling racial subject. Given that the conventional role of the Asian American literary character is to be “bad”—that is, vocally resistant against the oppressions of capitalism and racism—in order to reverse the model minority stereotype of compliance with structural injustice, Jenny is troubling precisely because she fails to trouble. Consider a telling moment from the text in which Jenny is confronted with the racist stereotypes of a junkyard owner:

The man props up the hood and asks where Jenny's from. She says, randomly, “Massachusetts.”

“I meant originally.”

She knows it's no use to tell him she was born in this country. “Japan,” she says. This satisfies him. (274)

Scenes in which Asian American protagonists are asked where they are “really from” in order to highlight their permanent “foreigner” status are considered *de rigueur* in Asian American literature for their tendency to “reveal both author and character's politics in the response—Ironic? Abject? Humorous? Outraged?” (Chu 541). If the exchange above can be read as emblematic of the novel's politics, then what are we to make of the seeming *lack of politics* in Jenny's apathy toward resisting the man's imputation of the “foreigner” stereotype upon her? Her resignation (“She knows it's no use”) to the racist encounter is disturbing because it thwarts the “proper” politics of contestation, resistance, or opposition that we have come to expect from the Asian American “bad subject” (Nguyen 144). However, beyond its merely disappointing or frustrating *contents* for lacking an oppositional politics, the *form* of the scene also raises a host of

disturbing questions. Note the terseness with which Jenny's interior state is described. We move very (too?) quickly from Jenny's enigmatic "know[ing] it's no use" to her answer ("Japan"). Thus, not only are we left without a set of politics, we are also missing an entire range of affects here. We have little sense of how Jenny feels (boredom or exhaustion? impatience or despair?), what she thinks (of the man's perception of her or her own experiences of this kind of racist stereotyping), and therefore, *who*, as a political subject, she is in relation to her racial interpellation. Taken together then, the mystery, signalled both thematically and formally by the scene, is precisely one of a missing "identity politics," both the question of the (non)politics of identity as well as that of (non)identity's claim to politics.¹

To be more accurate, the enigma of identity politics that preoccupies the novel is not merely the absence of both terms—although that certainly holds true—but rather, one that revolves around the perplexing nature of the relationship between the two. As recent Asian American literary criticism has pointed out, critics of the field have been firmly conditioned to theorize race and racial subjectivity by the assumption that an identity of difference "naturally" extends out into, or functions as the basis of, a politics of resistance. However, beginning with Viet Nguyen's diagnosis that the radical origins of the cultural movement of the late 1960s (out of which emerged the institutionalization of Asian American studies) has given way to an unstable body politic that is not only "demographically" but more importantly "also ideologically

¹ In Patricia Chu's close reading of this same scene, she points out that Jenny's response "is not minstrelsy, playing a stereotype ironically, cleverly, acquiescently, or vengefully—a scenario in which only someone who believes the stereotype could be defrauded, for instance. The man does not *have* to believe no Asians are Americans in order for them to escape notice" (541). In line with my reading of Jenny's thwarted or "troubling" affects, Chu contends, "The traditional ethnic assertion of triumphant humanity has become something of a non sequiter or a danger rather than a political culmination" (541). However, whereas Chu argues that the novel's articulation of post-identity serves to return to "civic, economic, and social identities the complex racial categorizations that seem(ed) not to be 'identity politics' but which were and are biopolitical, all along" (551), I conceptualize Choi's post-identity turn as a phenomenological excavation of 1970's Women's Liberation as a site that offers the potential for re-imagining alternative formations to liberal subjectivity.

diverse” (9), Asian American identity has undergone a “crisis of representation” (Nguyen 8). As I am suggesting, such representational crisis is aptly illuminated by Choi’s rendering of the *de rigueur* scene of *American Woman*. Precisely because Jenny responds to the racist encounter without defiance or dissent (something along the lines of “Well, where are *your* ancestors from?”), we end up struggling to “read” her legibly at all, both politically and subjectively. Therefore, the absence of ideological coherence (resistant opposition), as conventionally provided through the literary device of interiority, results in a lack of representation altogether.

In response to Nguyen’s diagnosis, critics have proposed different strategies for approaching the identity crisis of Asian American representation. Kandice Chuh suggests that rather than anxiously shoring up an essential subject in the name of “intelligibility,” Asian Americanist critique fully embrace “the internal instability of ‘Asian American’ identity” and reconstitute itself as a “subjectless discourse” (*Imagine Otherwise* 9). Further extending this line of critique, Christopher Lee argues that “the articulation and unraveling of identity ... [as] a dialectical process” can be traced through the discursive figure and operations of the “idealized critical subject” of Asian Americanist critique, which is “distinguished by its ability to reveal suppressed or neglected histories and experiences of domination, *knowledge that in turn becomes the basis for political contestation*” (11, emphasis added). The underlying aporia animating the formulation of the idealized critical subject is what pierces the very heart of *American Woman*’s critique of identity politics as well as its interrogation of the “post-identity” alternatives articulated through Chuh and Lee. For the novel, the mystery, and ultimate problem, of racial subjectivity consists precisely of the alchemical process by which “identity” somehow becomes transmuted into “politics.” How is it that for the racial subject, identity *is* politics? If the task of the idealized Asian American subject is “to integrate the production of critical knowledge with

an effective political praxis” (Lee 9), then what mechanisms undergird this mysteriously transformative work of “integration”? What, in other words, is the ontological nature of the naturalized and invisibilized fastening that so effectively sutures identity *to* politics?

Equal parts historical and speculative, Choi’s novel is a fictionalized retelling of the 1974 Patty Hearst kidnapping case from the perspective of a real-life minor character associated with the events, Wendy Yoshimura, a Japanese American artist and political activist. What makes Choi’s novel a particularly fitting site for critiquing and engaging with the Asian American “post-identity condition” (Lee) is its revisitation of the historical archives of identity-based political movements, as centred around class, race, and gender, respectively. As Jeffrey Toobin points out in his recent popular account of the high-profile case, *American Heiress*, the Patty Hearst kidnapping is about much more than Patty Hearst herself or the other individuals involved, for its unfolding functions as a microcosm for the simultaneously turbulent but very specific political climate of the 1970s (11). Choi seems to be of the same mind, for throughout the novel, Jenny (Yoshimura’s fictional counterpart) encounters, one by one (as satirically personified individual characters), each of the different political movements of the decade: from the antiwar New Left to Third World Internationalism to Women’s Liberation. However, rather than forming distinct or explicit attachments to any one specific set of politics, Jenny seems to simply drift, from movement to movement, consonant with her cross-country journey from the West Coast to the East and back again. What recurs throughout Jenny’s various “experiments” in political dissent is the ultimately unsatisfactory compromise between identity and politics that they each offer to the bind of racial subjectivity. Together then, they mark the irreducibility of race to either eschewing identity for politics (a “subjectless” positioning, as per Chuh) or politics for identity (an “idealized” subjectivity, per Lee).

To refer once again to Jenny's anti-climactic exchange with the junkyard owner: neither the identity nor politics of a resistant bad subject are viable lens through which Jenny's racial subjectivity might be interpreted. If such is the case, then *where* and *how* are we to locate the workings of race, especially when the interiorities of racialized characters remain frustratingly opaque? The scene therefore crystallizes the central question raised by the novel's critique of racial identity and its politicization: How do we discern the presence and operations of racial formation during its most (conventionally) illegible representational moments? In the remainder of this essay, I explore the stakes of this question through three broad moves. First, I investigate the novel's satirization of the radical left as grounded on what political theorist Wendy Brown terms "wounded attachments," that is, a politics constituted through its recursive identification with a state of injury. However, I contend that *American Woman* extends and critiques Brown's thesis by reconsidering the role of injury specifically in relation to racialized identity and its politics. For Choi, in the context of race, the politicization of identity is caught between on the one hand, its essentialization into "bad subjectivity," which fetishizes the role of injury to identity's formation, and on the other, a universal humanism that abstracts racial difference, which would deny the presence of injury altogether.

From here, I turn to the second broad stroke of my argument, which explores the possibility of an alternate model of politicized racial identity, one premised on neither the essentialist constitution of a *bad subject* who must be coerced into "speaking" or translating her injuries into political claims nor the suppression of injury in order to inhabit the unmarked position of the *universal human*. If the problem, in part, inheres in the overdetermination of racial subjectivity through its injuries—if the former can only attain legibility through the latter—then can there be a means of recognizing injury without the attendant pressure to

spectacularize it? What models of politicized identity might emerge from racial injuries that are rendered “minor” or “weak,” that is, present but not negligible? Writing against the representational grain, Choi designates the incarceration (internment) of Japanese/Japanese Americans during World War II as an exemplary site through which to explore the question of “minor injury” and its potential for political recognition, given the discursively fraught position wartime incarceration occupies as a historical event that is often “measured up” against the traumas of the holocaust or slavery. In aesthetically re-staging the Japanese internment as a form of “crisis ordinariness” (to borrow Lauren Berlant’s concept for tracking the quotidian contours of trauma), Choi also emphasizes both the limits of identitarian accounts for registering racial injury and the need for alternative methods of doing so.

In my third and final section, I suggest that the novel proposes a turn to the philosophy of phenomenology, as indexed by the stark contrast between the opacity of Jenny’s interior investments and the effusiveness with which the evocative and lush landscapes that she traverses is described throughout the narrative. I argue that such a shift in emphasis from internal to spatialized and proprioceptive modes of identification articulates an alternative means of forging a reciprocal relationship between racial subjectivity and its injuries, without the overdetermination of the former by the latter (the bad subject who reduces politics to identity) or the disavowal of the latter by the former (the universal human who abstracts identity from politics). Specifically, the novel does so by revisiting the nascent scene of 1970’s Women’s Liberation, as one that models a more perceptually expansive reframing of the relationship between identity and politics through its insistence on “the personal is the political.” I argue that Choi’s radical intervention into the history of the Patty Hearst case—rendered through the queer desire that she envisions between Jenny and Pauline (Hearst’s fictional counterpart)—illuminates

how the reconciliation between identity and politics that takes place on the terrain of feminist and queer intimacies is ultimately thwarted by the spectre of racial difference. However, I contend that it is precisely when the scene of racial injury—as literalized through the concentration (internment) camp Manzanar at the closing of the novel—fully realizes the unfulfilled promise of Women’s Liberation that the radical potential for an alternative model of politicized identity emerges, one that is grounded on “minor” forms of injury that register, and therefore, might function as the basis for claims to emancipatory justice, without reducing the racial subject to their mere articulation.

I. Neither Bad Subject nor Universal Human

In *American Woman*, Choi paints her representations of the revolutionary left with a very broad satirical stroke. The cadre (a fictionalization of the Symbionese Liberation Army)—whose demands, broadcasted after Pauline’s kidnapping, evoked “a sense of a panicked all-night study session, or a coffee-soaked chainsmokers’ mad argument that had collapsed in indiscriminate compromise” (Choi 81)—is clearly ridiculed and not to be taken seriously, even by other revolutionary organizations who had denounced this cadre’s actions as “a public mortification for the Left, an occasion for shirt rending and excommunication” (82). However, Choi conspicuously fails to offer any other nuanced representations of more “legitimate” or “serious” forms of radical left-wing movements. In fact, the other figures of political radicalism in the novel are either naïve students unprepared for the all-too-real consequences of living out these ideals (Sandy and Tom Milner) or self-aggrandizing entrepreneurs who seek to profit financially from a purely performative commitment to social justice (Rob Frazer). Even Jenny’s own commitment to radical politics, and violent resistance, is ultimately revealed to be empty at its heart. Toward the end of the novel, Jenny reflects:

It had been overwhelming anger that drove her when she set out to protest the war. She had been enraged by the state of the world, but perhaps even more she'd been enraged by herself, such a ridiculous, small, not-taken-seriously, average American girl. Not the president, or the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or the CEO of Dow Chemical. If she withheld her approval, those in power wouldn't scramble to suit her. ... She had wanted apologies made. She had wanted the powerful men who wreaked such great destruction to feel remorse. It occurred to her now ... that her most carefully rational acts had been shot through with rage. ... As much as she'd thought she was fighting for justice, perhaps what she'd wanted was less justice than vengeance—because justice wasn't an eye for an eye, an act of violence to match acts of violence. (350)

A little further on, she also realizes that she had used the “[e]xalted intentions” behind her and William’s bombings of war recruitment offices to justify the use of violence; however, upon closer reflection, these acts had led not to “salvation” but “[o]nly anger, infectious like fire” (352). Jenny’s startling revelation that what lies at the heart of her commitment to the “exalted” political ideals of radicalism is mere personal rage and vengeance, directed not so much towards transforming the structural forces of injustice and inequity, but rather, towards her own powerlessness seems resonant of the “wounded attachments” that Wendy Brown suggests motivate contemporary formations of emancipatory political movements in our late modern postindustrial society. Borrowing from Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, Brown argues that liberal subjects are particularly vulnerable to suffering from this condition due to “their situatedness within power, their production by power, and liberal discourse’s denial of this situatedness and production that cast the liberal subject into failure, the failure to make itself in the context of a discourse in which its self-making is assumed, indeed, is its assumed nature” (67). This failure of self-making, in the form of impotence and disempowerment, gets installed as the foundation upon which politicized identity constructs oppositional discourses and politics in an effort to ameliorate its suffering. However, in “locating a ‘reason’ for the ‘unendurable pain’ of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it” (Brown 74).

Thus, liberal configurations of politicized “identity structured in part by *ressentiment* resubjugates itself through its investment in its own pain” (74). In this way, Jenny’s commitment to the lofty ideals of revolutionary politics seems to be exposed as nothing more than merely a wounded attachment, given that it is constituted precisely through such a cycle of social powerlessness (“she’d been enraged by herself, such a ridiculous, small, not-taken-seriously, average American girl”), recrimination and revenge (“what she’d wanted was less justice than vengeance”), and re-wounding (“only anger, infectious like fire”).

Choi appears, therefore, to be in close alignment with Brown’s diagnosis of the wounded attachments that haunt and ultimately undermine the work of late modern emancipatory movements; however, she seeks to extend the latter’s thesis by cautioning against a hasty reversal of the terms of the problem. As Choi articulates the problem through Jenny’s reflections, one of the pitfalls of advancing a politics of *ressentiment* is that it inadvertently mistakes the advancement of petty personal desires for political progress. Thus, Choi’s critique of radical politics is centred around its inability to recognize and to engage with the political as such, for radical political dissent is more often than not, simply misdirected anger towards one’s own social position. However, Choi is quick to warn against reversing the conflationary logic of politicized identity so as to favour political abstraction over individuated subjectivity. Consider a scene in which Jenny’s previous reflection on the personal as animating the political is reversed to the opposite extreme. While discussing their role in the death of Mr. Morton during the grocery store robbery, Jenny and Pauline attempt to diminish their personal culpability for their involvement in the crime by speculating:

Perhaps they were victims of Juan and Yvonne. Thinking this made them ashamed. Of just Juan, then; Yvonne was a victim as well. Perhaps they were all, even Juan, victims of bad circumstances: they were all four of them victims of Frazer. But in a larger, ‘truer’ sense, Frazer along with the four of them was a victim of unjust government. ... They

took it to a higher, a deeper, a broader level again. ... In the end, it was capitalism that caused all these problems. Their lives had been compromised from the start by a legacy of imperial violence they could either have condoned through inaction, thus enabling violence itself, or resisted, thus consigning themselves to a marginal place with regard to the sullied mainstream. (282-3)

Here, the circuitous and ultimately absurd logic through which Jenny and Pauline seek to absolve themselves of responsibility for Mr. Morton's death seems merely the perverse flip-side of the previous revelation in which the structural is exposed as nothing more than the purely individual. In this case, personal culpability, a matter of individual agency, is increasingly abstracted into structural determinant forces (unjust governance, capitalism, imperial violence) so as to become completely meaningless. After all, how does one hold "a legacy of imperial violence" accountable for the murder of Mr. Morton? Furthermore, the increasing abstraction of the sovereign subject merely results in an overdetermined false choice between inaction or reactionary violence. Thus, Choi seems to suggest that "pure" politics absent of identity is simply the dangerous reversal of a politics reduced to mere identity, and that both should be eschewed in favour of a fuller and more nuanced relationship between the personal and the political (which I will come back to discuss in further detail in the third section).

What emerges from Choi's satirical critique of revolutionary politics would seem to be its fraught relationship to identity: it can neither be reduced to the latter nor completely free itself of it. However, further extending Brown's account of the wounded nature of politicized identity to consider it in a specifically racialized context, Choi works to map this impasse onto a configuration of racial politics in order to reveal the equally untenable position that the racialized subject is forced to occupy when caught between on the one hand, reductive forms of wounded identifications, and on the other, a falsely post-racial universalism that merely obscures the former. To illustrate the limits of a racial politics founded on identification through injury or

woundedness, Choi appoints Juan, one of the surviving members of the cadre, as the lampooned mouthpiece for a satirized version of reductive identity politics. In a heated exchange between Juan and Jenny, the former berates the latter for shirking her duties as a “Third World leader”:

“You owe your people your leadership. You can’t go denying your race. You don’t just owe the revolution in general, you owe your people in particular.”

“Human beings are my people.”

“But that’s denying your race!”

“Just because I’m a Japanese woman, you can’t define me in terms of just that.”

...

“Your Third World perspective’s a privilege.”

“And all I’m saying is, stop saying I’m from the Third World when I’m from California.” (139-40)

Then, a little further on in the same conversation:

“You can’t say that I’m racist,” Juan said earnestly. “I’ve always wished I was black. Not just wished it, but willed it. If any black man came to me and said Change places with me—regardless of if he was poor, or in prison, or was suffering in ten different ways, I would do it without thinking twice.”

“That’s just guilt. And it’s selfish.”

“Maybe it’s selfish, to want the kind of integrity that you can take for granted.”

“I don’t have more integrity than you do, just because of my skin. I wish you wouldn’t use me as an example of something I don’t believe.” (141)

Juan seems to offer the often criticized essentialist version of identity politics that crudely reduces complex forces of power and structures of inequality to their most simplistic distillations as mere matters of identitarian representation. For instance, in Juan’s articulation, blackness becomes synonymous with injustice or oppression. In addition, Juan’s conception of identity politics necessarily invokes prescriptive forms of racial and ethnic authenticity. To frame the problem through Christopher Lee’s cogent articulation, Juan’s identity politics works to produce an “idealized critical subject,” who “is distinguished by its ability to reveal suppressed or neglected histories and experiences of domination, knowledge that in turn becomes the basis for political contestation” (11). Juan renders Jenny precisely into this idealized critical subject by claiming that the “privilege” of her “Third World perspective” is what makes her a particularly

suitable candidate for assuming a leadership role in the revolution. The problem with this line of thinking, as Juan reveals, is that in pushing the logic of the idealized critical subject to its furthest extremes, this privileged subject must, in order to act ethically (i.e. with “the kind of integrity that you can take for granted”), actively desire to occupy a disempowered or marginalized position—in this case, become a black man. Thus, Choi, in extending Brown’s critique of contemporary modes of politicized identity, reveals the limitations of a racial politics that would fetishize racial injury or woundedness in order to make legible the contours of racial subjectivity. Put another way, we might say that Choi exposes the wounded attachments of the bad subject as its very grounding for political consciousness and resistance. In addition, a politics of identity staked on claims of racial injury is also intimately tied to the improper conflation between the concrete (the personal) and the abstract (the political), for Juan’s essentialist identity politics seems to stem in part from a misguided impulse to regard individual sovereign subjects (Japanese American woman, black man) as pure embodiments of abstract relations of power (Third World perspective, political integrity).

If Juan seems bent on foisting an essentialist and reductive identity politics upon Jenny, then she is equally resistant toward his attempt to do so. In this exchange, as in previously mentioned other instances, Jenny conspicuously refuses to be the bad wounded subject (“I don’t have more integrity than you do, just because of my skin.”) However, it is telling that Jenny seems to refute Juan’s impositions through recourse to a “post-racial” cosmopolitanism. In response to Juan’s exhortations to assume leadership of “your people,” Jenny insists, “Human beings are my people” and that she is from “California” rather than the “Third World.” Although, as we have already discussed, Juan’s invocation of identity politics rests on the problematic fetishization of racial injury as well as the reduction of complex abstract social

relations to concretized forms of racial embodiment, Jenny's rejoinders do not seem to provide any more productive avenues for alternative modes of racial identification or formation. In fact, Jenny's refusal here to claim racial difference in lieu of an invocation of universal citizenship echoes a later moment in the text when her father Jim Shimada recalls that he had wanted to move with her to New York when she was younger because "[h]e'd thought it was the place he could teach her to be a citizen of the world, a Universal Human. Neither American nor Japanese, but New Yorker—it was a romantic idea, he knew. ... He'd always associated the journey East with the final achievement of American belonging, sheared free of ethnicity. He saw it as something to be sheared free of, yes." (Choi 338). Jim's cosmopolitan fantasy of claiming belonging and citizenship by becoming the "Universal Human" is explicitly posed as the antidote to the problem of racial particularity and identity ("sheared free of ethnicity"). However, even in the very articulation of this desire for post-racial identifications, Jim is clearly self-conscious that it could never be more than a "romantic idea," and thus can only ever remain in the domain of fantasy. Beyond its own self-conscious impossibility, such a post-racial fantasy is further exposed as working to obscure and even exacerbate the conditions that produce reductive forms of "bad" and "wounded" identity politics.

