Troubling Beginnings

Trans(per)forming African American History and Identity

Maurice E. Stevens

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History and Identity

Maurice E.Stevens

To Ruby
The One Who Woke and Reminded Me
Elemental
Fierce
Necessary

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"Phenotype(d) Embodiment in Haile Garima's *Sankofa*" *Black Arts Quarterly,* Stanford, Stanford University Committee on Black Performing Arts, v3, n1, Summer 1998, p.9

"Public (Re)Memory, Vindicating Narratives, and Troubling Beginnings: Toward a Critical Postcolonial Psychoanalytical Theory" in the Blackwell Critical Reader Series *Fanon: A Critical reader,* ed. Lewis R.Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T.White, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996, p.203

TROUBLING BEGINNINGS

Troubled Beginnings

Let us then say that we can reinterpret ideologies of difference only because we do so from an awareness of the supervening actuality of 'mixing,' of crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries, which are more creative human activities than staying inside rigidly policed borders.

Edward Said

Identity, as Stuart Hall asserts, is shaped at the "unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."[1] This book examines how identity emerges through fierce contestation over narratives of human being, in sites that most graphically demonstrate the excruciating tension between seemingly intimate and individual stories about subjectivity and apparently more distanced narratives of collective history. You will find here the argument that narratives of origin, place, and even agency contain unruly, excessive meanings that speak pointedly of the moments of socio/political trauma, the facts of death, that mark the fleshy reality of American history. Out of this interface, stories of self unfold, like scars, as bumps and grooves in the terrain of subject formation, recording in often displaced, oblique, and disavowed ways our attempts to re-imagine ourselves as agents in history.

The following chapters chart how these scars, these raised and sensitive narratives signal endeavors to translate and retranslate troubling historical moments. Moreover, it will become clear that inhibitions evident in processes of historical reconstruction are themselves forms of group boundary management that become institutionalized and policed, constituting an important form of ongoing trauma in their own right. One of the issues with which we will be concerned is the functional and psychical relationship between historical reconstructions and the performance of African-American identity. Although it

has been nothing less than American racial terror that has necessitated the survivalistic and recuperative production of particular ideas of African-American self-hood, it should trouble one that African-American identity formation has been raced, classed, gendered and heteronormativized by ideas of authentic "blackness."

Nevertheless, at the same time that boundaries of identity have been relentlessly policed, creative artists like Bill T.Jones, James Baldwin