In a "primal scene" from her childhood memory, Jenny seems to enact and live out Jim's fantasy of the Universal Human, only to quickly realize how such a form of post-racial cosmopolitanism may become a perversion of its own purported ideals when extended to racial subjects. Jenny's memory begins with "a terrible scene" of her father raising a mortifying fuss over some confusion in the airline seating plans for their journey to Japan (after Jim bitterly renounces the U.S. following the end of the internment). The racialized undertones of the conflict between her father and the flight attendant seems to be something that Jenny is no

stranger to, even at her young age, for she describes it as “of the sort that featured a blond, silk-scarf-wearing woman repeating, ‘I’m going to call the police’” (341). Immediately following this scene of racial humiliation, Jenny stumbles upon a separate play area reserved for the children of First Class membership and their custodians while wandering around the plane. Although initially denied entrance by a stewardess, Jenny eventually joins the other children at play. She recalls the experience as saturated with a sense of absolute and utopian belonging, for “[i]t was one of those immediate, effortless intimacies that seem only to happen in childhood, if they happen at all. And perhaps it had happened to her just this once. She remembered little else of her initiation into the world of these people; she seemed to have arrived, and then been among them” (341). Eventually, her father “awfully” interrupts this idyllic playtime, rebuking the friendly efforts of the other adults, and returns Jenny to her (properly classed) seat. Afterwards, Jenny “remembered having the idea that the people had been some kind of royal family. . . . They had certainly been beautiful—incandescently gold-skinned and gold-haired. And they must have been rich” (343). That Jenny’s recollection of this idealized “effortless” and “intimate” belonging among the world of wealthy white elites follows so closely on the heels of a prior scene of racialized humiliation suggests that the former functions as a form of racial amelioration for the latter. In this way then, Jenny’s memory functions as the uncanny realization of Jim’s own fantasy, in which racial injury and trauma (the internment) can be transcended by laying claim to a universal global citizenship (“a citizen of the world”).

For a brief (quite literally suspended) moment, in the confines of the plane, Jenny achieves the kind of utopian belonging among actual members of the jet-setting cosmopolitan elite that Jim had dreamed of for her as a little girl. The highly allegorical nature of this childhood memory—as the fantasy of post-racial intimacy triumphing over racial conflict—is

alluded to by Jenny herself when she reflects, “There was the incident itself, the marked page, but there was also the unexplored volume of her own character. She had thought of it when William was arrested: Hadn’t she found herself, without quite knowing how, among the self-confident children of the white upper class? With whom she had fought for the rights of the colored and poor” (343). What is revealed then is that Jenny’s own conversion to radicalism might constitute a case of the return of the repressed, that is, the re-enactment of this childhood primal scene of cosmopolitan belonging. However, in Jenny’s re-enactment, the false grounding of this utopic post-racial universalism is exposed. Even in the midst of her efforts to achieve a sense of belonging among the “self-confident children of the white upper class”—that is, participating in revolutionary activities alongside of other (white) radicals—she nonetheless has to contend with the presence of “the colored and poor.” It is particularly telling that she identifies herself as working alongside “*with*” the former in fighting “*for*” the latter, effectively displacing herself from the category of “the colored and poor.” However, as we have observed from her exchange with Juan, the very attempt to transcend racial difference and particularity in lieu of post-racialist universal belonging produces a fraught relationship to her own racial identity and politics. As much as Jenny might strive to gain entry into the world of the white upper class via radicalism, she is nonetheless reminded, at every turn (and even explicitly by Juan), of her inescapable membership within that other category, which in fact, results in her having to perform an idealized critical subjectivity for the former’s consumption. In this way, both Jim’s and Jenny’s fantasies of post-racial universal belonging are revealed as working to obscure the ineluctable racial particularities and injuries that are, in fact, its very conditions of possibility, and that break through to rupture the fantasy when racial subjects attempt to lay claim to such forms of transcendental citizenship.

II. The Crisis Ordinarity of Wartime Incarceration

Through Jenny's fraught conversion to radicalism, Choi aims to expose the equally untenable positions between which the Asian American racial subject is caught: that of either the bad subject, whose fetishized wounded attachments function as the grounding for the performance of an idealized critical subjectivity, or the Universal Human, whose abstraction of particularity and identity merely serve to obfuscate and ultimately reinforce the very conditions which produce the former. If neither bad subject nor Universal Human appears to be viable options, then the novel seems invested in theorizing an alternate model of identity politics that would account for a more nuanced and reciprocal relationship between the personal (racially embodied identity) and the political (abstract relations of power). However, such an alternate model would also have to contend with the particular ontology of racial injury and suffering that animates the wounded attachments of bad subjects. In a revealing passage that aptly illustrates the presumed relationship between racial injury and idealized critical subjectivity, Jenny reflects on how her father's experience of being incarcerated during WWII has affected their fraught relationship: "She'd long given up brooding on his appalled opposition to her political beliefs, in spite of the fact that he should have been more likely than the average person to agree with her" (161). In an ironic reversal, Jenny has now assumed what was previously Juan's role in regarding her father as the idealized critical subject of wartime internment. By expecting him to be "more likely than the average person" to sympathize with her political beliefs, she assumes that his experience of racial injury permits him privileged access to an oppositional consciousness that should, in turn, render him an exceptionally politically resistant subject. The dilemma that then arises is how to contend with the prospect that perhaps not all racial injuries are created equal.

To refer to an earlier point I have argued, if Choi's elaboration of Brown's critique of identity politics involves illustrating how the contours of racial subjectivity can only be made legible through evidencing injury and woundedness, then such identificatory processes rest precisely on very specific *kinds* of suffering—namely, demonstrably visible and spectacular modes. To put it another way, if the political “integrity” of the bad subject stems in part from its woundedness, then it has to be a kind of woundedness that is intelligible and maintained (in order to claim it as the basis of its idealized critical subjectivity). How then might we account for forms of racial injury that stubbornly refuse to be legibilized or spectacularized? What alternate model of identity politics might arise by grounding it not in the legibilization of racial injury, but rather in its de-spectacularization? For Choi, the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII poses a particularly productive site to work through the problem of ambiguous or “minor” forms of racial injury precisely because it is one that must contend with and is often defined against its more “visible” counterpart, the Holocaust.

In *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma*, Emily Roxworthy points out that the particularity of the trauma of the Japanese American internment has often been elided by the tendency to “compar[e] the internment *event* with other more widely recognized atrocities such as the Nazi genocide of Jews and other minorities” (2). However, “[b]y accessing Japanese American trauma through these other atrocities ... these ‘American concentration camps’ inevitably find themselves subordinated once again in hierarchies of suffering that always privilege the point of comparison” (Roxworthy 2). To put it bluntly then, “Japanese American trauma inevitably pale[s] in comparison to the Holocaust” (3). The point here is, of course, not to diminish the trauma and suffering of Japanese Americans during WWII or attempt to “raise” internment up to the same level of atrocity as the Holocaust, but rather to investigate what and

how claims of racial injury might be made without recourse to precisely this problematic hierarchy of suffering that both haunts discourses of internment and against which it inevitably “pales in comparison.” The move to explore the trauma and injuriousness of internment on its own terms rather than through an abstracted or analogous figuration to other historically traumatic events is precisely one that the novel seeks to make. For example, the source of tension in Jenny’s relationship with her father, Jim, seems to lie within the latter’s refusal to allow his experience of internment to be appropriated by the former’s radical politics. For Jenny, her growing political consciousness of the hypocrisy and moral failures of the U.S. government is solidified when, “In Vietnam at the start of that summer a monk had immolated himself, and the ghastly flames eating his body had been shown on TV. Now her father was declaring a truce in his one-sided war on the land of his birth, but it was at the same moment she’d started to grasp why he’d waged it” (162). After learning about internment at school, “it had seemed like a key: to understanding him, to knowing him, perhaps even to being his daughter. Her discovery of what he’d endured was the beginning of her discovery of history and politics, of power and oppression, of brotherhood and racism, and finally, of radicalism; but it only drove them to fight with each other” (163). Here, it is only through the violently self-immolated body of the Vietnamese monk (visible suffering) that Jenny can begin to “grasp” the trauma of internment (that is, why her father had waged war against the U.S. government). Thus, in circuiting the trauma of internment through the atrocities of the Vietnam War, a point of comparison is established between the two events that, in turn, works to legitimize the former through the latter. However, Jim conspicuously refuses to participate in the comparative structuring of the internment against the Vietnam War, for it is precisely Jenny’s attempt to deploy “what he’d endured” as the impetus for her newfound radicalism that leads them to “[f]ight with increasing

fury” (163) over her consequent involvement in the antiwar movement. Thus, Jim’s annoyed reluctance to discuss his past and opposition to Jenny’s radical awakening is a discrete refusal to participate in the attempt to legitimize the internment experience through recourse to an analogous or comparative atrocity (the televised immolation of the Vietnamese monk).

What then are the particularities of the trauma of the internment that the text offers? How does it represent the internment on its own terms? Choi signals the need for an alternate language or grammar of trauma that would account for (without diminishing the force of) “minor” forms of racial injury by indexing the “ugly feelings” produced by internment. For instance, Jim’s recollection of his internment experience seems to be associated with that cluster of “politically ambiguous” “negative affects” that Sianne Ngai identifies as characteristic of late modernity (1):

Months before learning that Jenny had been arrested Jim Shimada felt a heightening of sensitivity, or maybe just of irritability. He hated to call it paranoia, but it *was* paranoia. If it wasn’t that, it was something worse: guilt. A habit of guilt it repulsed him to find in himself. He had felt a tinge of guiltiness his whole life after being interned; the same blameless guilt that had made him feel disgust for his parents, and for everyone else who’d been wrongly accused. Jenny once asked him why they knew no Japanese in California. “Do you *want* to?” he’d said. “They’re all sheep!”. (324)

Indeed, the full gamut of Ngai’s ugly feelings are on display here: sensitivity, irritability, paranoia, guilt, and even disgust. The appearance of these minor affects seem especially discordant given that the canonical literary discourses of internment tend to marshal either the “grander passions like anger and fear” or the “potentially ennobling or morally beatific states like sympathy, melancholia, and shame” (Ngai 6) in order to relay its traumatic nature or make political claims for redress (e.g. John Okada’s *No-No Boy* or Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*). In line with Ngai’s diagnosis of these weaker affects’ diminished capacity for generating conventional modes of political action, Jim’s guilt and disgust, by prohibiting him from “knowing” other Japanese Americans, function precisely to thwart the possibility for collective identification and agency.

Thus, in contrast with the earlier instance of the “infectious” nature of Jenny’s anger toward global injustice and oppression—resulting in overt, even violent, acts of political dissent—Jim’s ugly feelings remain frustratingly localized, unable to congeal or “harden” into the kind of injurious attachments productive of political resistance.

Delving further into Jim’s reconstruction of his time in internment, even the descriptions of the internment itself seem to thwart the familiar narratives of spectacularized crisis and trauma—often literalized through violent forms bodily injury (castration in *No-No Boy* by John Okada and petrification in *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa)—that characterize internment literature.² Departing from such conventions, however, Choi instead chooses to foreground the seemingly quotidian dimension of the violence suffered by those interned. Consider Jim’s recollection of camp life, during which the internees “had all been good enough to have been awarded the privilege of self-amusement by their captors” (327), such as putting on “frantic, overheated mixers” in which everyone participated by “getting the sheet music to the current hits by mail order, seeing no real contradiction in their fervid pursuit of the latest in American wartime fashion from the inside of a jerry-rigged American prison” (327). Then a little further on, Jim also recalls the almost feverish degree of conspicuous consumption that overtakes the younger generation of internees, as described from the perspective of their parents:

Their children were wearing flared skirts and slim loafers and garish sport shirts that they’d ordered from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. Where had the money come from? It was their parents’ life savings, withdrawn from the banks and sewn into their coats before leaving for camp. ... They’d ordered ankle socks and twin sets and trombones from Sears, Roebuck, which delivered great heaps of American goods to the camp constantly, as if camp were like any small town. (330)

² It is important to note that the effort to stress injurious violence within the genre of internment literature has been a necessary corrective to the national tendency to minimize or suppress the traumas of Japanese wartime incarceration. For a fuller account of the state-sanctioned pressures to remain silent under which Japanese American writers were often operating, see “Writing the Internment” by Greg Robinson in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*.

Taken together, the striking juxtapositions of “American wartime fashion” in the midst of “a jerry-rigged American prison” and routine small town atmosphere to camp life are disturbing not because they show the horrifying interruption of ordinary life by crisis, but precisely because they index how the ordinary relentlessly carries on amidst crisis. The sense of unease evoked here by the uncanny relationship between the quotidian and the traumatic might be best illuminated by Lauren Berlant’s concept of “crisis ordinariness,” which shifts away from conventional models of trauma that tend to conceive of it as “the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident” (10). Instead, crisis ordinariness accounts for “the spreading of ... inexpressive but life-extending actions throughout the ordinary and its situations of living on” (Berlant 81) as well as reveals how “the extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure” (10). If crisis ordinariness refuses explanations of “slammed-door departures” in lieu of understanding how the traumatic in fact inheres in, is always “in the works” of, the quotidian, then the ethical imperative for theorizing racial injury through such a lens becomes urgent. Attending to the crisis ordinariness of an injurious event such as the internment, as Choi does, would involve remaining skeptical of its exceptional status and rather, to search for the clues of racial subjection in seemingly innocuous (that is, quotidian) places—perhaps even in something as unlikely and modest as the current hits of wartime fashion, a Sears, Roebuck catalogue, or “any small town.” In other words, it would not let history off the hook for being that which is “in the past” nor would it allow “ongoing, uneventful ordinary life” to be divorced of its racially injurious potential and thus something about which one can feel “solid and confident.” For Jim and the other internees of camp life then, the ordinary does not work to

obscure or repress crisis; it *is* the crisis. Thus, racial injury manifests not only within exceptional scenes of trauma, but also in the quotidian styles that constitute the practice of everyday life.

For the novel then, the internment seems to function as a site in which racial violence is rendered in the terms of crisis ordinariness rather than exceptional trauma. However, therein also lies the source of the tension between Jenny and her father, for their fraught relationship stems in large part from the former's inability to fully comprehend the latter's past. Given that another common trope within internment literature is the theme of intergenerational transmission (how the trauma of internment gets passed down from one generation to the next), Choi seems to be posing the question without offering any easy resolutions. If the trauma of internment for Jim is experienced as not the breakdown of but rather the continuance of the ordinary, then how might he convey such an experience to Jenny? The larger question is therefore one of political articulation: How might such a racial crisis ordinariness be registered or given form without resorting to spectacularizing its injurious effects? Consider, for instance, the ways in which Jim seems to consistently rebuke Jenny's efforts to get him to "open up" about his internment experiences. When she tries to ask him about the internment after learning it in school, "he'd just said with annoyance, 'Why ask about that? All of that was a long time ago'" (Choi 163). Or when Jenny attempts to revisit the internment camp Manzanar with Jim for a memorial event, he protests, "with irritation," repeatedly, "'I don't want to do this'" (366). Thus, the novel stubbornly refuses to offer any easy or cathartic avenues by which Jenny can access a privileged view of Jim's personal history and thus reconcile with him.

However, there is a brief but discrete moment in which Jenny achieves a muted revelation of sorts about the internment. While packing up her meager belongings to part ways from the remaining members of the cadre:

She thought of her father, always trying to teach her to build chairs from scrap wood or grow food from seeds. Maybe that had been his way of describing internment to her. He'd always brushed off her questions about it, but maybe he'd been telling her things all her life. This is how you make a horse stable into a home, and a burlap sack into a bed. This is how you pack one little bag, though you're going so far for so long ... She hadn't learned very well. (221)

Two striking themes emerge from this scene: the respective phenomena of depth and perception. In regards to the former, Jim's lessons in minimalism to Jenny signal the notion of "hidden depths," as figured by the image of the "one little bag" that has to somehow contain enough to last a long journey. That something might be made from seemingly nothing, that the calm surface of the quotidian can potentially give way to constitutive and defamiliarized depths of use repeats in various motifs: scrap wood transforming into chairs, seeds into food, a horse stable into a home, a burlap sack into a bed. The hidden depths contained in quotidian objects and everyday life also extends into the closely related theme of perception that is being articulated here. If something can always be transformed into something else, then the relation is a matter of perception, of the ability to perceive or discern the transformative potential that inheres in what is given. Crucially then, it is only when Jenny gains this perceptive ability to discern the potential depths of things—this, what we might call, "depth perception"—that she realizes her father "had been telling her things all her life" and thus describing internment to her in this way. What Choi seems to suggest is that efforts to register de-spectacularized forms of racial suffering or trauma (without diminishing the force of that register) might begin with a perceptual shift toward a more phenomenological rather than identitarian account of injury and subjectivity.

III. Lessons in Depth Perception from Women's Liberation

If what the novel seems to offer—in part, through its renarrativization of internment literature—is a more diffuse or "weaker" account of racial injury, that is, racial injury as crisis ordinariness rather than trauma, then the question with which I began the previous section

returns: How might political claims be staked on these forms of racial injury? If racial injury inheres in the ordinary and the quotidian, if it cannot be spectacularly legibilized as an event or departure from what is already ongoing, then how can it function as the privileged basis of an idealized critical subjectivity? If wounded attachments and idealized critical subjectivities no longer seem to “fit” as appropriate models for addressing quotidian forms of racial injustice, then what are the transformative possibilities of an alternate model of identity politics? To briefly reiterate Choi’s critique of radicalism, the problem with grounding politics in wounded or injurious attachments is that it elides the political as such, by improperly conflating it with the desires of a sovereign liberal subjectivity. Conversely, to absent politics of a recognition of identity, of the sovereign subject itself, is no better for that would result in the meaningless abstraction of individual agency. The inheritance of such a liberal tradition within contemporary configurations of racial politics produces a similar collapse in a meaningful distinction between the personal and the political. On the one hand, an identity politics that seeks to generate an idealized critical subjectivity requires that abstract relations of power and inequality be reductively concretized by the bad racial subjects that would give embodied form to them. On the other hand, the post-racial fantasy of cosmopolitan belonging would favour an abstract universalism that subsumes in order to exploit racial particularity. Given the vexing nature of the relationship between the intimate and the structural, or the quotidian and the exceptional, that politicized identity presents then, it is perhaps not so surprising that Choi revisits the Women’s Liberation movement of the early 1970s—the very birthplace of the slogan “the personal is the political”—as a simultaneously productive and fraught site through which an alternate relationship between the personal and the political might be re-theorized.

As Victoria Hesford argues in *Feeling Women's Liberation*, by 1970, “the personal is the political” had “become a powerfully enigmatic statement of and for women’s liberation” (120) and thus something of “a magical phrase” for the movement (121). Today, the phrase “tends to operate as a kind of motto, or better still, an epitaph on the tombstone of a feminism now remembered by many as inadequate or lacking in some way” (Hesford 120-1). Namely, “the personal is the political” has now been charged with “that most infamous of second-wave crimes: essentialism” by performing “a naïve collapsing of ‘women’ into ‘experience’ and ‘politics,’ which has resulted in the privileging of white, middle-class women as the site and source of (second-wave) feminism” (121). However, in being retrospectively construed as “an empty phrase” (121), it has become “a screen memory” (130) that in fact obscures how “the meaning of the phrase was never so singular and fixed” as well as the ways in which it “had the capacity to conjure multiple, even contradictory, feminist claims to a political collectivity at the time of women’s liberation’s emergence” (121). I contend then that the novel “returns” to the unfinished business of women’s liberation precisely because it offers itself up as a compelling site of multiple and contradictory critical perspectives on the nature of the relationship (that crucial “is” which serves as the hinge) between the personal and the political. Furthermore, in offering a more substantive negotiation between the personal and the political, 1970’s Women’s Liberation, however incompletely, nonetheless points the way to an alternate envisioning of a phenomenologically inflected model of identity politics.

In order to unpack the site of Women’s Liberation as offering a more phenomenological account of subjectivity and collectivity, I turn to the scene of another classic trope of second-wave feminism: consciousness-raising. Consider the context of Jenny’s and Pauline’s “feminist

awakening” alongside the other women peripherally involved with the cadre, and with whom they have formed a feminist reading group:

Jenny had to admit there was pleasure in sitting on the deep pile carpet of the living room floor with Sandy, and Sandy’s younger sister Joanne, and Joanne’s housemate Lena, the five of them dismantling a 12-gauge shotgun, cleaning it with pipe cleaners and household rags, using their hands. A pleasure in framing questions and absorbing the answers, in making lists upon lists of ideas. A pleasure in wonderment, she realized. ... One thing they all agreed on, one thing they realized was true across contexts and even in the best of situations, was that in their relations with men they had subtly but constantly presented themselves as more knowledgeable than they were; all the time, in the wings, playing catch-up. ... She and the others didn’t think men had known more than them. But, they agreed, men had a culture of already-knowing ... [b]ut being just among women was something more sweet, the fresh pleasure of coming to things the first time, and of showing their wonder—of not having known, and then knowing. (291)

That this scene illustrates the logic and work of consciousness-raising is evidenced by the women’s dawning consciousness of not only the damaging effects of male-centric modes of knowledge production (“a culture of already-knowing”) to “real” learning, but also the *systemic* nature of such a problem (“true across contexts and even in the best of situations”). Citing the 1973 anthology *Radical Feminism*, Lisa Maria Hogeland concisely defines consciousness-raising as both method and practice, and its process as ““one in which personal experiences, when shared, are recognized as a result not of an individual’s idiosyncratic history and behavior, but of the system of sex-role stereotyping. That is, they are political, not personal, questions’ ... The women in the group shared and analyzed personal narratives in order to shift the terrain of their interpretation from the personal to the political” (qtd. in Hogeland 23). Thus, in scenes of consciousness-raising, it is precisely the porosity of the boundary between the personal and the political, and the perceived capacity of the former to contain the hidden depths of the latter (much in the same way that scrap wood contains the potential of a chair, or a burlap sack of a bed, etc.), that is at stake. What emerges in this particular scene of consciousness-raising is the crucial work of pleasure as that which sutures the personal and the political together. The

movement and concatenated iterations of pleasure is what serves to transform the subjective into the collective. The first iteration of pleasure, embodied and subjective (the textural sensation of the deep pile carpet, performing tasks with their hands); shifts into an epistemic register (framing questions, absorbing answers, “pleasure in wonderment”); and culminates in the promise of belonging and community (“being just among women was something more sweet”). The multiple registers through which pleasure moves, shifts, and manifests brings into effect the seamless passage from the personal (subjective sensation) to the political (utopian collectivity). Thus, the different experiential reiterations of pleasure function to link together the personal and the political in a way that crucially maintains their continuity and relationality without flattening or enfolding into one another, resulting in the disjuncture or conflation between the two that radicalism engenders. In other words, through pleasure, the abstract and the structural can be refracted into quotidian intimacies without subsuming it; and vice versa, personal experience can organically extend out or give way to the political register of collectivization while still retaining its own coherence. What I want to suggest then is that pleasure, as constructed within a feminist account, is performing an orientational role. In order to shed more light on the phenomenological account of pleasure that Choi develops here, it is useful to turn to Sara Ahmed’s work concerning queer modes of embodiment and spatiality.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed borrows the concept of “orientation” from the philosophy of phenomenology in order to theorize how the normative can simultaneously appear as an ontological given and yet also be an effect of repetitive actions. As Ahmed elaborates, “orientations can operate simultaneously as effects and be lived or experienced as if they are originary or a matter of how one’s body inhabits the world, by being orientated toward one side, like being right or left handed” (80). She offers the concrete example of the writing table in order

to further illustrate this simultaneity of cause and effect: “The table is both an effect of work and also what allows us to work: whether the table ‘works’ depends upon whether we can do, when we make use of the table, the work we intend to do” (Ahmed 50). We might characterize the pleasure that Jenny and her friends experience as a similar “orientation device” to Ahmed’s table in the sense that on the one hand, it marks the shift from the subjective to the structural and yet on the other, it directs and “orients” that very trajectory. To put it another way then, pleasure orients the personal and the political (and vice versa) in that it renders the one as simultaneously both cause and effect of the other. Thus, pleasure here works not only as an orientational force that both shapes and is shaped by the co-emergence of the personal and the political, but it is also that which establishes a relation of reciprocity between them.

Beyond this initial scene of consciousness-raising, pleasure continues to recur as an instrumental force in the formation of a feminist consciousness for Jenny and Pauline. Consider the generative power that aesthetic pleasure holds for the two women when they fashion makeshift curtains for their apartment in an effort to hide their firearms from outside view: “All they did was cut long rectangles of fabric and sew deep hems at one end for a dowel to run through, but when they were finished it was another improvement the pleasure of which exceeded the purpose it served. ‘Our beautiful feminist curtains,’ Pauline said. ‘They might look bourgeois, but they’re not’” (Choi 292). Just as in the previous scene, pleasure is operating along multiple and even contradictory registers here. In fact, it is precisely the transformative power of pleasure, its ability to exceed its own intended purposes (as a kind of remainder), that allows it to generate personal effects (“beautiful”) from amidst the political (“feminist curtains”) and vice versa; thus, constituting them as reciprocal to one another.

When Pauline claims that the bourgeois appearance of the curtains belies a far more radical purpose, she also indicates how pleasure is precisely that perceptual capacity which might reveal the unexpected depths of defamiliarized objects. That pleasure has a motivating or directional effect is reiterated when the pleasure they derive from modest material comforts causes them to re-examine their political beliefs. Towards the end of their time together, Jenny and Pauline reflect on their newly-reconciled desire for happiness:

Things that might have once seemed self-indulgent to them are important, and they've made their peace with them: flowers in a vase on the table, a pretty cloth Jenny found at the thrift store. When their first zucchini had been big enough to harvest they'd spent the whole day making dinner: ratatouille of mostly zucchini, and a salad and homemade bread, and a cake, just for them—how absurd! And a bottle of wine . . . bourgeois things, but are they? Aren't they beautiful things? "We feel bad if we want to be happy," Pauline . . . says, "But it can't be so selfish. I used to think so, I used to think I was rotten. But is it really so wrong?" (309)

Here then, it is the enjoyment of modest personal pleasures that necessitates a shift in their commitment to radical ideology. As Pauline points out, in their former life as radicals, the idea of partaking in ordinary pleasures would be tantamount to bourgeois self-indulgence. What pleasure seems to undo again and again in these scenes of feminist consciousness-raising is the presumed relationship between the ordinary world (that is, subjective attachments and quotidian experiences) and the abstracted structural forces that shape it, whether that relationship manifests as one of conflation (one subsumes the other) or radical division (one precludes the other). Instead, what Jenny and Pauline desire is a different kind of political "orientation," one in which personal pleasures and unassuming events, such as a vase of flowers or a nice meal, might contain the transformative potential to give way to—rather than constitute a betrayal of—utopian politics. What then is this "giving way to"? To reiterate a question posed previously, what is this "is-ness" between the personal and the political, if the meaning is neither as singular nor fixed as one of simple equivalence? How can something contain the potential to be transformed into

something else entirely that it was never intended to be (scrap wood into a chair, a horse stable into a home)? In order to shed light on the nature of the reciprocal orientation between the personal and the political, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's work on the perception of depth.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims that perception is an "act that creates, all at once, out of the constellation of givens, the sense that ties them together. Perception does not merely discover the sense they have, but rather, sees to it that they have a sense" (38). For Merleau-Ponty then, perception is both contingent and intentional: it is dependent on the givens of a situation and therefore never wholly originary, but it also, in turn, creates meaning out of what is given and therefore is not passive absorption. In other words, perception takes something (that is already receptive to it) and turns it into something else that it then "gives back" and so on, in a repetitive but ever transformative loop. In particular, Merleau-Ponty identifies the spatial dimension of depth as most clearly evidencing the motivated nature of perception because "[i]t announces a certain indissoluble link between the things and me by which I am situated in front of them" (267). Merleau-Ponty begins by rejecting classical theories that posit the experience of depth as consisting in "decoding certain given facts," such as "the convergence of the eyes, the apparent size of the image ... [and then] putting them back into the context of objective relations that explain them" (268). Such explanations do not satisfy Merleau-Ponty, who points out that the ability to interpret such visual signs is itself dependent on a particular understanding of being situated in space (in other words, of being oriented). Instead of being either signs or causes of depth, convergence and apparent size "are present in the experience of depth, just as the motive ... is present in the decision" (Merleau-Ponty 270). He goes on to explain, "The motive is an antecedent that only acts through its sense, and it must even be added that it is the decision that confirms this sense as valid and that gives it its force

and its efficacy. ... The relation between motivating and motivated is thus reciprocal” (270). To put it even more plainly, “Every focusing is always a focusing on something that presents itself as something to be focused upon” (275). In being composed of the “simultaneous presence to experiences that are nevertheless mutually exclusive, th[e] implication of the one in the other, and th[e] contraction into a single perceptual act of an entire possible process” (276), depth is “the thickness of a medium devoid of things” (278). Framed in Merleau-Ponty’s terms of depth perception, the “enigmatic” relationship between the personal and the political posited by these scenes of Women’s Liberation becomes clearer. For Jenny and Pauline, pleasure constitutes the thickness of the medium of the personal and the political; it is what lends the two simultaneity despite their seeming mutual exclusion, what implicates the one in the other, and what contracts them into a single perceptual act (keeping in mind that perception is defined not as passive absorption or interpretation, but as an intentional or motivated enactment of an already latent potential). To contend that the quotidian and the spectacular exist in a relation of depth to one another is to emphasize their reciprocity, that is, how the one only becomes legible when it is enacted through the other. To frame this in the language of the novel then: the scrap of wood does not simply turn into a chair, as if it were something one moment and another entirely the next. Rather, the perceptual ability to view the possibility of one that inheres in the other is what allows each to retain its given form.

If the novel seems to invest Women’s Liberation with the utopic potential for engendering a more phenomenological relationship between identity and politics, or the personal and the political—one that is foreclosed by a New Left radicalism—then it also illuminates how this utopianism is abortive due to its failure to contend with racial difference. The fragility of the radical feminist collectivity that Jenny and Pauline work to envision for themselves is confirmed

when it is (quite literally) interrupted by the intrusion of the FBI into their hideout, but also when (more symbolically) threatened by the spectre of racial violence. If pleasure seems to function as an incipient orientation device through which the relationship between the personal and the political might be reconceptualized, then its manifestation as queer desire in the intersubjective context seems to push up against the problem of racial difference as an obstacle to the realization of its full potential. For example, although it is clear that Jenny's and Pauline's at times ambiguous relationship with one another contains explicitly queer dimensions—their eventual separation during their respective legal trials is experienced as “the first true heartbreak of her life” (350) for Jenny—its maintenance depends crucially on the erasure of their racial difference. Their mutual desire for the sexual consummation of their relationship is characterized as “[p]ossession of the other and erasure of the self” (281). The desire for the annulment of their individuated identities is emphasized by the amnesia-like effects induced by their sharing a bed together while on the run: “They wake up, feeling drugged from the long-deferred sleep. For a long moment they don't remember their childhood homes, what their parents look like. Prior history all seems unreal” (281). Furthermore, towards the end of their time together, when Jenny reflects on her relationship with Pauline, she realizes:

There were so many things about herself that she had never told Pauline, lost continents of her life ... Their intimacy, from the moment it really began, had seemed so complete that she supposed it would have been an aspersion, a tremor of doubt, if either had begun to bring forward such artifacts. They spoke intensely and exhaustively within the frame of their short time together ... but they never carefully tutored each other in their own histories. There'd been the sense that all that was assumed, that each knew the whole of the other one's past. To suggest otherwise would have shattered their union somehow. (358)

For Jenny, the “true bond” and “perfect comradeship” (352) that she so intensely craves and fulfills through her relationship with Pauline can only be sustained through the deliberate erasure of the “lost continents” of their lives. As the journalist Anne Casey subsequently discovers, if the

two women had indeed “tutored each other in their own histories,” they might have discovered, as she does, that Pauline’s grandfather had, in his newspaper business, fiercely advocated for the internment of Japanese Americans that imprisoned Jenny’s father, or that the latter’s attempted escape from the Camp for Incurables occurred close enough to Pauline’s family’s ancestral home for her grandfather’s mistress to exclaim in her memoir, ““One night we had the awfulest scare. The Japs at the camp had a riot—who knows what they all got so angry about? There the President was, letting them live without lifting a finger on your taxpayer dollars, but they still had to make a big fuss. They broke out and we knew they were coming to murder us all!”” (323). That the two women’s “complete intimacy” crucially depends on the self-censorship of such “prior history” suggests their failure, even through a radical feminist vision, to reckon with the embedded history of racial violence that threatens to “shatter” the “union” between them.

However, beyond the spectres of prior national histories of racial violence (as encoded in personal histories), the emergence of an utopian feminist collectivism is also haunted by the inability and failure to extend its own phenomenological orientation to the problem of discrepant racial formations. If the vexed relationship between the personal and the political is capable of becoming oriented through the role and function of pleasure, then racial difference remains that which cannot be properly resolved by the work of feminist and queer intimacies. Consider, for instance, Jenny’s initial attraction to Pauline when she reads about the latter’s kidnapping in the news, an attraction which belies how race operates phenomenologically:

Everything about that unknown girl had interested Jenny: her ancestors’ legends and ancestral homes and her alleged boarding-school rebellions. The inexhaustible store of her portraits: in tennis whites and first communion whites and giggling on the beach in a T-shirt, and unsmiling in formation with her parents. Her two-seater car and her desire ‘to be normal,’ as described by her boarding-school friends. Her labyrinthine relationship to her own money. Her towering American pedigree. (343)

From the beginning, even before they meet, something, or rather, “everything” about Pauline “interested” Jenny; however, this “interest” appears both vague in its nature and widely-dispersed in its objects. The aspects of Pauline’s life that seems to intrigue Jenny run the gamut from: her genealogical prestige (ancestors’ legends and ancestral homes); her personal character (alleged boarding-school rebellions); her conventional and even mundane upbringing (first communion whites, giggling on the beach in a T-shirt, and unsmiling in formation with her parents); her material possessions (two-seater car), her entrenched privilege (desire ‘to be normal’), and the unimaginable degree of her own wealth (her labyrinthine relationship to her own money). For Jenny, this wide range of both quotidian and exceptionally “interesting” qualities find their culmination in Pauline’s “towering American pedigree.” Put another way, all of these qualities are so compelling to Jenny because they add up to install Pauline as the quintessential national subject of belonging, as the eponymous “American woman.” What is worth emphasizing, however, is the simultaneously given and yet arbitrary nature of the mechanisms behind the constitution of such a “towering pedigree.” What seems to be at the centre of the list is a tension between the given (as the things that one “inherits” and are thus predetermined by external circumstances) and the variable (as that which is accumulated and thus subject to further change). Indeed, the very term “pedigree” contains a doubled sense of something both biological in nature and also subject to cultivation.

In recent years, the critical deployment of the philosophy of phenomenology for theorizing racial difference has gained increasing momentum. As Mark Jerng puts it, “As a methodology that does not take the givenness of the object for granted, but which instead focuses on its conditions of emergence, phenomenology has more flexibility than an analysis that relies on identifying a discrete thing called race. It acknowledges race as a social relation rather than an

atavistic form of thinking or a residuum of the historical past” (187). Phenomenological accounts of race often draw from Frantz Fanon’s influential work on the “racial-epidermal schema” in *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to theorize racial embodiment as produced through “pre-conscious” postural “body-images” and “habitual perceptions,” such as “greetings, handshakes, proximity, tone of voice,” etc. (Alcoff 17).³ However, I depart from such emphases on the discrete experiential and sensorial processes by which racialization contours embodied subjectivities to focus instead on more ephemeral affective and perceptual modes of spatial orientation by which the spheres of the intimate and the social are arranged and re-arranged in relation to one another. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty’s account of anchorage points and Ahmed’s of inheritance might prove useful here once again in offering a queer phenomenological account of race and racialization. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is always anchored, for “an initial perception without any background is inconceivable. Every perception presupposes a certain past of the subject, and the abstract function of perception – as the encounter with objects – implies a more secret act by which we elaborate our milieu” (294). How then is this resting background upon which perception relies constituted? Merleau-Ponty suggests that the perceptual background is an “anchorage point,” which is “not an explicit perception” (292) as if it were an object, such as a church steeple amidst the sky. Rather, “[i]t is essential to the supposed reference points of movement not to be thematized in actual knowledge and to be always ‘already there.’ They are not presented directly to perception, they circumvent it and haunt it through a preconscious operation whose results appear to us as ready-made” (Merleau-Ponty 292). The preconscious given-ness of anchorage points is explained through the theme of inheritance by

³ See: “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” by Linda Martín Alcoff; “Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology” by Jeremy Weate; and *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race* edited by Emily S. Lee.

Ahmed. For Ahmed, inheritance is inextricably tied to the notion of orientation because if bodies become orientated in certain directions over others, then that orientation can, in turn, shape the capacity to perform certain actions over others (91). Drawing on the phrase, “a path well trodden” as an example, she explains, “the relationship between ‘following a line’ and the conditions for the emergence of lines is often ambiguous,” for “we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked on” (16). Thus, the paradox that emerges is that “[l]ines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (Ahmed 16). We might then understand racial formation as a matter of such an orientation, as a matter of following lines that are in themselves created by being followed.

Recall the earlier discussion of Jenny’s anger that is directed toward herself in being “such a ridiculous, small, not-taken-seriously, average American girl” and compare that to her fascination with Pauline’s “towering American pedigree,” which in itself contains a “desire ‘to be normal’.” What then is this difference between an “average American girl” (something which enrages) and a “normal” American pedigree (something of interest)? It would appear to be precisely the difference between the merely average (Jenny) and the exceptionally normal (Pauline). In Pauline’s case, her “pedigree” is a kind of anchorage point, it renders everything about her as *always already* normal. Thus, she is exceptionally normal because by setting the norm, she proves herself to be exception to it (or, in following lines that are already in place before her, she also creates them). Even her desire “to be normal” in itself suggests that she is in fact far from normal but also securely attached enough to her exceptional privilege that she can choose to exempt herself from it without fear. To put it simply then, the “towering” force of Pauline’s American pedigree is both derived from what is already in place (her ancestral genealogy and her wealth) but also works to anchor, that is, make a place for, those very things.

In contrast, Jenny is “average,” but her average-ness lacks the kind of exceptional and orientational status of Pauline’s inheritance. She might be able to follow lines, but she fails to make enough of an impression for them to be created while being followed. Thus, unlike Pauline, she is not the exceptionally American woman, merely the exception to it.

The apparent paradox of racial difference between the two women is also revealed by the outcomes of their respective legal trials. As Jenny notes, “She and Pauline were destined to pay different prices” (Choi 354). Pauline “would ‘get the book thrown at her’” in order to “prove that there were no exceptions, she would be an exemplar, at last, through no acts of her own, of all-persons-created-equal, ... she would still emerge somehow restored, made more interesting by her adventure, a reinforcer, in the end, of the privilege she’d once seemed to spurn” (354). Thus, in the end, “[m]ore than anything else Pauline would come to symbolize the immutableness of her class. She would seem to have gone through the muck and emerged from it clean. ... She’d serve less than two years of her sentence before it was commuted, and the stigma of prison would not stick to her. It would be something else she’d endured, without being degraded” (354). Unlike Pauline who is meted the harsher legal sentence, but a more lenient social one:

Jenny, by contrast, would ‘get off easy’—easier, even, than she wanted to. ... But she would feel, perhaps indelibly, a new shame, an impulse she’d never before exhibited to scrape and be thankful, an instinct toward obsequious accommodation, as if she were the lucky recipient of some benign power’s unusually good graces; as if she were not simply serving her time but, as the phrase put it, ‘getting off easy.’ ... She felt like a token for the first time in her life. ‘The model minority,’ the one extended privileges as an example to the rest of her less worthy kin ... Prison made Jenny feel a member of a despised category, the more so for every time she was praised for behaving so remarkably well. ... Pauline would ‘get the book thrown at her’ yet somehow be redeemed, or rather shown to require no redemption, while Jenny would ‘get off easy,’ for somebody like her. (355)

Here, the same paradoxical problem of inheritance emerges once again. Whereas Pauline’s ostensibly harsher sentence in fact works to affirm her innocence (that she requires no redemption), Jenny’s “easier” punishment ends up marking her as more guilty. It is precisely in

being made “an example of”—that is, in being held to the strictest letter of the law in order to show that no one is beyond exception—that Pauline is in fact shown to be exemplary, to be above example. Jenny, by contrast, in “getting off easy” merely proves that “somebody like her” in fact deserves the very opposite. In seeming to have evaded the typical punishment, she is in fact relentlessly held to the strictest standard, which in turn further confirms her “always already” deviance from it. Thus, Pauline, in “getting the book thrown at her” (subjected to the standard), is revealed to be the standard-bearer (the anchorage point), whereas Jenny, in “getting off easy” (circumventing the standard) is one whose existence is in fact constantly being “checked against” and therefore wholly determined by the standard (follows the line). Just as in the previous example then, this problem of inherited orientation is the very grounding of racial difference. Pauline’s ability to simultaneously set the very standard to which she is ostensibly subjected confirms the “immutableness of her class.” Conversely, by seeming to benefit from being an exception, which in fact merely proves one’s membership within “a despised category,” Jenny—for the first time in her life—feels like a token or model minority. That the ugly feelings of racial consciousness (“a new shame”) surfaces for Jenny precisely during this experience of “getting off easy” rather than through those previous instances of “overt” racism (i.e. the interactions at the junkyard or the bar) would seem to index the phenomenological rather than merely identitarian groundings of racial formation.

What both of the above two scenes illustrate then is the way in which racial difference operates phenomenologically in the same way that pleasure does in the service of suturing the personal to the political. However, if women’s liberation is capable of engendering a critical revision of the personal and the political, it falls short of extending this necessary critique to the impasse of racial difference. As Jenny finally admits to herself, following her eventual separation

from Pauline, “And so the rift she had felt open up between herself and Pauline, which at first seemed entirely intimate, a rift between two individual persons, would come to seem increasingly social, inevitable and ordained” (355). If pleasure re-orient identity and politics as being held “in-depth” to one another, then as the two women’s eventual estrangement illustrate, the rift of race flattens this depth, reifies (“increasingly ... inevitable and ordained”) the division between the intimate and the social (one precludes the other), which, in turn, produces their conflation (one must necessarily subsume the other). Herein lies the double impasse: first, the “contents” of the feminist and queer desire for collectivity must be expunged of the threatening traces of racial violence as encoded within personal histories, and secondly, its very formation or condition of emergence is foreclosed by inherited racial orientations. In this way, Choi seems to contend that the enduring lesson of Women’s Liberation is its incipient attempts to radically destabilize and reconceptualize the very coordinates of the personal and the political through a recourse to pleasure, but that, crucially, it cannot carry this project to its fully realized end (as signalled by the foreclosure of queer desire between Jenny and Pauline) without extending its own phenomenological re-orientations to account for racial difference. In fact, it is precisely only when the promise of “the personal is the political” is fulfilled in the context of racial justice that radical liberation might occur at all.

I conclude then by turning to the ending of the novel, which I want to suggest seems to offer a tentative account of what such a feminist lesson in depth perception might look like when enacted within an alternate model of racialized identity politics. At the novel’s closing, Jenny and Jim return to the internment camp Manzanar for a memorial event. At first glance, this allegorical return, which also functions as a reconciliation of sorts between father and daughter, turns out to be somewhat anti-climactic and deflating. Instead of any shared revelations or

newly-forged affective intimacies, we are left with only displays of frustrated bickering and missed communications. On the one hand, Jim's former ugly feelings seem to return in full force. When Jenny picks him up for the trip, he waves a bandana "toward her with irritation" and explains that it is to help protect her face from the endlessly blowing sand in "the most miserable place in the world you're dragging me to" (366). Throughout the car ride, he snaps at Jenny's offer of food and "resumes a familiar expression of disgust" (367). On the other hand, multiple moments of failed communication between Jenny and Jim seem to confirm the novel's refusal to provide any easy resolution for rendering the internment as an object of cathartic intergenerational transmission that might in turn function as the grounding for political agency or radical resistance. When Jenny thoughtlessly mischaracterizes Jim's internment experience as "an all right time out here," Jim reprimands her and gives her the silent treatment for the rest of the trip (368). Or, when Jenny attempts to thank her father for the scarf he gives her to keep the sand out of her face, he fails to hear her because "he was already getting out of the car and gazing around him" (369). In thwarting the impulses toward familial reconciliation and narrative resolution, such ugly feelings highlight what Chu interprets as "the disjunctures among the experiences of former internees like Jim, who *lived* there, Jenny's antiwar politics, and the next generation building an Asian American movement" (548).

However, not only is the father-daughter reunion strangely deflating, but the Manzanar reunion itself seems completely and inaptly tone-deaf toward the reason for its occurrence. Namely, an almost campy or surreal sensibility permeates the scene. The Manzanar event, presumably meant to commemorate internment survivors and their descendants, is characterized as a "REUNION" (as announced on a small sign), which brings to mind more of a high school reunion than a memorial for a traumatic chapter of U.S. history. Indeed, when Jenny and Jim

arrive on the scene, other participants are busy “setting up a crude stage” and “unfolding long portable tables for food” (369). Just a little earlier, when Jenny describes the event to Jim, he responds with indignation: ““They think this is some kind of cookout?’ he spat. ‘So we’ll all sit around and eat *burgers?*’” (367). Furthermore, Jenny sees an old school bus in the parking lot with “*MANZANAR OR BUST!* ... spray-painted into the back” (369). To add final insult to injury, a young man, who Jenny realizes is the same age as her father was when he was interned, approaches them “clutching a taiko drum like a beer keg to his chest. ‘Welcome!’ he called. ‘We’re just now setting up. Give a hand if you want, or just dig the cool view’” (369). Overall, the buffet-style cookout, tongue-in-cheek school bus slogan, and taiko-drumming young man urging them to “dig the cool view” work together to lend the scene an absurd and dissociative, at best, and even irreverent, at worst, atmosphere.⁴

What I contend, however, is that this disjuncture between the aggressively irreverent tone and its traumatic referent (internment) signals not so much the foreclosure of identity politics, but precisely its very condition of possibility in offering an alternate mode of recognizing and registering racial injury. What it offers is the possibility of depth perception in grappling with the crisis ordinariness of the internment. To render the scene of traumatic violence mundane is not to obscure or repress, but rather to bring it into fuller view, to contract an entire possible process

⁴ In her close reading of the ending, Patricia Chu provides a similar gloss on the sensibility of absurdity that pervades it: “With this, as with her merciless sketch of the next generation with their taiko drums, ready to “dig the cool view” and determined to get to an ethnic politic or bust, Choi gives a sincere nod to the building of that politic while at the same time emphasizing elements of the absurd—“JENNY” buttons?” (549). However, while Chu argues that such absurdity reveals the novel’s critique of identity politics as equally evacuated of meaning or sense, I claim the opposite. For me, the elements of disjuncture and surrealism in the concluding scene function as the grounding to building an alternate (i.e. phenomenological) model of identity politics, one capacious enough to maintain precisely the tonal tensions between the quotidian and the exceptional (what I term, “depth perception”).

into a single perceptual act. Consider the telling conversation between Jenny and Jim during their drive up to the reunion, when the latter comments on the passing scenery:

“A landscape like this, it takes a rigorous mind to appreciate. There’s a certain austerity to it. Most people find this too lonely. These ugly hills, how tall do you think they are?”

“I can’t tell. They seem like they might be little humps, or big enough to be small mountains. I’m having trouble judging how far the Sierras are, too.”

“They’re close. Close. ... You’re having trouble judging the height of these hills because there’s nothing on them to give you a sense of scale. That’s what’s so amazing. They’re only a few hundred feet at the most. ...” (368).

Is not what is lacking here precisely a literalized sense of depth perception? For Jim, what the internment divests him of is this much-needed depth perception, that is, the ability to distinguish between “little humps” or “small mountains” by holding them in view in relation to one another. Otherwise, the absence of “a sense of scale” prevents visibility—or even more crucially, “judgment”—altogether. In the last few lines of the novel, Jim announces:

“Hey, ... I *lived* here.”

“I know,” [Jenny] said.

“Let’s go help them set up.” He turned and strode off. (369)

Thus, Jim’s claiming of his own internment experience and eventual concession to participate and “help” is only made possible when a previously absent depth perception has been achieved, when the quotidian signs of ordinary life are held in a reciprocal tension with the scenes of exceptional trauma that allows for each to be perceived at all.

The progression here from “sense of scale” to “judgment” crystallizes the corresponding critical turns that have taken place throughout my argument. By recasting perceptual capacities, embodied habituation, and spatial sensibilities rather than predetermined identity as the basis from which political commitment might develop, I have offered an alternative account of racial form at its most recalcitrant to representation. I have suggested that Choi’s novel locates injury as the ontological basis of the racial subject’s claim to identity and its ineluctable politicization.

However, rather than its mere renunciation for transcendence into abstracted universalism, *American Woman* re-considers how injury might be reconstituted into “minor” or “ugly” (to borrow Ngai’s formulation of weak or diffuse political effects) forms in order to induce a necessary reframing of racial subjectivity through recognition without reduction. Such reframing is undertaken through the archival excavation of 1970’s Women’s Liberation and in doing so, the novel outlines the possibilities that a phenomenological account of the relationship between the personal and the political might offer Asian American identity politics. The spatialized reconfiguration of racial formation as untethered from the subject’s attempts to politicize the injuries of identity or identify a set of politics may produce disorientating effects at first. However, as the enduring forms of injurious and pleasurable embodied affects prove, race and its attachments can continue to live on long past the racial subject’s own undoing.

CHAPTER THREE

Curatorial Technique, Coolie Labour, and Factory Work

in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*

Chang-rae Lee's 2014 dystopian novel *On Such a Full Sea* offers less an exciting than an underwhelming twist on the classic tropes of techno-Orientalism, a genre of speculative fiction that envisions the arrival of the future specifically through diffuse signifiers of "Asian culture." Less *Bladerunner* or *Cloud Atlas*, Lee's novel takes place not in a slick, hyper-technologized East Asian cityscape, but rather, unfolds along a quotidian, almost tedious, aesthetic register. In Lee's novel, we know the future is Asian not because there are flying cars and colossal skyscrapers, but because of the snacks these dystopian subjects consume (mochi, egg custards, dumplings), their sartorial sensibilities ("the sash and uniform of the salesgirls at the department store"), and the vernacular proverbs that circulate among them ("Save some noodles for tomorrow's lunch."). To put it bluntly, Lee's dystopian vision is not so much provocative and thrilling as it is thoroughly muted. The charge of the novel's lackluster formal contributions to the dystopian genre as co-extensive with the shortcomings of its social critique is articulated clearly and succinctly in Min Hyoung Song's review of the work for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Pointing out that Lee's latest effort "feels like a halfhearted dystopia," Song elaborates that the novel "doesn't follow through enough in pursuing its premise that dystopian fiction is a well-crafted vehicle for exploring the problems of the present" ("Between Genres"). For Song, it is precisely the novel's generic failings that render it socio-politically ineffective. As he notes, the "depiction" of the alternate dystopian world "isn't as satisfying as it should be" and as a result, the novel fails as "a particularly good example of dystopic fiction, if what is prized is

immersion, action, the building of a world that may speak to concerns in our own world but only through metaphor and distance.” Indeed, the novel’s muted techno-Orientalist aesthetics reflect and inform its thematic articulation of racial politics, or rather, *its lack thereof*.

Although racial conflict is obliquely referenced through the world-building of *On Such a Full Sea*, its action remains confined to the historical past that takes place before the events being narrativized. Tellingly revealed through museum artifacts and “history class materials” (Lee 81), we come to learn that the society of “B-Mor” originated from the re-settlement of “New China” immigrants in what was previously the city of Baltimore, and in the process of doing so, displaced the “indigenous population” (21) of Latin and African American residents. However, this initial “transition” phase, which spurred protests and riots on the part of the displaced population, remains firmly located in the narrative past, for as the narrator assures us, “whatever was in question when the originals landed long ago is by now for us a set of curiosities, like the crank on an ancient automobile, or the virtual keys on a computer screen, the inconvenient or tiresome having been steadily engineered away” (13). Like other forms of obsolete technology then, the “inconvenient” and “tiresome” divisions of previous racial orders have been superseded, replaced by the racially homogenous (New) Chinese society of the present-day. Perhaps most telling of the new racial order that prevails in the novel’s alternate reality is the confusion that Fan, the protagonist and B-Mor resident, expresses toward the meaning and relevance of her ethnic identity:

New China [was] a most distant notion that was hardly ever mentioned ... Yet in bloodlines it was where she came from, it was what she looked like, and when she mused about it now, she wondered whether the legacy should mean more to her, especially as she was carrying a child. It was a talisman that was hers but which she kept solely on a shelf, an object that might indeed be powerful but only if she brought it down and pressed it to her brow and asked something significant of it. But what was that? And how would she ever come to know? (188)

Tellingly, Fan conceives of her phenotypical racial characteristics (the “legacy” of her “bloodlines”) as a “talisman” or “object” that can be “kept solely on a shelf” and taken down or put back, presumably, at will. Just as cultural signifiers of Asian-ness manifest merely at the level of food or clothing, so is race now similarly rendered merely a decorative adornment that can be alternately “brought down” and put away, indexing an absence in the historical and structural forces of racial antagonism within this alternate social landscape. If race and racialization have been radically transformed by the end of the world as we know it in the novel, however, that is not to say that social inequalities and political injustices no longer exist. In fact, if anything, life seems more precarious than ever within Lee’s dystopia. More specifically, no longer hierarchized along racialized lines, biological life has become subjected to an overriding biopolitical differentiation into healthful versus diseased forms.

In the novel’s not-so-distant future, U.S. society has become rigidly stratified along class divisions into three distinct sectors: the Charters, a set of elite villages populated by those possessing spectacular and unimaginable wealth; settlements, such as B-Mor, gated communities of Chinese immigrant labourers who have been brought overseas to resettle ostensibly abandoned urban centres in order to produce and export consumer goods exclusively for Charter consumption; and the counties, the environmentally-devastated anarchic wasteland outside of both the Charters and settlements, in which the conditions of life retain nothing “beyond the basic functions” (116). Roughly, the plot of the novel follows Fan as she navigates a perilous journey through all three distinctly spatialized sectors in order to be reunited with the father of her unborn child. If the vision of an intensely stratified social landscape in which economically differentiated populations have highly uneven access to basic material necessities and resources is hardly unrecognizable from contemporary U.S. society, then what distinguishes the novel as

dystopian versus simply realist fiction (of American economic disparity) is the mysterious illness of “C” (perhaps an allusion to cancer) that universally afflicts every resident of this alternate world. Although the origins, causes, and pathology of “C” are never fully elaborated, the novel hints that it is partially the result of the widespread environmental degradation that has taken place. As the narrator explains, “Our tainted world looms within us, every one” (75) such that “[n]obody goes C-free—nobody—an axiom that we B-Mors and counties people have surely accepted but that Charters probably never will, given the obscuring veil their essentially inexhaustible resources can throw over reality” (117). Thus, predictably, under the conditions of late capitalism, the effects of environmental disaster impacts different populations differently (that is, biopolitically). Whereas the “haves” possess “enough wealth to visit their specialists as often as they wish, theoretically ad infinitum, or at least until their bodies eventually succumb to the accrued effect of the interventions” (116-7), the “have-nots” are quietly resigned and consigned to an entirely reduced capacity for biological life.

The novel’s seeming displacement of racial difference by economically-driven biopolitical distinctions between increased versus diminished biological potentiality perhaps finds its most “real-life” resonance in the model of what I characterize as the “Whole Foods ethos.” As Joshua Clark Davis details in *From Head Shops to Whole Foods*, the origins of Whole Foods Market began in 1978 when John Mackey and his partner Renee Lawson, whom he met while living in a vegetarian co-op residence, opened their own natural foods store, SaferWay (a wordplay on the supermarket chain, Safeway). SaferWay emerged out of a growing social awareness of the holistic benefits of natural, organic, and macrobiotic diets during the 1970s. Tied to other progressive social movements of the decade, such as “[e]nvironmentalism, pacifism, animal rights, anarchism, and the counterculture—all contributed to natural foods’

ideological profile in the early 1970s” (Davis 191). In September 1980, Mackey and Lawson merged SaferWay with a competing natural foods shop in the area, and opened the new store as Whole Foods Market on Lamar Boulevard in Austin, Texas (211). As Davis further elaborates, the company has strayed far indeed from its countercultural and radical activist roots, given that its “message for environmental and social transformation is essentially a philosophy of self-reform, a prescription of individual health and wellness that avoids making any demands for systemic change” (225). In probing the racialized contradictions underpinning such an ideology of self-reform, I consider Whole Foods as merely a representative example of a growing social sensibility and ethical commitment toward “slowing down.”

In recognition that the accelerated pace of late capitalism is destroying entire social and environmental life-worlds, advocates and proponents of the contemporary social movement for “slow living” urge its practitioners to “lead slower, more ‘grounded’ lives” (Parkins and Craig 2) in “a conscious attempt to change the current temporal order to one which offers more time, time to attend to everyday life” (3). From the “so-called ‘wellness revolution’ [that] places emphasis on bodily well-being and is linked to the increasing popularity of ‘slow’ practices such as yoga and meditation” to the “return to creative practices, such as knitting or gardening” (2), slow living is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of social phenomena and practices. However, what they all ultimately share is an emphasis on the values of “‘care’, ‘attention’ and ‘mindfulness’ ... whether in relation to cooking, walking, meditating, gardening or just doing *nothing*” (4). One of the most prominent strands of the “slow revolution” is the Slow Food movement, which emerged out of organized protests in 1989 against the opening of a McDonalds in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome (Parkins and Craig). Slow Food, although composed of a diverse range of ideologies, practices, and activities, generally shares a broad

interest in the relationship between pleasure (taste and quality) and ecology (environmental biodiversity and systems of agricultural production) when it comes to food, combined with “a political focus on the deleterious effects of globalization” (20). To be clear, I am contextualizing the Whole Foods ethos less as a faithful interpretation of Slow Food’s ideals than as its hyper-commodified (per)version given that the cultural cachet of the company manifests through the aestheticized pleasures of slow living’s emphasis on mindful, healthful, and environmentally sustainable modes of consumption.

For my purposes here, I am particularly interested in how the contemporary social desire for a better life and a better self, as negotiated through self-reform ideologies of literalized and figurative consumption practices, unknowingly but necessarily rest on cultural imaginaries of racialized labour. To raise the question another way, perhaps more bluntly, I ask why a place like Whole Foods Market, as a microcosm for how biological life is characterized by discourses and politics of organicism and “natural-ness,” might *feel* so inhospitable for racialized Third World bodies and lives (even as the former proclaims its commitment to fair trade, environmentally sustainable, and socially just practices and products). Or, to frame the inquiry through the terms of Lee’s novel: Where does race go—and what happens to it—when it is effaced through an entire repertoire of seemingly deracinated and (in its stead) biopoliticized self-reform ethos that pivots on the advancement of “individual freedom, self-therapy, and wellness” (Davis 240)?

In what follows, I aim to approach such questions by theorizing the essential racialized structure of the ethics of slow living (or, the Whole Foods ethos). To do so, the rest of the chapter is divided into three broad sections. In the first, I track the formation of an emergent model of biopolitical subjectivization that I term “the curation of the self.” Informed by Michel Foucault’s work on the “care of the self,” as produced through both pastoral governmentality

(subjection) and technology of the self (subjectivization), I argue that the “curation of the self” constitutes a specifically aestheticized model of biopolitical subjectivity as a condition of and response to our historical present as one constituted through the catastrophic combination of late capitalism, bio- and necro-political governmentality, and widespread environmental devastation—producing, in turn, what Lauren Berlant terms “slow death” as “a contemporary way of being” (102). Taking as my cue the etymological origins of the term “curation”—derived from the Latin *cūrāre*, referring to practices of both political care-taking and custodianship (under Roman Law) as well as religious curing and healing (during the Middle Ages)—I develop and extend the concept of self-curation as techniques of subjectivization that condenses precisely both a form of care, as the cultivation of an embodied, individuated self that maximizes the capacity for biological life, *and* cure, as an imagined defense against the threat of inhumanizing racial labour. In doing so, I probe the contradiction that arises between Foucault’s account of the biopolitical imperative to maximize the probabilities of life at the generalized level of the population and its application to the individuated embodied subject of slow death. Such a tension between the regulation of collective species life and the necessity of intervening at the level of the individual in order to achieve the former serves to split life into two separate dimensions: that of life in its abstract, calculable form (the population) and life as sensorial, vital matter. The curation of the self stages precisely the contradiction produced at the nexus of these two different forms of life. As the curatorial subject seeks to increase its “best chances” for ever-more life (by meticulously stylizing its entire existence through such an imperative), it must rely on mechanized and industrialized (abstracted) relations to labour that paradoxically diminish its capacity to experience the organic and material dimensions of biological life.

In order to lay bare the contradiction at the heart of self-curation, I move into the second section to contextualize the problem through theories of Asian American political economy. Ultimately, I argue here that curatorial techniques are animated by a specifically racialized fetishization that functions to *mediate* the abstract and concrete dimensions of life in order to produce it as a coherent whole, that is, imbue it with a properly human form. To do so, I illuminate how B-Mor's origin story condenses historical discourses of indentured coolie labour and contemporary imaginaries of overseas Chinese factory work in order to designate the Asiatic labouring body as a form of perverse racial difference. Such perversity lies in precisely Asian labour's propensity to assume the force of capitalist abstraction itself, and in turn, contaminate what it produces with its inhumanizing quality. However, rather than reproduce this historical and cultural discourse of inhuman Asiatic labour, Lee radically subverts conventional signifiers of Chinese factory work by aligning it with the modernist logics of aesthetic craft production. By restaging factory labour through the antimony between craft versus (fine) art, the novel revises the traditional paradigm of a humanist Marxism that idealizes the alienated worker's return to a "natural state" (through artisanal craft production). In its stead, Lee articulates an aestheticized discourse of racial ambivalence through which Asian bodies and labour are produced and valued precisely through their simultaneously abstract (fungible) and concrete (sensorial) dimensions. In encoding such different historical iterations of racial labour within one another, *On Such a Full Sea* ultimately posits Asian racialization as increasingly central, due to its mediating capacity, to the production of a properly human form of biological life.

Self-curation's valuation of authentic corporeality through mimetic fungibility, its desire for the human touch through an inhumanizing abstraction, characterizes precisely the structuring logic of what I term its racial fetishism. Bringing together Homi Bhabha's racial gloss of the

Freudian fetish and Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, I move to argue that curatorial technique is structured by the twin logics of the repudiation of racialized inhumanization (through the perverse quality of Asian labour) and the retention of racial labour's mediation of fungible reproducibility and sensorial materiality. I conclude my final section by considering how, in the novel, it is specifically Asian feminized bodies and subjects who come to personify the racial fetishism that animates self-curation. If such is the case, then I limn the recuperative possibilities in foregrounding precisely the Asian feminized figure as the site through which political projects that articulate an alternate model of life itself might be configured.

I. Macrobio(poli)tic Diets, Microcosmic Selves

Given that there is no absolute cure for "C," at best only the privilege of "serial treatments and procedures that Charters now consider a natural part of the experience of life, applied measure after measure, each one increasingly heroic" (Lee 75) that merely delay the inevitable, we might say that in the world of the novel, "[d]eath was no longer something that suddenly swooped down on life—as in an epidemic. Death was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it" (Foucault, *SMBD* 244). This transformation of death from an issue of epidemics to that which is endemic to life itself is symptomatic of the emergence of a "new technology of power" (243) that Foucault terms "biopower" and "biopolitics." Linking the attritions of biopolitics and capitalism together, Lauren Berlant deploys the term "slow death"—defined as the paradoxical "condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life" (100)—to designate how the "the destruction of life, bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under contemporary regimes of capital" (104) has effectively rendered life and death "coextensive." To counteract the slow death of "C"—under the conditions of which as Vik explains to Fan, "they were never actually 'well,' given the

constant stress of regimens and associated side effects” (Lee 320)—via recourse to the tenets of slow living is precisely the strategy assumed by the Charters.

If life and death appear less in contrast to one another but rather, disconcertingly “coextensive,” then one must assume a hyper-vigilance against the latter category within every aspect of the former. The relentless quest for mastery over death in each and every dimension of existence is reflected in the overarching Charter philosophy, one that seeks to slow life down to its minutiae in an effort to maximize it, beginning with the most everyday practice of all, eating. As the narrator remarks, “Eating was obviously elementary, it was what people did most of in their day, literally taking in the world” (397). The Charters’ obsessive attention to their food’s “most critical quality of all, which can only healthfulness” has made them “famously nervous, for despite their wealth and security and self-satisfied demeanors, they are obsessed with minimizing hazards of any kind, and are perhaps racked most of all by the finally unknowable dangers of what they ingest. It’s the only thing that they have not mastered” (Lee 114). In fact, the settlement of B-Mor, which raises fish and grows produce exclusively for Charter consumption, was established for the express purpose of “offering them full confidence that there are no compromising or exogenous elements, nothing but the fortifications exactly specified by them and them alone” (115). The Charters’ quest for mastery over what they ingest, and the maintenance of a symbiotic producer-consumer relationship in order to secure that confidence, can therefore be regarded as a hyper-intensified and satirized version of Slow Food’s commitment to “local,” “organic,” and “sustainable” sourcing as part of an overall emphasis on food’s quality over its quantity (Parkins and Craig 75).

For example, an exemplary scene of the Charters’ rehearsal of Slow Food’s ideology and practice can be discerned in Oliver’s stance on eating, towards which he takes:

a particularly intensive interest, not so much from a gastronomic angle about how things should taste but rather with the idea that each of them—even the babies—should take part in the production of the meal, from the selection of the ingredients at the village market to the chopping and measuring and cooking (the babies given a strong whiff of everything, from ginger slices to cinnamon sticks, after which they’d sometimes cry), the idea being a holistic appreciation through mindful exertions that would result in the best chance for well-being. (397)

Oliver’s efforts here in fostering a “holistic appreciation” for eating and food within his family derives specifically from the concept of “taste education,” which is one of Slow Food’s long-term campaigns. Taste education is based on the “ambitious aim of returning to the sensory experiences of food, based on pleasure, and a commitment to the investment of time in such pleasures. Teaching children, for instance, of the panoply of possible flavours, textures and colours, with an emphasis on the tactile and sensual experience of food – from garden to kitchen to plate – is not about the cultivation of *taste* in the traditional gastronomic sense but of *appetite* – for food, play and knowledge” (Parkins and Craig 27). From “holistic appreciation” to “mindful exertions” to “best chance for well-being,” slow living’s language of “care,” “mindfulness,” and “wellness” suffuses the scene in the mode of satire. However, Oliver’s rehearsal of taste education also signals a strange contradiction in the internal logic of Slow Food, and the slow living movement more broadly. The distinction between “taste” (in its narrow gastronomic sense) and appetite (as a holistic experience from market to kitchen to plate) turns on the tension between the selectedness (and as I will go on to argue, curation) of the separate ingredients and the tactile pleasure of the meal in its entirety, from “selection ... to chopping and measuring and cooking” (as opposed to the singular moment of gastronomic consumption). Although each ingredient of the meal is to be selected with the utmost attention and care (mindful exertions), they do not simply “add up” to guarantee the meal’s success. Crucially, well-being cannot be secured here, only its “best chance.” Instead, its closest approximation is

engendered in the form of a holistic appreciation that is and must be greater than the sum of its parts. As the practitioners of slow living might put it, it is the process (slowness) that matters here, not the outcome itself (since goal-oriented thinking is precisely the logic of capitalist productivity). However, as Oliver's version of taste education also reminds, the process cannot be a haphazard one, for it is one that depends on careful selection and curation in order to maximize the best chance for (rather than the guarantee of) success.

The slow logic of "mindfulness" is one that the Charters apply not only to the arena of food and eating but to every single facet of their lives, to a nightmarishly heightened degree. As Fan observes of Vik Upendra, the young Charter doctor who takes her in:

If anything, he was as highly evolved as any successful young Charter could be, the elements of his existence rigorously tuned, as were those of all his peers, with "best practices" in mind, those ever-optimizing metrics that we in B-Mor know as well as anybody, though ours are, of course, designed ultimately to smooth our unitary workings. Charters, on the contrary, are always striving to be exquisite microcosms, testing and honing and curating every texture and thread of their lives, from what they eat and watch and wear to whom they befriend and make love to, being lifelong and thus expert Connoisseurs of Me. (296-7)

Here, the "ever-optimizing metrics" that induce the Charters' constant "testing and honing and curating" of "every texture and thread of their lives" in order to transform them, each and every one into "exquisite microcosms" constitutes the model of, what I term, the curation of the self, as the ultimate perversion of the ideals of slow living ("best practices"). As we have already seen, life in the Charters seems determined by the operations of the technology of biopower, which Foucault defines as the power to "make live and let die" (*SMBD* 241)—in contrast to the sovereign right to "take life or let live"—and thus seeks, above all else, to "optimize a state of life" within "a population of living beings" (246). The Charters' "slow" hyper-vigilance toward "minimizing hazards of any kind" in their food in order to ensure its maximal capacity for "healthfulness" would seem to exemplify precisely biopower's injunction to extract, maximize,

and optimize the biological forces of life. However, as Foucault explains, whereas disciplinary power “train[s] individuals by working at the level of the body itself” (246), biopower and biopolitics are directed not at the individual but at the “population,” which, in this instantiation, becomes precisely “a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” [245]), “directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (243). Because such power is less individualizing as it is “massifying” (Foucault, *SMBD* 243), the mechanisms of biopower include “forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures,” as “their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but, essentially, to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality” (246). To put it simply then, whereas discipline operates on the micro-scale of individuated subjectivity (training individuals into “docile bodies”), biopower works on the macro-scale of the population in general. However, what the Charters’ curation of the self raises is precisely the contradiction that arises when biopower becomes turned inward, or leveled precisely at the micro-scale (“microcosm”) of the individual. Or put another way, what happens when an individuated life is regarded *as* an entire population, not to be disciplined, but “regularized” (247)? What if each and every individual considered oneself not as a singular subject, but as if the whole of one’s existence were a set of phenomena that required intervention at the level of their generality (rather than individuality)?

The trope of the “microcosm,” to which Charter individuals are compared, is in fact one that recurs throughout the text. In the earlier iteration we encountered, it is used to convey the pervasive effects of widespread ecological devastation on individual bodies and health (“Our tainted world looms within us, every one”). In its very opening pages, the novel considers the possibility that “each and every being in the realm is a microcosm of the realm” (3), only to

conclude, tellingly, that the “question, then, is whether being an ‘individual’ makes a difference anymore” (3). Perhaps, most conspicuously of all, the trope of the individual subject as a microcosm for the larger “world” or “realm” is formally rehearsed through the novel’s mode of narration, in the form of a first-person-plural “we” who functions as the collective voice of B-Mor itself. What the textual recurrence of the microcosm signals, narratively and formally, is the ineluctable blurring between individual and collective phenomena (bodies versus worlds). In the above passage describing the Charter lifestyle, the constant striving to transform each and every individual into an “exquisite microcosm” extends this categorical collapse to its furthest extreme to consider the effects of biopolitical calculation and intervention as applied to the individual subject who paradoxically regards their life not merely as a singular “organism endowed with capacities,” but rather, a set of “general biological processes” (Foucault, *SMBD* 249), as an entire field of aleatory and random elements that must be regularized. Such is precisely the logic and mechanism of curation. The work of transforming oneself into an exquisite microcosm depends less on the optimization of an individual dimension of life so much as the careful (or to borrow from an earlier passage, “holistic”) curation of its “every texture and thread” that together compose or add up to an equilibrated whole (“Me”).

As a contrast case, consider Foucault’s description of the ideal figure of disciplinary technique, the soldier, in *Discipline and Punish*: “the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected, a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit” (135). In short, discipline worked on the body in “‘retail’, individually; ... of obtaining holds upon it at the level of mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity; an infinitesimal power over

the active body” (Foucault, *Discipline* 137). The imagery and language that Foucault draws on here, of the calculated, mechanized automaton, broken down into increasingly-infinitesimal components or fragments (movements, gestures, attitudes), which are then subjected to “correction” and “constraint,” runs far afield of the organicism of the living and breathing microcosm. The rhetoric of aesthetics (“exquisite,” “curating,” “texture and thread”) situates the latter in closer proximity to Foucault’s late turn to the technologies of the self, which he posits as working in tandem with technologies of power, such as either discipline or biopolitics; in other words, the shift from how subjects are governed to how they make themselves governable (“Technologies of the Self”). As Foucault explains, one particular technology of the self, as derived from the ancient Greeks, is the “care of the self,” which regarded ethical conduct as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (*The Use of Pleasure* 10-11). Thus, the Charters’ curation of the self—through which individual subjects regard their each and every existence as living works of art (“every texture and thread” to be obsessively curated)—might be regarded as the perverse literalization of Foucault’s account of the “care of the self.”

The juxtaposition between the “deadened” mechanization of disciplinary technique versus the organicism of a living and breathing biopower at work is reinforced in another scene detailing the curatorial technique by which the Charters lead their lives. While on a gift-shopping trip with Vik in the Charter village of Seneca, during which he “was searching for the singular gift, something they might use often or not at all but that would complement the distinctive needs or lifestyle of the receiver” (Lee 306), he and Fan browsed kitchenware shops “lined with

unending inventories of luxury glassware, pans, ladles, and spatulas, such that Fan had to think that every dish that Charters made (or was made for them) had to be served or prepared with a dedicated series of implements, vessels. And by extension, that every movement or act of Charter life, however trivial, required specialty objects and mechanisms for the best chance at an ideal outcome” (306). The recurrence here, in the Charter propensity for curation—as discerned not merely in Vik’s efforts to find the perfect gift, but also more broadly, in the ability to select the most fitting object from among “unending inventories” of presumably similar items—toward the ultimate end of producing the “best chance” for an “ideal outcome” (rather than simply the outcome itself) recalls the earlier passage of Oliver’s interest in taste education. The repeated invocation of “best chance” in both instances indicates, once again, that what is at work in the Charters’ curatorial technology of the self is not so much discipline as it is biopower.

Recall that biopower constitutes “a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events[,] ... a technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers” (*SMBD* 249)—for all of these reasons, the mechanisms of biopower are probability forecasts and statistical estimates. Regarding the apparatus of security, as a specific mechanism of biopower, Foucault explains that it works within the realm of probabilities precisely because it does not seek to establish “a binary division between the permitted and the prohibited” (*STP* 6), but instead, operates by “maximizing the positive elements, for which one provides the best circulation, and of minimizing what is risky and inconvenient” (19). In this way, circulation—defined “in the very broad sense of movement, exchange, and contact, as form of dispersion, and

also as form of distribution” (Foucault, *STP* 64)—becomes a key technique in the installment of security, through which “the components of reality” are made “to work in relation to each other, thanks to and through a series of analyses and specific arrangements” (47). The work of circulation, distribution, and arrangement, as the bases of securing probabilities (rather than the outcome itself), are precisely the techniques of curation at work in the Charters’ projects of existence. In the description of Fan’s shopping trip with Vik, what characterizes the Charters’ curatorial practices, in selecting from an “unending inventory” of practically indistinguishable items, is less the prohibition of “bad” or “defective” objects, but rather the maximization of what might be most complementary to one’s “distinctive needs or lifestyle” and conversely, the minimization of that which threatens the probability for success. In particular, the emphasis being placed here is not on the quality of each singular implement or vessel in and of themselves, but rather, on their particular composition and distribution into a “dedicated series.” Thus, the proper arrangement of “every movement or act of Charter life” (not its breaking-down into discrete components, which are, in turn, individually perfected), as meticulously coordinated to each complementary instrument—in a word, curation—is what maximizes the “best chance” (increases the probability) for an ideal outcome.

Taken together, both the descriptions of Vik and his shopping trip with Fan offer an illuminating model of the curation of the self. It is one that I have been sketching, following from Foucault, as a specifically biopolitical technology of the self, through which the very subjectivity of the “self” is paradoxically displaced. Instead, the individual is transformed into (exquisite) microcosm—that is, a series of elements and events that, subjected to an “ever-optimizing metrics” of probabilities, are relentlessly calculated, arranged, and regulated in order to approximate an ideal equilibrium. By extension then, the novel’s satirization of the slow living

movement turns on precisely this revelation that undergirding its philosophy and tenets, is the biopolitical technique of curation that seeks to extract and optimize a state of biological life. However, as the Charters' symbiotic relationship to B-Mor also reveals, a central contradiction animates their curatorial existence. On the one hand, the Charters' quest for ultimate mastery over what they ingest reflects their singular pursuit of securing life itself (and its endless continuation) at all cost, and yet, on the other, in their precarious world of slow death, there can be no absolute guarantee of life, only its highest probability ("best chance"). Thus, the promise of life in the abstract (as an estimated projection in a given population) exists in contradiction with life in its actual or concrete form. We can discern the significant discrepancy between these two distinct forms of life through the figuration of excess in scenes of Charter (slow) living, which serve to index how the maximization of abstract life through mechanized and industrial production techniques results in a proportionally inverse diminishment in the capacity for "natural" forms of corporeal and sensual vitality.

Beyond the predictably hefty psychic toll exacted by the pressure to maintain the typical Charter lifestyle—such as "that empty-lunged feeling that can come from being measured, unceasingly, from the moment of birth" (Lee 134) or "their tightly compacted psyches [that] require regular and deep unwinding" (141)—beyond such signs of obvious psychological distress, there is also the perhaps more unsettling possibility that the ultimate fulfillment of the Charters' curatorial logic results not in its own purported objectives of optimizing biological life (making more life) but, in fact, its very inverse. For instance, during her first meal in the Charter village, Fan notices that although the food had been prepared "with careful attention to healthfulness" and while "[i]t was all very fresh and vibrant and delectable looking, ... afterward Fan had to say that none of it was half as tasty as she expected it to be, though she couldn't

exactly say why. It was seasoned enough and not unusually bitter or sweet, but there was something fundamentally sterile about it, as if the food had not been touched by human hands” (199). It is precisely this absence of tactile and sensory pleasure that Oliver attempts to re-introduce in the previous scene of taste education. Or, when Fan visits a fitness centre for the first time, she observes that everyone there “looked fit enough and not one of them could be termed fat, but it seemed to Fan they were maintaining themselves in a stressful way, such as not quite eating enough, their dogged faces a bit too drawn, even slightly dessicated” (307). Together, the characterization of Charter food as “sterile” and untouched by human hands and the “fit body” as animalistic (“dogged”) or even corpse-like (“dessicated”) suggests that maximizing health to excess paradoxically reduces biological species-life to an inorganic, less-human, or inanimate state. In both cases, what is revealed as the contradiction animating the curation of the self is precisely the separation between life, abstracted (“sterilized”) as an optimized principle, and its concretized dimension as animate and sensorial matter. Furthermore, as the text lays bare, the two exist in an active relation of disproportion to one another, wherein the increase of the former results in the decrease of the latter.

Another way to frame such a contradiction is through the co-extensivity of disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. Foucault contends that, crucially, discipline and biopower “are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated with each other” (*SMBD* 250) such that the latter does not exclude the former, but “does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques” (242). If such is the case—that disciplinary and biopolitical techniques can work in tandem with one another—then the ambivalent relationship between B-Mor and the Charters also reveals the points of contradiction and rupture that emerge along their co-articulation. By way of illustration,

we can turn to the stark juxtaposition between the different methods by which the Charters secure their food sources. As mentioned previously, due their “famously nervous” constitution over “minimizing hazards of any kind” in what they ingest, the Charters have established a tightly-structured producer-consumer relationship with B-Mor in order to ensure that the latter provides them the “full confidence” of “the fortifications exactly specified by them and them alone.” In a number of scenes throughout the novel that describe the grow facilities, and in particular fish tanks, in which B-Mor raises the fish that are exported for Charter consumption, the details of their setting and techniques are enumerated to an almost tedious degree. We are assured that the grow process is one that has been “ideally engineered” for “maximized production” (Lee 81) such that:

every factor of temperature and water composition and nutrients et cetera has been engineered and tested and monitored, the formulations optimized to the extent that there are code manuals for every stage of development, each stage broken down into smaller intervals, such that the tank operators can recalibrate almost hourly, say, by adding a certain mineral tincture or upping the temperature of the inflows a half degree. Even the daily cleaning of a diver’s suit is done the same way each time, exactly, so as to minimize the introduction of contaminants. (111-2)

However, despite B-Mor’s extensive efforts to ensure their quality of production, a strange new movement begins to gain momentum amongst the Charters. Called Back to Soil, the movement is one in which Charter experts attempt experimental farming in the open counties in order “presumably to see what the qualities of what they raised and grew in a totally ‘natural’ way might be” (116). As the B-Mor narrator elaborates:

The fact that ‘natural’ is no longer a dirty word is amazing, seeing how the Charters had pretty much given up on everything outside their gates and ours ... Back to Soil, we have to explain to our young ones, is a reprise of an old philosophy about the unequaled purity of naturally growing things, that a particular and endemic matrix of earth and water and air and sun will result in the ideal expression of whatever one is growing, in color, structure, taste, and, of course, the most critical quality of all, which can only be healthfulness. (116)

The resonances between Back to Soil and Slow Food are clearly articulated here, given that a fundamental tenet of the latter involves the concept of *terroir* (from the French term for territory), which refers to “the specificity of place that stems from its traditions, the uniqueness of local food cultures and regional produce, that resides in the landscape, soil and climate” that “give an agricultural locality its unique character” (Parkins and Craig 76). In the juxtaposition between the “ideally engineered” artificial ecologies of B-Mor’s fish tanks and the “ideal expression” of “naturally growing things” within Back to Soil, we see the further intensification of the contradiction between a disciplinary technique—which, in mechanistically breaking down the living organism into its microscopic components, paradoxically reduces its capacity for animate life—and a biopower that requires the circulatory mechanisms of a living and breathing sensorial whole in order to extract and optimize an abstracted state of life, a contradiction that was previously signalled through the spectre of Charter excess.

In the Charters’ dependence on B-Mor’s production facilities and techniques, we can discern Foucault’s thesis at work, in which a thoroughly disciplined racialized underclass is marshalled by biopolitical mechanisms in achieving the latter’s effects (that is, optimizing the general population’s state of health and life). B-Mor’s production process and facilities, themselves a microcosm of B-Mor society at large, are subject to the strictest disciplinary controls, which are “exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement” (*DP* 137), as literalized in the “code manuals,” corresponding to each “broken down” infinitesimal interval of composition and temperature. However, if biopower’s seizure of life (its extraction and optimization) is consonant with, or even effected by, such disciplinary techniques, then it is precisely by the same token, that discipline becomes aligned with the petrification of life’s material and organic dimensions specifically through its

reproducible nature. In contradistinction to B-Mor's "ideally" calibrated and codified ecologies (both in specific reference to the production facilities as well as the wider sense), is the flourishing ("ideal expression") of a different kind of life. It is one, which, as conveyed through the ironic de-naturalization of the word "dirty," is rendered "natural" and "pure" precisely through its proximity to earthly dirt and soil. It is one which can be recovered only through a "holistic appreciation" that incorporates the realm of the tactile and the sensual. Recalling Oliver's taste education, Back to Soil here turns on the same slow and biopolitical curatorial logic by which only an irreproducible ("unequaled") arrangement or composition ("a particular and endemic matrix") of elements, installed in circulation with one another, that secures the highest probability of life ("healthfulness"). And yet, such a curatorial life necessarily produces that which remains in excess of itself, whether the disciplinary measures it deploys, toward optimizing a state of life, paradoxically robs the living organism of its vitality or its very abstraction, into calculable probability, requires the restoration of tactile materiality. As I will go on to argue, this fundamental excess or contradiction that animates the curation of the self constitutes a specifically racial fetish formed out of the perverse quality of Asian racialized labour, as signified through the narrative construction of B-Mor.

II. Van Gogh in China

The narrative history of B-Mor is given as thus: due to catastrophic environmental pollution that made their small riverside town, Xixu City, in "New China" uninhabitable, New Chinese labourers were brought overseas to transform a largely "abandoned" Baltimore (in fact, displacing its "native" residents of African and Latin American descent) into the present-day B-Mor, a gated settlement facility dedicated to farming fish and growing agricultural produce exclusively for Charter consumption. The origin story of B-Mor, therefore, signifies and enjoins

the narrative tropes of Asian labour during two distinct historical formations: that of Asian immigration to the U.S. as well as the contemporary discourse of Chinese factory work in the Western imaginary. It is precisely by marshalling and enfolding the two together that the novel reveals the perverse character of Asiatic labour that undergirds discourses of transnational Asian racial difference, as one that not only becomes conflated with the inhuman force of capitalist abstraction but that, in turn, also threatens to contaminate the products of such labour with its inhumanizing tendencies. Furthermore, in revealing the ambivalent structure of Asian racialized labour and subjectivities in the context of the Western global marketplace, I contend that these separate historical racial formations are not only firmly imbricated, but also, more crucially, operating in tandem to form the racial fetish of biopolitical curation.

In regarding B-Mor as encoded through Asian American history, we can unpack how its formations and functioning rehearse the “two aspects of the same, long-running [Asiatic] racial form” (Lye 5): model minority and yellow peril. Regarding the first of the two, as the narrator explains, “The originals were brought in en masse for a strict purpose but with their work- and family-centric culture intact, such that they would not only endure and eventually profit the seed investors but also prosper in a manner that would be perpetually regenerative” (Lee 22). The reference to the economic advantages of a “work- and family-centric culture” combined with the subsequent disclosure that in the process of their resettlement, these originals displaced the remaining “indigenous population” of the “native citizens” of Baltimore, primarily “descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves and twentieth-century laborers from Central America” (21) confirms, what Viet Nguyen terms, the “model minority thesis.” In the model minority thesis, Asian Americans are positioned as “a minority that can succeed ... through sheer hard work and perseverance based upon a system of social values that prioritizes family, education, and

sacrifice” (Nguyen 146), social values often referred to as Confucian. In turn, these purportedly shared “Confucian” values serve to discipline other minorities, particularly African and Latinx Americans, by demonstrating to them “what can be achieved through self-reliance rather than government assistance, ... and quiet restraint rather than vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice” (147). In being touted as “models,” Asian Americans therefore also function as “buffers,” for absorbing the rage and opposition of other minorities toward racist systemic inequities. One particularly charged historical instance in which the model minority thesis became explosively played out is the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the echoes of which clearly resound throughout the origin story of B-Mor itself.

As Colleen Lye importantly reminds us, however, model minority and yellow peril are simply flip-sides of the same coin, and that coin is the trope of economic efficiency. Tracking the historical conditions of the persistently economic form of Asian racialization, Lye mines nineteenth-century U.S. naturalist fiction to reveal how Asiatic figures often “referred not to persons but to a host of modernity’s dehumanizing effects (laboring conditions, group entities, corporations)” (*America’s Asia* 11). According to Lye, within these fictions, “the coolie signifies a different kind of monstrous presence, not the ambivalent pleasure of the body’s libidinal release, but, on the contrary, the prospect of its mechanical abstraction” (56). It is precisely by combining this mechanized “biological impossibility” along with the coolie’s representation of “numerical abstraction” that coolie labour figures “the degradation of work as a result of industrialization, a process fully realized when capitalism reaches a monopoly finance form” (Lye, *America’s Asia* 56-7). In a sense then, *On Such a Full Sea* can be positioned as the latest iteration within this genealogy of nineteenth-century fictions that articulated orientalist dystopian imaginaries of an American frontier invaded and over-run by cheap immigrant Chinese labour.

Even if, in Lee's novel, the threat of racialized labour to expropriate the American national body has been thoroughly domesticated through geographic and economic containment, the traces of these yellow peril tropes nonetheless persist in the representation of B-Mor's labour practices.

Recall that the motto of B-Mor's grow facilities is one which in urging "Trace Levels Show Haste Levels!" refers to their "ideally engineered" environments. As the narrator elaborates:

Every level and composition—from the feed, to the water, to the air, to the grow media, to the spectrum of the lighting—is constantly monitored and reviewed, though the truth is that over the years the calibrations have grown so fine that new equipment was necessarily developed, given how decimal places kept being added, the measuring process itself evolving into a kind of test of our mettle, to see how far we could go in realizing an ultimate standard. (115)

The inhuman spectre of coolie labour is invoked here through the conflation between the "measuring process itself" and the citizenry of B-Mor, as given in the substitution of numerical abstraction ("decimal places") for ("evolving into") the latter's subjectivity ("a kind of test of our mettle"). The play on the doubled meaning of "realize" as both fulfillment (as in to bring something to fruition) and conversion (as in to make something real) raises the nightmarish possibility that these B-Mor labourers, in a literalized sense, have become living embodiments of the abstraction of an "ultimate standard."

In this conflatory move, not only can we detect Lye's claim for how the coolie signifies "the prospect of ... mechanical abstraction" (*America's Asia* 56) as part of industrialization's assault on working labour ("new equipment was necessarily developed"), but we can also discern Iyko Day's identification of Asian racialization as inextricably aligned with the category of abstract value itself in *Alien Capital*. Extending Lye's argument, Day contends that the combination of a global capitalist as well as settler colonial order (note that B-Mor's originals are construed as racialized settlers through the language of indigeneity) within North American society has produced a valuation system of "romantic anticapitalism," through which

capitalist social relations have been split into an antinomy between the concrete (such as material objects and the unmediated modes of labour that produce them) and the abstract (the money form, relations of exchangeability, and the socially necessary labour time that converts highly differentiated labour into commensurable units). Under romantic anticapitalism, Asian subjects and bodies give form to, often by personifying, the destructive tendencies of capitalism's abstract dimensions. Exemplifying Day's formulation, the collapse in the distinction between the subjectivities of B-Mor's workers and the units of measurement of their labour (the former embodying and becoming an "ultimate standard") starkly illuminates how Asian racialization figures not merely the abstraction of labour (for instance, through industrial mechanization), but also, the very process of capitalist abstraction itself.

Crucially, however, contextualizing the yellow peril tropes of B-Mor's labour through Lye and Day serves to shed light on the racialized nature of life's separation into abstract and concrete dimensions within the curation of the self. Given the historical figuration of coolie labour, we might identify the Back to Soil movement's valorization of natural and organic life-forms as rehearsing a specifically racialized anxiety about the mechanical abstraction of the organic, biological processes of the body. The fish and produce farmed through the (highly disciplined) mechanized industrial production techniques of B-Mor's facilities, are associated with the abstract value of Asian racialized labour, which is, in turn, aligned with the destructive effects of capitalism that render life intangible, fungible, and ultimately inorganic. It is precisely against this threat of an inhumanizing (through abstraction) racial otherness that the realm of the concrete, which prizes all that is "real, sensory, or 'thingly'" (Day 10)—manifested in "naturally growing things" or "earth and water and air and sun" (Lee 116)—becomes established. Thus, the curation of the self is, in part, effected through the racialized repudiation and disavowal of the

abstracting tendencies of Asian labour that would render biological life less materially “real,” and against which it must shore itself up through recourse to the “unequaled purity” of an organicism rooted in the sensorial natural world.

Beyond Asian North American racial formation, the reference to an “ultimate standard” also, at the same time, doubly tropes the transnational standardization of labour, the most immediate visual grammar of which are Asian female workers in factory rows, in what Laura Hyun Yi Kang suggests “has arguably become one of the emblematic images of the global assembly line” (403). Thus, even as *B-Mor* encodes conventional tropes of Asian American identity (as both model minority and yellow peril), it also condenses contemporary anxieties concerning transnational Chinese factory work. By his own admission, Chang-rae Lee had in mind to write “a novel set in contemporary China, focussing on the factory towns outside of Shenzhen,” but ultimately decided on a slightly different direction while taking the train through “a derelict section of Baltimore” (*New Yorker* “Interview”). Beyond authorial intent, *B-Mor* simulates the site of Chinese factory labour through a number of characteristic features. For instance, its architectural-spatial composition as one of “gates ... insurmountable” (Lee 15) and “airless, chockablock row houses” (189) that are “oversubscribed” and “occupied right up to the rooftops” (62). Or, similarly, its highly-regulated social and temporal distribution, where “[s]tability is all here in *B-Mor*; it’s what we ultimately produce, day by night by day, both what we grow for consumption and how we are organized in neighborhood teams” (8) and where “routine is the method, and the reason, and the reward” (190). More than its formal and functional equivalence, however, it is *B-Mor*’s economic form that refracts Orientalist anxieties of yellow peril through Western dystopian imaginaries of Chinese factory work.

Let us reconsider the grow facilities’ facetiously cheery injunction “Trace Levels Show

Haste Levels!” In cautioning against hastiness and urging the facilities’ workers to slow down in order to ensure quality (presumably over quantity), the motto stages precisely the constitutive antimony of romantic anticapitalism. Glossing Marx, Day clarifies that just because something takes a longer time to make, it does not mean that thing will be more valuable or expensive. Thus, “concrete labor will only tell us how well made a commodity is; it is the *qualitative* dimension of use-value” whereas “abstract labor is a *quantitative* expression of value—it is an unfixed social average of human labor time” (Day 12). Recall also that for Day, it is always Asian labour which signifies the problematic aspects of latter, whereas the white body hypostatizes the romanticization of the former. Thus, an anxiety about the destructive effects of abstracting concrete labour time into a social average (that then determines the exchange-value of a commodity) in the form of compromising the quality (use-value) of the product itself is precisely what is being articulated through the reminder, “Trace Levels Show Haste Levels!” This all-too-familiar notion that the rate of speed of standardized production processes becomes directly proportionate to the diminishing quality of what is being produced is one that characterizes cultural narratives of the inferior nature of “made in China” consumer products. These discourses range from contempt over China’s propensity for producing “fakes” or “knock-offs” (Lin) to fear of “the inherent health risk of Chinese products” (Chen, *Animacies* 164), as evidenced by the 2007 “lead panic.” Whatever its iterations, what ties these divergent Orientalist anxieties centring around the site of the Chinese factory and its products is the intrinsically perverse quality of Asian racialized labour, which is understood as either exemplifying the dehumanizing effects of monopoly finance capitalism (Lye) or personifying the “destructive abstraction anchored by a settler colonial ideology of romantic anticapitalism” (Day 10).

However, if by presenting a dystopian vision of Chinese factories transplanted onto U.S.

soil Lee signals toward the hegemonic cultural narrative of perversely contagious Asiatic labour, then he also works to unsettle this account by providing a thoroughly defamiliarized version of factory work from that which dominates the Western cultural imaginary. Through the complexity with which he depicts B-Mor and its residents, it is clear that Lee works to deconstruct, what Kang terms, the recurrent “si(gh)tings” of Asian factory working bodies, through which the latter are “simultaneously erased of historical and material specificities and exported and circulated as a spectacular signifier of broader socioeconomic formations such as ‘the global assembly line,’ [or] ‘the export processing zone’” (404). I contend that Lee reverses the public—often in the form of journalistic—si(gh)tings of transnational Chinese factory workers and instead presents a critical version by decoupling the naturalized associations between factory labour and the garment or electronics assembly industries. Whereas our most “emblematic images” of the Chinese factory consists of tightly-packed rows of workers (usually female but increasingly less so) stitching clothing parts or assembling cell phones, Lee raises the troubling possibility of factory work that resembles not so much assembly-line labour—and the implications of industrial alienation and de-skilling that it raises—as it does aesthetic production.

Located adjacently to the southern Chinese megacity of Shenzhen—China’s first established Special Economic Zone and a major hub for manufacturing plants that produce an estimated 90 percent of the world’s consumer electronics—is Dafen village. Not so much a rural village as it is an urban community comprised of migrant workers, high-rise residential towers, studios and workshops, the small-time bosses that run them, and passing foreign buyers, Dafen is the world’s largest production centre for handmade oil paintings and Western retailers’ “best source for oil reproductions of Western masterpieces” (Wong 5). Hand-painted reproductions of the canonical works of the Western “greats”—ranging from da Vinci, Jacques-Louis David,

Monet, and Gauguin to Picasso, Warhol, and Lichtenstein—Dafen’s products can be found in hotels, restaurants, homes, retail shops, sidewalk stalls, commercial art galleries, and more. In her book, *Van Gogh on Demand*, art historian Winnie Won Yin Wong undertakes a comprehensive study of Dafen Oil Painting Village, gathered from five years’ worth of ethnographic fieldwork and research. Wong’s central aim is to dispel the construction of Dafen within the Western cultural imaginary as a “dystopian object of the Chinese copy” (10) through “fantastical tales of assembly line production, theft, and copyright infringement” (22). Instead, Wong seeks “to challenge the seductive notion that Dafen’s painters are *especially unfree* victims either of a global capitalist system or a totalitarian communist state, either of which is thought to prevent their overcoming a condition of mimetic alienation in order to produce original and creative art” (15). She does so by showing how the Dafen painters’ “condition of work ... is *exactly like* the flexible, specialized, and bespoke mode of global production in which contemporary artists function, and it is *exactly unlike* the industrial mode of manufacture or mechanical production from which a powerful factory imaginary around the readymade draws conceptual substance” (15-6). What is especially compelling about Wong’s account of Dafen’s painting “factories” is precisely the revelation that, staged through the dystopian Orientalist narratives of alienated and mimetic (in other words, “perverse”) factory labour, is in fact an altogether familiar set of contradictions concerning the nature of “real” art, what constitutes it (through handmade labour versus techniques of industrial mechanization), and who gets to make it (privileged Western artists versus oppressed Chinese workers). These tensions, although projected onto and embodied by the Chinese Other by the anxious Occidental imagination, has in fact long occupied the very heart of Western aesthetic culture itself, particularly in the context of modernist differentiations between craft versus fine art forms.

In the case of Dafen, we can discern how the spectre of Chinese factory labour in the Western imaginary might function as a kind of screen that multiple contradictions concerning the authentic and the mimetic have been both projected onto as well as obscured by at different times. I suggest that Lee's novel articulates precisely such a critique of Chinese factory work in order to stage and reveal these contradictions by aligning B-Mor less with the garment or electronics factories (in Shenzhen) that are most often si(gh)ted in the Western cultural imaginary but instead, with Dafen Oil Painting Village in which "the two class types unified in the figure of the Dafen painter" (Wong 4) are the worker *and* the artist. Furthermore, by aligning B-Mor's simulation of factory work with the site of aesthetic rather than commodity production (and thus, collapsing the distinction between the two), Lee extends the modernist fetishization of the indexical human attribute signified through craft work to contemporary Western consumption of racialized labour and its products. The resonance between B-Mor and Dafen is established through a seemingly minor but nonetheless significant observation. While describing one of the benefits, in the form of "exotic travel," afforded to B-Mor through their symbiotic relationship with the Charters, the narrator informs us:

Last month another big group of the retired and the terminal flew their once-in-a-lifetime global to Amsterdam, one of the few cities that is still like it was in olden times, inhabited by permanent residents but also completely open to any who wish to visit and tour and buy souvenirs and snacks. The group crossed the city on bicycles and rode canal boats and brought back posters and placemats from the Van Gogh Museum, the overwhelming favorite painting being his *Almond Blossom*, which you see in every other kitchen and parlor of B-Mor, the celadon background and the dulled white of the petals and the twisting, mossy branches a tableau that somehow captures the exact hue of our lives, this bright-tinged gloaming. If only he had painted fish! (Lee 113-4)

As *Van Gogh on Demand* reveals, in the real-life counterpart version to the novel, the handpainted oil reproductions of van Gogh's works that tourists and museum goers purchase in Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum itself or perhaps in souvenir shops just steps away, en route to

the Rijksmuseum, are most likely sourced from and produced in Dafen village by Chinese painters (Wong 170-1). Regardless of whether Lee himself is aware of the existence of Dafen village, the incredible irony of these dystopian New Chinese characters—who are primarily labourers working in highly-regulated facilities to farm fish and produce for exportation to the Charters—purchasing hand-painted van Gogh reproductions during “global” trips, which are themselves in fact produced by real-life Chinese workers in studios and workshops in Dafen and then exported to the Western world is too suggestive to pass by without comment. As Wong explains, the van Gogh painting trade holds a “prominent and particular place” (151) in Dafen for two main reasons. First, in the historical context, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the market demand for trade versions of van Gogh paintings dramatically increased due to a number of record-setting auction prices for their original versions. As a result, the van Gogh specialty quickly became the first skill acquired by many unskilled Chinese rural migrants seeking to enter the Dafen painting trade. As Wong notes, “The paintings are produced in high volume yet each painting is evaluated as though it were unique. It is relatively low-skilled but judged by its expressiveness” (151). This brings us to the second reason, which is that on the symbolic register, the “canonical place of van Gogh’s late paintings within the master narrative of modernism places central importance on the artist’s hand” (167) so that “van Gogh is thereby constructed as both the apotheosis of individual style in modern art and as the worker’s hero of the visibly tactile hand” (3). It is because the “surface of a van Gogh painting announces its authenticity as a work of the human hand, and this indexical attribute ... is of central appeal to the consumer,” that “Dafen’s van Gogh production is at the center of [a] long-standing set of modern issues” (168). These issues revolve around the tensions between unalienated originality and mechanical repetition that undergird the concepts of “craft” and “artisanality” in relationship

to art, tensions that map the shuttling back-and-forth of Dafen painters between “the cultural imaginary of factory production and the actual flexible condition of their labour” (27). For both historical and symbolic reasons then, the van Gogh painting trade is at the centre of the often conflicting dynamics that structure Dafen’s constant negotiation between the Western imaginary and its own self-positioning within the global marketplace.

In regards to *On Such a Full Sea*, it is no mere coincidence (or if it is, then an incredibly meaningful one) that it is specifically through mimetic reproductions, explicitly recognized as such (“which you see in every other kitchen and parlor of B-Mor”), of van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom* that the subjectivities of B-Mor residents are captured, articulated, and figured (“a tableau that somehow captures the exact hue of our lives”). As Wong points out, it is specifically the van Gogh trade within Dafen—given van Gogh’s emblematic positionality within modernist art—that stages the tension between the “indexical attribute” of an authentic human hand and the “mechanical aspects of handcraft’s characteristic repetitions and traditions” (169). It is key, therefore, that B-Mor’s affective and subjective identification with van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom* unfolds precisely through the register of the tactility of its brushstrokes. The description of the painting’s “dulled white ... petals and the twisting, mossy branches” as a “bright-tinged gloaming” that “captures the exact hue of [their] lives,” all serve to draw attention to the highly *textural nature* of its colours and shapes. The emphasis on the physical trace of hand-work serves to single out “craft,” from among fine art or industrial manufacture, as the ideal form of labour that is emblemized by the reproductions of van Gogh’s paintings. As Wong explains, “[i]n contrast with industry, craft and art form a dyad, linked to one another at opposite ends of a spectrum of aesthetic ‘work’” (164). Thus, in occupying a liminal position between art and manufacture, the very allure of “craft,” as anchored in “an ideology of authenticity, handwork,

and primitivism” (Wong 165-6), is always tempered by its simultaneous proximity to the characteristics associated with the latter, such as “repetition, tradition, skill, function” (163). The Dafen van Goghs—and by extension, as I have been arguing, B-Mor’s labour practices—encapsulate precisely this fundamental contradiction of craft because even as each and every work is an “original” and “handpainted,” it also announces by its existence as a reproduction that it could have been painted by *any* anonymous hand or even *multiple* ones.

The contradiction of craft, then, would seem to rehearse romantic anticapitalism’s racialized antimony between concrete and abstract social relations with a slight difference. As Kathi Weeks notes in *The Problem with Work*, the “romanticization of craft production” (87) occupies a longstanding tradition within what she terms a paradigm of humanist Marxism. Under this model, which focuses its critique on the alienation of labour, “the cure for capitalism is not more work ... but better work” (Weeks 86). The humanist Marxist paradigm contends that privileging “[c]oncrete labour in the production of use values” over “abstract labour that produces exchange values” by maintaining a “direct and personal connection to the products of our labour” as well as only “produc[ing] useful things for immediate consumption” constitutes an ameliorative to the alienation attached to industrial capitalist modernization (87). However, the particular contradiction of the craft work exemplified by Dafen and B-Mor does not straightforwardly rehearse the dichotomy between romanticized white concrete labour and the abstracted relations of exchangeability (in the form of reproducibility and mimeticism) figured by racialized Asian labour. Instead, circuited through the aesthetic ambivalence of craft, Asian bodies and labour in the context of Dafen and B-Mor present a slight amendment to Day’s account of romantic anticapitalism given that, as articulated through the novel, they are valued for their simultaneously concrete *and* abstract dimensions. From one perspective, it is precisely

the oil painting's visible brushstrokes, indexing the corporeal touch of the human hand, that the Western consumer prizes. And yet, from another, it is the work's status as a mimetic copy of the original, and therefore as an abstracted and reproducible (that is, endlessly exchangeable) quantity, which guarantees its production in the first place.

In an exemplary scene that makes explicit the racialized contradiction encapsulated by the appeal of craft products, the novel offers such a revelation through the satirical rendering of yet another staple of the slow living and Slow Food movements: the farmer's market. As Parkins and Craig note, the increasing popularity of farmers' markets in recent years can be attributed to "the mobilization of particular values associated with 'the local'"—derived primarily from the character of "its physical environment (land, climate, flora and fauna)" (75)—as "a complex response to the global food system, including its abstract deterritorialized spatial relations" (74). If the resurgence of farmers' markets within the slow living movements constitutes an alternative to the destructive (deterritorializing) effects of global abstraction through recourse to the concrete values (land, climate, natural elements) of "the local," then *On Such a Full Sea* reveals that such romanticized desires are premised on both a racialized repudiation of the former as well as its partial re-animation in the fulfillment of the latter. The novel's satirized rendition of the farmer's market takes the form of "Seneca Circus," a weekly Saturday market that takes place outside the Charter's village gates. During an excursion to this weekend market with Vik, Fan observes that the merchandise tents of the market "sold handmade crafts of a typically high level, nothing like the junk the counties peddlers would hawk back in B-Mor, items such as paper fans and placemats mass-produced in a rustic style, which soon proved cheap and flimsy. Here, however, there were finely turned wooden bowls and handblown wineglasses, and custom jewelry, not all of it equally attractive but clearly produced painstakingly, and with pride" (313).

Initially, Fan is surprised and skeptical since she knows that “most Charters would not deign to leave the comfort and safety of the village for such peculiar stuff, the notion of handmade to them suggesting a thing slightly fouled, probably dirty, ... in comparison with the time-honed, market-engineered perfection of their beloved brands” (313). However, she soon “recogniz[es] the style and shape of a vase like one back at [Vik’s] apartment” (313). Beyond handcrafts, the primary draw of the market is its food:

Again here was something one would never expect Charters (or even us B-Mors) to tolerate, food made and served practically outside, without the usual hygienic safeguards and standards. But this is precisely what drew this venturing lot, the chance to eat dishes prepared by an authentically ordinary person, one standing directly before you, dressed in unremarkable clothing, whose bare hands touched everything, from the raw ingredients to the plate. Whom you could speak to if you pleased. For a certain person, this was thrilling dining, an experience further heightened by the fact that the food itself was old-fashioned and indifferent to the Charter prerequisite of having to be healthful; you could get Belgian street frites, or a Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki*, or a gravy-sopped plate of chicken and dumplings. (314)

In this scene of the farmer’s market, the doubled logic of the racialized contradiction of craft emerges. As discussed earlier in the context of Dafen’s van Goghs, craft exemplifies “a postmodern ethic of authentic labor, invoked as an aesthetic challenge to the mechanization of modernity, but also produced in step with post-Fordist deindustrialization in the West and the globalization of cultural production” (166). We can discern precisely this tension between craft’s industrial mechanization as well as its romanticized status as the product of authentic labour in the distinction drawn between on the one hand, “junk” that is “mass-produced,” and on the other, the “handmade” that is of a “high level,” sold at Seneca Circus. Furthermore, such a distinction is explicitly racialized through the romantic anticapitalist alignment of the former with B-Mor, since the “cheap and flimsy” (echoes of inferior “made in China” consumer goods resound here) junk is sold and used exclusively by its residents. In turn, the racialization of the abstract dimension of craft production reaffirms the concrete appeal of the handmade, as that which is

defined against the process of industrial mechanization denoted by “time-honed, market-engineered perfection,” which (as we encountered earlier in the previous section) becomes associated with the inorganic “deadening” of lively vitality. Thus, the sensual allure that the market’s handmade craft holds for the Charters is precisely what is signified earlier by the tactile register of B-Mor’s comparison to van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom*: the presence of the human hand, detected through not so much aesthetic value (“not all of it equally attractive”) but rather, the physical exertion of labour (“painstaking”).

However, the appeal of this imprint of the human hand, which carries the romanticized concrete value of craft, contains a fundamental contradiction, as revealed in the context of the market’s available offering of “un-hygienic” and thus, “unsafe” food. Echoing Slow Food’s emphasis on the sensorial pleasure of food, the confirmation of authenticity is provided here through the concretized and tactile dimension of flesh (“bare hands,” “touch[ing] everything,” “raw ingredients”), which is precisely what was missing in Fan’s initial “sterile” Charter meal. Crucially, however, what restages, and thus reconfigures, this romantic anticapitalist racial logic through the specificity of the aesthetic ambivalence of craft, as figured and embodied through B-Mor, is that even as the human hand is fetishized, the identity of the hand matters less than the mark of its presence. Just as in the case of the Dafen van Goghs, regardless of which specific hand is responsible for the reproduction, the work is valued by the consumer as long as the brushstrokes denote *any* hand or even *multiple* ones behind it. Similarly, for the Charter market-goers, the appeal of the handmade merchandise and food lies not in knowing the unique identity of the worker who produces or serves what they consume, but rather in the knowledge and confirmation that such an individual simply exists at all (an “ordinary” and “unremarkable” person to “whom you could speak ... if you pleased”).

If, for Lee, the ethics of slow living seem to be animated in part by the biopolitical impulses of the curation of the self, then the scene of the farmer's market here (as a satirical snapshot of slow living) reveals the racial contradiction contained within its operations. On the one hand, the "ever-optimizing metrics" of curation works in the service of transforming individual subjects into "exquisite microcosms" of health and probabilities of more-and-more life. On the other hand, however, such a curatorial art of living is one that requires constant defense against its own excess or surplus, produced out of the racialized antimony between the abstract and the concrete, through which the former is aligned with the threat of mechanized inorganicism and the latter to sensorial vitality. Thus, caught between the desire for human authenticity and fungible reproducibility, curation fetishizes the concrete realm of the tactile, the touch, and the hand even as it simultaneously abstracts through dis-identification and mass-ification ("any hand" or "multiple hands"). It is precisely this contradiction of a valuation of the human that in-humanizes, a desire for concrete authenticity that can only be fulfilled through abstract reproduction, which is revealed and signified by the novel's reconfiguration of Chinese factory work through the aesthetic ambivalence of craft.

III. Living Otherwise: Slowing Down and Scaling Up

In deliberately aligning B-Mor with aesthetic craft production, rather than the perhaps better-known Shenzhen electronics factories, *On Such a Full Sea* articulates the twin logics of repudiation (when racialized labour figures mechanized abstraction) and retention (when racialized craft mediates the antinomy between abstract and concrete) that together comprise the curation of the self as constituted through a double movement of shoring up against the threat of an inhumanizing racial otherness as well as the suturing back of organic and vital forms of life predicated upon their splitting off from the former. The logic of mediating such contradictions is

one characterized precisely through the work of the fetish. Here, I contend that it is precisely through both the Freudian and Marxian fetish that we might understand the racialized contradiction that animates curatorial projects of existence. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that the racial stereotype within colonial discourse operates through the function and structure of the Freudian fetish. Drawing from Freud's essay on fetishism—which posits the fetish as emerging from the young boy's ambivalent disavowal (as opposed to repression) of his mother's lack of a penis (resulting in the contradictory belief that “all men have penises” and “some do not have penises”)—Bhabha situates the stereotype within the same conflicted scene of both the fantasy and disavowal of difference. Thus, the racial fetish constitutes “a form of multiple and contradictory belief” (Bhabha 107), “a form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division” (115), which explains why stereotypes so often encapsulate impossibly oppositional beliefs—for instance, “[t]he black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child” (118), etc. If what is structural to the heart of the colonial fetish via Freud is a sustained ambivalence, then the racialized character of the Marxian fetish illustrates how such duality is reconciled. Elaborating on Marx's theory of the commodity fetish, Day explains that a “key aspect of the fetish ... is the mystification of capitalist social relations that present themselves antinomically, *as the opposition of the abstract and concrete*” (14). It is precisely the “metaphoric activity” of the fetish, which “conceals as it substitutes” by “rendering unequal elements the same by turning them into values” (193), that Day identifies as the principal racial violence of capitalism. The operations of the fetish both obscures and represses

the essentially dual character (both value and use-value) of every commodity while simultaneously engendering value's illusory antinomy by personifying its abstract dimensions through Asian bodies and subjectivities. Condensing the racial fetish in the Freudian and Marxian contexts together helps to illuminate the functional and structural role of racial difference to the slow ethics of curation.

Consider the novel's most explicit and literalized representation of racial fetishization, which appears in the form of the Girls, the seven young Asian women that Miss Cathy "keeps," an "uncommon but growing Charter practice" (Lee 267). Given that the novel draws an explicit analogy between the Girls and B-Mor (the former as *microcosm* for the latter)—when the narrator muses, "Perhaps in this regard we B-Mors ... are merely the Girls writ large, our leagues ... clustered for best use and sanctuary" (286)—we might also understand "keeping" as structurally analogous to the symbiotic relationship between the Charters and B-Mor. While they are not necessarily prisoners, for they "professed undying devotion to Miss Cathy," the Girls "were lodged in the same way beloved pets were once kept by their owners, who, of course, did not query them as to what they might desire" (267). Explaining the appeal of this practice of "keeping" for Miss Cathy, the narrator observes:

For it was ultimately not a particular girl or girls who were most important but their totality, the way they could web her and cocoon her and settle her down each night and day so that there was no untoward pinch or ache or wrinkle, the temperature of their corpus always regulating and kind. It was all about her, yes, it was solely her storm or fine clime they were subject to, and in this regard the greatest potential disturbance was not their complement being diminished but the specter of sudden change. (285)

In a sense, the practice of "keeping" might be regarded as merely the latest iteration of the Charters' natural propensity for curation, albeit one taken to extreme and disturbing degree. Instead of kitchenwares, the ingredients of a meal, or decorative crafts, it is live human beings, specifically racialized and gendered, who must be carefully curated to form an equilibrated

ecology that does not so much fulfill a particular need in itself but rather, more crucially, “complement” its distinctive nature. The curatorial logic that assigns value (that is, calculates the highest probability for success) not according to the character of each individual element (“not a particular girl or girls who were most important”) but instead, through their circulation, distribution, and arrangement into an optimized whole (“their totality, the way they could web her and cocoon her and settle her down”) is precisely what structures Miss Cathy’s affective attachment to the Girls. Thus, the “regulating” power that the Girls hold for Miss Cathy operates biopolitically, that is, only at the level of their generality rather than individuality. In turn, the biopolitical technique of curation produces not necessarily a discrete outcome (say, actual happiness or well-being) but rather, its conditions of possibility; in other words, the closest approximation or highest probability toward such an outcome (a state of complementarity, defined as the absence of an “untoward pinch or ache or wrinkle”).

Serving the sole purpose of approximating, if not fulfilling, Miss Cathy’s desires (however hazy and undefined they might be), the Girls are subject to sexual fetishization, in the Freudian sense, as fantasy objects through which she alleviates her anxiety over lack or loss; in turn, rehearsing longstanding tropes of Orientalism, which functions in part as an exoticized repertoire of feminized sexuality (Said 190). In this way, curation as biopolitical technique is revealed here as operating in tandem if not expressly conditioned or enabled by Orientalist sexual fetishization. However, Miss Cathy’s attachment to the Girls simultaneously assumes and reconfigures the structure of the commodity fetish. As Day reminds us, alignment of Asian racialized labour with the category of abstract value—as arising from the illusory antinomy produced by the commodity fetish—renders such labouring subjects imminently fungible, “insofar as [Asian] bodies are interchangeable with other [Asian] bodies” (76). The perverse

fungibility signified by Asian racialized bodies serves two specific purposes for Miss Cathy's curatorial attachments. First, that the Girls are evacuated of individuality and particularity reduces them into mere background, as a "web" or "cocoon," from which Miss Cathy emerges in the foreground ("it was solely her storm or fine clime they were subject to") as the sovereign curating subject. Second, such a curating subject accumulates or maximizes not merely life in the abstract, but a specific form of life authenticated through its simultaneous proximity to corporeal materiality as well as delineation from an inhumanizing abstraction. Thus, the Girls, and by extension, B-Mor itself, are racially fetishized—in Bhabha's sense of "embracing two contradictory beliefs"—as precisely both the personification of a devitalizing abstraction against which the curatorial shores up itself as well as the mediation between life's concrete particularity ("a human hand") and potentially endless fungibility ("any hand") through which the curation of the self becomes inaugurated.

Thus far, Lee's novel seems primarily invested in presenting a thorough critique of a particular version of slow living and its ethics, one that as I have argued, is both constituted in opposition to the threatening spectre of Chinese factory work as well as animated by its ineluctable re-suturing within its innermost workings. However, if slowing down does not always produce effective strategies for tracking or countering the violence of slow death—or more accurately, can only do so through the scaffoldings of racial exploitation—then the novel seems reticent to articulate discernibly alternative modes of living otherwise. I conclude here then with a meditation on what the novel might offer, if only in an embryonic or submerged register, in the way of possibilities for reckoning with our contemporary anthropocenic scene of slow death (or to use Rob Nixon's term, "slow violence") in which the deadly combination of capitalism, biopolitics, and climate change serve to divest vulnerable communities of their

capacities for life in order to divert them for the elite. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his seminal essay on the problem of climate change for history, “Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others” (221). However, as Chakrabarty emphasizes, although historians or other scholars of the Humanities are well within their rights to critique the discourse of climate change and the anthropocene for how “the talk of species or mankind simply serve to hide the reality of capitalist production and the logic of imperial ... domination that it fosters” (216); at the same time, climate change constitutes “parametric conditions [that] hold irrespective of our political choices” (239). Thus, the urgent task at hand “calls for thinking simultaneously on both registers, to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history” (Chakrabarty 220). Published almost ten years ago to date (in 2009), Chakrabarty’s essay remains no less urgent, and his provocation remains no less challenging. Writing on the its heels, Lee’s novel, published in 2014, seeks to address and respond to Chakrabarty’s theses, both in articulating precisely a critique of how anthropocenic and species devastation might manifest through or exacerbate the circuits of Western imperial domination over its vulnerable populations as well as in offering a speculative account of how to “mix together” the seemingly incommensurable scales between the universality of shared catastrophe with the particularity of its suffering.

What both Chakrabarty and Lee point to in their works, then, is less the problem of speed so much as that of scale, even as the two are undeniably bound up together. How to enjoin or sustain the tension between the radically divergent scales of universality versus particularity, species life versus racial difference, and shared catastrophe versus uneven embodiments, without according primacy to one over the other? I suggest that the novel offers a way of moving beyond

or out of this impasse through the conceptual reframing of racialized, and more specifically, Asian feminized, embodied subjectivity. Such a reframing is indexed by the recurrent image of Fan, the female protagonist who is a diver in B-Mor's grow facilities, hauntingly suspended within the watery ecologies of the fish tanks. In the emblematic passages of the opening pages, Fan is described as a "mere shadow" (4) among the fish in the water. As the narrator elaborates, "[t]he diver is not "one of them" but is part of the waterscape from the time they are hatchlings, and they see her customary form and the repeated cadence of her movements" (5). Regarding Fan's experiences specifically, "she is accustomed to the buoying lift of their numbers, how sometimes the fish seem to gird her and bear her along the tank walls like a living scaffold... or even playfully school themselves into just her shape and become her mirror in the water" (5). In addition, the narrator relates of Fan's natural affinity for being underwater:

She once told us that she almost preferred being in the tanks than out in the air of B-Mor, that she liked the feeling of having to hold her breath and go against her nature, which made her more aware of herself as this mere, lone body. In the hour or so after the shift ... she would pull her knees to her chest and drift to the bottom and stay there in that crouch until her lungs screamed for forgiveness. She wasn't inviting oblivion or even testing herself but rather summoning a different kind of force that would transform not her but the composition of the realm, make it so the water could not harm her. (6-7)

The insistence and repetition of Fan represented in these scenes as "mere shadow," "customary form," "repeated movements," the floating centre of a "living scaffold," a shape or mirror composed of swimming fish, and one again, a "mere, lone body" signals the troubled (and troubling) nature of Fan's characterization. In fact, not only here, but throughout the novel, Fan's interiority as an individual remains frustratingly opaque and even conspicuously lacking. As Christopher Fan points out, the novel's "'We' narrator's description of Fan ... denies her any access to protagonicity" (687). According to him, Fan's "muted personality" suggests that "she might not qualify as the kind of liberal, bourgeois subject traditionally associated with the novel

form” (Fan 687). Building on this, I add that Fan’s lack of characterization (in the conventional sense of the novel form) remains unresolved throughout. The ending lines of the novel, in which Fan is described as “the brightest shape we know” (Lee 407) echo these opening passages that resolutely deny her the interior qualities of character and instead, cast her as the “mere” form or shape of one. Thus, in moving away from the *bildungsroman* of liberal, bourgeois subjectivity, the novel presents an alternative model of “living otherwise.”

I borrow the term “living otherwise” from the title of Kandice Chuh’s influential text of Asian American literary criticism *Imagine Otherwise*, which argues for the reconfiguration of Asian Americanist critique as a “subjectless discourse.” Crucially, subjectlessness does not negate the historical and material productions of Asian American subjecthood, but rather, “foreground[s] the discursive constructedness of subjectivity” (9). Constituting “a strategic *anti*-essentialism” (10), Asian American subjectless discourse facilitates political convergence around the very site of the evacuation of an essentialist racialized subject. Through Chuh’s paradigm, we can imagine the Asian American subject as leaving an empty outline, which in the conceptual blurring of presence and absence, elicits not less but more participatory identifications and their political projects for justice. In a similar vein, I contend that *On Such a Full Sea* tentatively proposes a model of “living otherwise,” in which Asian feminized subjectivity, as represented through Fan, constitutes not the essentialist grounding of, but rather an absent presence (or present absence) around which political identifications of species life might converge. Just as the schools of fish playfully compose themselves into her shape, the novel suggests that the relationship between collective species life and gendered and racialized particularities does not have to assume the structure of an either/or. Instead, each might take and receive form through one another. Crucially, however, what maintains this kind of relationality is not the abstraction of

concrete positionalities, but the insistence on the formal (if not essential) embodiment (“mere, lone body”) of an Asian feminized subjectivity, which in reconfiguring the frames of individuality (to collectivity), particularity (to universality), and ultimately, difference (to species life), does not merely transform itself but perhaps, “the composition of the realm.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Carceral Ecologies of Settler Colonial Capitalism

in Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*

In the final concluding chapter, I wish to turn the focus on what has remained submerged in the background of the preceding chapters so far. For those who are familiar with the set of literary texts I address in the previous chapters, one pressing question that might be raised concerns the status of comparative or relational racializations. Thus far, the dissertation project has made a number of claims regarding the shifts in twenty-first-century ethnic literary imaginaries of racial difference. It has argued that in the wake of race's disarticulation from the discourse and politics of individuated and embodied identity, it has become increasingly reconfigured through diffuse structures of being, feeling, and sensation that serve to contour the edges of the human. It has posited that such racial configurations have been prompted by a post-1965 historical shift in which emergent projects of racial nationalism that articulated race through the rubric of a culturally and politically distinct identity were increasingly registering and indexing the afterlives of U.S. empire in the Pacific. These twenty-first-century racial configurations, in which such post-1965 racial shifts are encoded, manifest as interstitial forms of life, which illuminate the inhuman processes that produce the human, such as inanimacy, disembodiment, inorganicism, devitalization, and abstraction. However, if the overarching project argues that we can track these transformations of and to race, then it has also done so through aggregate rather than comparative analyses of discrete racial differences in the separate chapters. I began with the reconfigurations of blackness in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, before moving on to Asian racialization under shifting regimes of political inclusion

and transpacific labour, respectively. What then might be the relationships or divergences between black and Asian racial formations under this framework?

As I discussed in the Introduction, departing from accounts of Afro-Asian identifications forged from the late 1960s onwards, I approach the convergence of black and Asian presence within the U.S. nation-state during that period as one that produces a splitting and consequent re-organization of the ontological grounding of racial difference. Accordingly, as further evidence for this claim, the representations of cross-racial formations in the post-1965 literary archive that I assemble are never explicitly thematized, but always implicitly, opaquely, and paratextually intimated. For example, in my first chapter on *Zone One*, I contend that the emergence of the zombie genre coincides with the post-Civil Rights re-articulation of black political cohesion. However, as a number of commentators point out, the Vietnam War also constitutes an important historical context out of which a specifically American zombie cinematic tradition emerged, such that it has become encoded into the DNA of the genre itself.¹ In Whitehead's novel, the spectral presence of Asian-ness takes the form of the backdrop in and against which the events of plot unfold: New York City's Chinatown.

Renamed "Fort Wonton," which has been annexed by the army officers of the interim government to serve as the operating centre of the sweeping mission, to clear out the remaining zombies in Manhattan Island, a.k.a. Zone One, in order to rehabilitate the city for human resettlement. As Mark Spitz remarks, Chinatown holds a special symbolic place in both his own and others' geographical imaginary in relation to the larger city: "Outside the dumpling house, in this resettled northern edge of Zone One, the tiny chaos—the sudden shock of a supply truck's

¹ See: "Night of the Living Dead: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era" by Sumiko Higashi, in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*; "Lost Bodies/Lost Souls: Night of the Living Dead and Deathdream as Vietnam Narrative" by Karen Randell, in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*.

horn or a jeep backfiring—was the sound of promise, of a civilization stepping clear of the charnel house. The welter of Chinatown had been the larger hustle of the entire city condensed, and now the echo of that noise in this handful of streets spoke of a vanished order that might reassert itself. If you believed in the mission” (Whitehead 55-6). That it is specifically the locale of a thoroughly Orientalized Chinatown (discernible in the reductive moniker “Fort Wonton”) which seems to hold out the tentative promise of a reconstituted futurity (“a vanished order that might reassert itself”) invokes the trope of techno-Orientalism in which East Asian urbanscapes (or other figurations of Orientalism) serve to signal technologically-advanced futures; for example, in novels such as *Neuromancer* and *Cloud Atlas* or the film *Bladerunner*. However, the crucial difference between those classic techno-Orientalist texts and *Zone One* is that whereas in the former, anonymous and nameless masses of Asian bodies fill the urban landscape to form an Orientalist backdrop against which the plot unfolds, the latter envisions a post-apocalyptic image of an Asian setting hollowed of its referents. Thus, instead of Asian-ness signifying either the optimism of technological modernization or the nostalgia of a primitive historical past,² in *Zone One*, Asian racialization is defamiliarized and spectralized, rendered into a haunting trace through which the evacuation of its signifying presence constitutes, at the same time, the very grounds for rebuilding human civilization.

What we might term this spectral surplus of race can also be found in Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, albeit with the positions of blackness and Asian-ness inverted from those in

² The editors of *Techno-Orientalism* point out, it is precisely the oscillation of Asia between pre-modern and hyper-modern in the speculative imagination that underpins the discourse of techno-Orientalism. As Roh, Huang, and Niu write, “Whereas Orientalism, as a strategy of representational containment, arrests Asia in traditional, and often premodern imagery, techno-Orientalism presents a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations” (3).

Zone One. If the Vietnam War functions as one of the unspoken historical contexts for Whitehead's intervention into the zombie genre, then the 1992 Los Angeles riots occupies that position in Lee's construction of B-Mor's origin story, in which Asian immigrant labourers displace the "native" black and Latinx residents of Baltimore, resulting in violent eruptions of protest and territorial reclamation. In Lee's dystopia then, it is blackness that is relegated to a historical past, signifying the antagonism of a racial order that has become superseded by a Sino-centric future of biopoliticized labour divisions (wealthy consumers versus Chinese factory workers). Thus, blackness in Lee's novel performs the role that Fort Wonton does in that of Whitehead's, as the spectral ruins of a racial presence that elliptically returns to haunt in the futurity envisioned and realized through the absence of its signifying bodies. How then do we make sense of the way that these texts would seem to elude if not outrightly refuse the critical frameworks of comparative racializations, upon which Afro-Asian political solidarities are often theorized? If anything, they would seem to suggest the impossibility of cross-racial identification or comparison, given that either Asian-ness or blackness must necessarily remain spectral or submerged in the historical background for the respective other to fully appear into view.

In what remains of this fourth chapter, I explore the critical possibilities of an analytic that I term "carceral ecologies," which offers the potential for approaching divergent racial formations comparatively while maintaining their historically distinct characters and operations by investigating the differential modes and sites of incarceration that are produced under settler colonial capitalism. In considering how overlapping migrations (enslaved, indentured, and unfree) induced by flows of capital, labour and trade have informed and been informed by territorial and resource extraction, I seek to weave together the rubrics of racialization, settler colonialism, and empire in order to theorize the co-presence of Indigenous and racialized

minorities while emphasizing their uneven relations to capital, labour, and land. To do so, I turn to a text that offers a “new materialist” history of the settler colonial capitalism that has shaped racial formations, migration circuits, and Indigenous presence through the distinct lens of territorial incarceration in North America.

On August 6th, 1945, the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare, codenamed “Little Boy” was dropped over the city of Hiroshima. Three days later, on August 9th, a second atomic bomb, “Fat Man,” was detonated over Nagasaki. The historical precedent marked by these events, of the first—and to date, only—use of nuclear weapons in the history of warfare is usually narrated within the framework of the Second World War, and more specifically, through the military conflict between the U.S. and Japan. However, the play *Burning Vision* by Métis playwright Marie Clements’ tells a different story, one that both reframes the peripheral roles played by a myriad of governments, territories, and communities in the atomic bombings and re-orientes them into the foreground. *Burning Vision*, first performed in Vancouver at the Firehall Arts Centre on April 26, 2002, follows a wide cast of characters along a nonlinear narrative, composed of fragments of haunting images and elliptical dialogue. Although the play is difficult to summarize clearly and succinctly, it is roughly concerned with tracking the journey of the uranium ore that was used to make the atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Based on real historical events, Clements’ renarrativization of the atomic bombings begins in the late 1880s, with the prophecy of a Dene medicine man who foretells a “vision” of white-skinned people digging something out of the earth, transporting it away, and then dropping a “burning” onto people who “looked like us, like Dene.” The journey of the uranium ore begins with the LaBine brothers, white prospectors Charles and Gilbert, who in 1930 “discover” the ore in the Great Bear Lake region of the Northwest Territories (in Canada). Dene men are then hired to

carry the ore mined on Dene land out of the mines and ferry it down the Mackenzie River to Fort McMurray (in Alberta), bound eventually to be sold by the Canadian state to the U.S. government for the purposes of military research at the laboratories and test sites of the Manhattan Project, before ultimately being dropped over Japan.

The number of participants along this circuitous route, including the Dene ore carriers, the boat crews, the miners, and even the radium watch-dial painters (who were all women), were left unaware of the health hazards of highly radioactive materials, and many died or suffered serious health effects, such as cancer, from contact with the uranium ore. Furthermore, the Canadian government led all those individuals involved to believe that they were mining the ore to be used for cancer research and cures, while cognizant that its purchase by the U.S. government was intended for military development. In addition to a Canadian history of the expropriation of Dene land and labour that Clements recovers and re-inserts into the narrative of the atomic bombings, the play also weaves in references to the Japanese/Japanese North American internment during WWII across Canada and the U.S. through the character of Tokyo Rose, who turns out to be a Japanese American UCLA graduate living in Chicago. Thus, from a trans-geographical traversal across multiple sites—spanning Dene territories, Canada, Japan, and the U.S.—to a transhistorical perspective that interweaves histories of Indigenous dispossession along with anti-Asian racism and the militarization of U.S. empire, *Burning Vision* unpacks the seemingly discrete event of the atomic bombings to reveal a densely interconnected network of state actors, communities, and environmental sites.

The formal premise of the play, as one that unfolds almost through the perspective of the uranium ore and around which multiple characters, sites, and histories converge, firmly centres the material and natural world. Such a formal move posits the destructions wrought by natural

resource extraction without care or regard for its effects on the wider ecology as inseparable from and constituted by the logic of settler colonial capitalism. By settler colonial capitalism, I follow in the vein of Glen Coulthard's argument for "re-establishing the colonial relation of dispossession as a co-foundational feature of ... capitalism" (14). As Coulthard elaborates, the settler-colonial relationship is, at its core, one produced by "the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (7). Positing settler colonialism as "a form of structured dispossession" (Coulthard 7) reveals its relationship to capitalism as constituted through "primitive accumulation" and its constant reproductions, that is, what Marx describes as the violent processes of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder" (qtd. in Coulthard 7) by which Indigenous territories and resources become subjected to privatization. Under this reframing, settler colonial capitalism names the relations and structures by which capitalism proceeds through the dispossession and expropriation of Indigenous land and sovereignty.

In the play, perhaps the characters who most embody the destructive forces of settler colonial capitalism are the LaBine brothers. As we follow them on their journey, we come to find out that they did not so much discover the ore on their own as they were guided to its location by an "old Indian" living in the area. When Charles reminds Gilbert that the Dene man had warned them about the story of the black rock, the latter scoffs and replies, "I don't listen to rocks. I listen to money. Now, *that* I can hear" (Clements 30). When Charles responds that he "can hear the rock" (30), Gilbert insists, "You can go Indian all you want. But know this. I am going to find that rock, I'm going to stake it and it will be rightfully mine ... That's how real dreams work" (30). Later on, when Charles wonders if they should share a piece of the claim with the Dene man who directed them to the ore, Gilbert mocks, "What's an Indian gonna do with money? Don't you worry, he'll get his piece, alright ... we'll give him some lard and baking

powder and he can bake some bread. ... What the hell is an Indian going to do with a rock anyways, at least he can eat the bread” (37). From the brothers’ dialogue, we can discern the workings of, what Iyko Day describes as, “the capitalist logics of settler colonialism” (34), constituted by “[m]ixing alien labor with Indigenous land to expand white property” (31). The relationship between the LaBine brothers and the Dene residents is defined by the former’s expropriation of the latter’s land in order to generate capital. Gilbert’s insistence on staking claim to the land on which the ore will be mined in order to make it “rightfully” his while rejecting the idea that either the profits or land should be shared with the Dene residents of the region illustrates how settler colonialism and capitalism collude precisely in order to eliminate Indigenous presence for the purposes of establishing white property, which can, in turn, be commodified for financial profit.

In an interview between Naomi Klein and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson concerning the tar sands and pipeline expansions in Alberta, the former asks, “But extraction isn’t just about mining and drilling, it’s a mindset—it’s an approach to nature, to ideas, to people. What does it mean to you?” (qtd. in Simpson 75). In response, Simpson explains:

Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. My land is seen as a resource. ... Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That’s always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous—extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples. (75)

The simultaneous conflation and distinction that Gilbert makes between money and rocks indexes the mutually constitutive relationship between not only settler colonialism and capitalism, but also, as Simpson illuminates, both of their inextricability to ecological damage. On the one hand, Gilbert makes a clean separation between abstract capital (in the form of

money) and the natural world (i.e. rocks) in order to point out that he values the former over the latter. On the other hand, the rocks are converted into money through an alchemical process involving the expropriation, extraction, and commodification of land through Indigenous dispossession and racialized labour. Thus, as illustrated by the case of the LaBine brothers, capital is generated through the conditions of a settler colonialism that establishes itself through not merely disregard but outright instrumentalization of the natural environment. That Gilbert ridicules the notion of attending to a few rocks instead of money as “going Indian” suggests that, conversely, as Simpson explicates of an Indigenous viewpoint, the extraction of natural resources “without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that [it] has on the other living things in that environment” functions as the bedrock of the violence of settler colonial capitalism.

If, as I have suggested so far, the play insists on a continuity between settler colonial capitalism and extractive modes of ecological damage, then I want to push further in proposing that the latter is, in turn, inseparable from a carceral logic of state violence that manages divergently racialized communities for the purposes of expanding white property. I am informed here by Iyko Day’s “triangulated articulation of settler colonialism” (25) as giving rise to heterogeneous racial formations. Disrupting the conventional Native/settler binary within critiques of settler colonialism, Day approaches the latter as operating through a triangulation of symbolic positions that include the Native, the alien, and the settler. Whereas the “primary relationship between settler colonizers and Indigenous populations is land” (27), in the case of African and Asian North Americans, the relationship is one which revolves around labour. As Day further elaborates, “[w]hile a logic of elimination functions to increase white property through the decimation of Indigenous populations who stand in the way of territorial expansion, a logic of exclusion serves industrial capitalism by furnishing a vulnerable labor force” (33).

Further historical and economic differences within these vulnerable labour forces help to explain the divergent racial formations between black and Asian North Americans, for whereas the former satisfied the settler colonizers' need for a "permanent, reproducible, exclusive, and violently contained population of alien labor" (Day 32), the latter's service to industrial capitalism renders them into disposable, conditional, and flexible alien labour, in turn producing "a less fixed and more volatile racialization by virtue of the exclusionary power of immigration restriction" (33). What Day's argument so persuasively illuminates is how settler colonial capitalism operates by managing differentially racialized populations differently, while also maintaining them in relationship to one another. Following from Day's thesis concerning the erasure of Indigeneity as partially predicated on different forms of alien labour—that is, disposable versus undisposable—I explore the ways in which settler colonial capitalism differently incarcerates differentially racialized communities in order to maintain an extractive and possessive relationship to the natural landscape.

The notion that resource extraction is intimately tied to incarceration is alluded to throughout *Burning Vision*. On a performative level, much of the play takes place in a variety of dark, tight enclosed spaces: from the inside of a mine to a test home built for bomb simulations to a barge. The characters repeatedly describe physical sensations of being suspended or suffocated in the dark, such as LaBine Brother #2 who whines that "It's too dark to find anything" (24); Round Rose who broadcasts to her listeners, "Here we are huddled in the dark like two Orphan Annie's" (41); Captain Mike of the barge *Radium Prince* who cautions, "if we don't go nowhere in a goddamn hurry we won't be goin' anywhere goddamn soon" (76); Fat Man who rants, "We are all in a hole if that makes you feel better. All of us. You, me, everyone. The hole is getting bigger. ... Like we are digging a hole so deep none of us will be able to get

in, or out” (48); and the miner musing, “Shit ... I’m way down. Not just this feeling of being beneath the earth but this feeling a guy gets when he’s been there for awhile” (42). The repetition of such embodied carceral states is one which arises out of and converges around the journey of the uranium ore, from its first mining to its watery passage to its detonation over test sites in Nevada. That the various sites of resource extraction and commodification are staged through experiential sensations of enclosure suggests that it is precisely the technologies of ecological devastation that produce the need to bind and suffocate living bodies within contained spaces. The dense network of relations by which the expropriation and commodification of territorial resources, via settler colonial capitalism, produces recursive conditions containment, enclosure, and imprisonment for the differentially racialized labour forces enlisted into its reproduction is what I term “carceral ecologies.” Thus, *Burning Vision*, in tracking a new materialist history of uranium ore, lays bare the carceral ecologies of a discrete historical event (the atomic bombings) that traverse and conjoin divergent communities, histories, and nation-states.

The diffuse sensations of carceral embodiment that recur in various sites throughout the play congeal into an explicit critique of historical forms of institutional state incarceration in one of Round Rose’s broadcasts to her predominately white Canadian listeners:

You have to know when to be sorry. You can’t really be sorry for something you don’t want to remember can you. Selective memory isn’t it? Let’s be honest, hell, you can’t even apologize for the shit you did yesterday never mind 50 years ago. Indian residential schools, Japanese internment camps, hell, and this is just in your neighbourhood. But it’s alright ... everybody’s sorry these days. The politicians are sorry, the cops are sorry, the priests are sorry, the logging companies are sorry, mining companies, electric companies, water companies, wife beaters, serial rapists, child molesters, mommy and daddy. (100)

Round Rose’s invocation of the incarcerations of Indigenous and Asian North American communities, in residential schools and internment camps respectively, positions them in relation to one another as different iterations of a consonant state violence that maintains itself as

simultaneously settler colony *and* militaristic empire through the capitalist expropriation, extraction, and commodification of Indigenous territory (logging, mining, fracking, etc.) within both domestic and global circuits of industrial trade. In *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Gilmore Wilson interrogates the commonsense belief that “prisons sit on the edge—at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights” (11). As Wilson argues, “This apparent marginality is a trick of perspective, because, as every geographer knows, edges are also interfaces” (11). In Round Rose’s accusation of the Canadian state for its “selective memory” of Indigenous residential schools and Japanese internment camps, we can discern an effort on her part to wrest such histories and sites of incarceration from their relegation to the margins of national identity. Instead, by moving it from the edge to the very “neighbourhood” of the nation itself, she foregrounds this recursive carceral order as precisely the portal through which a settler colonial state coalesces and emerges into being.

In offering a new materialist history of settler colonial capitalism’s carceral ecologies, *Burning Vision* elaborates on the *longue durée* of the contemporary prison industrial complex, which as Angela Davis reminds us, emerges out of a historical chronology of anti-black racism that encompasses chattel slavery, the institution of lynching, and legal segregation (25). Clements’ play posits settler colonial capitalism as another potential source of the modern history of incarceration by explicitly naming the various “industries” implicated in the former—from state and religious organizations to corporations of resource extraction—and placing them in enjambment to the institutional sites of residential schools and internment camps. By concluding with an itemization of the environmental, bodily, sexual, and familial violences produced through the confluence of Indigenous and racialized incarceration with the extractive industries of settler colonial capitalism, Round Rose’s monologue identifies the grievous

damages and irreparable injuries to every dimension of life, natural and social, inflicted by precisely their concatenation. By illuminating the divergent but reiterated disposessions, exploitations, and violences that Indigenous and racialized communities face under the carceral ecologies of settler colonial capitalism, *Burning Vision* articulates an argument that Jodi Melamed, citing Wilson, has made in a related context for “racial capitalism as a technology of *antirelationality*” (78). In this definition, racial capitalism operates through “the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work” (78). However, it is the unique achievement of capitalism to manipulate such antirelationality for its own ends such that it fosters “dense interconnections” (78) among social differentiations for the sole purpose of sustaining and developing capital. The paradoxical relational antirelationality with which Melamed characterizes racial capitalism is the same dynamic that underwrites the carceral ecologies that I have been tracking thus far, as one that embeds divergently racialized labour in relation, *and/through seclusion*, to one another within an overarching “ecosystem” of Indigenous dispossession and settler colonial capitalism.

If the violence of settler colonial capitalism does its work through the antirelational logics of carcerality, enclosure, and separation, then Clements’ insistence on formal assemblage and collage as aesthetic strategies that offer a means of arranging elliptical fragments of heterogeneous voices, presences, and images that traverse space and time on a discrete stage (or page) constitutes an ameliorative “imagining otherwise” to carceral ecologies. Let me close with the alternative future (or past or present) that *Burning Vision* leaves us with at the end of the uranium ore’s journey, following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “*The sound of the bomb falls downward and into their own bodies that glow bright and then ... They all look up ...*”

The sound of an explosion. A huge white light whites out their world into blackness” (118-9).

After these stage directions, various characters resume their attempts to find loved ones lost or separated from them. Finally, interlocking and overlapping radio voices send out their calls for a homecoming across Japan, Canada, and Dene Nation. The very last image: “*Glowing herds of caribou move in unison over the vast empty landscape as cherry blossoms fall till they fill the stage*” (122). As an ancestral source of social life (food, clothing, tools, shelter) for First Nations communities in Northwestern Canada, caribou have now dwindled to near extinction after their migration patterns and natural environments became devastated by the arrival of white settlers and their extractive technologies (logging, mining, pipelines, etc.). That they might return one day, in mutant and radioactive forms (“glowing”), to a post-apocalyptic landscape refuses the desire for a hastening of anthropocenic destruction in order to secure “new” and “better” (post-settler-colonial, post-capitalist) arrangements for living. Instead, such radioactive and toxic forms of restored life affirms the ephemeral yet organic bonds between life already living, and in doing so, offers a vision of not the end but reconfiguration of the existing world such that what has been grievously harmed might be re-animated to another life.

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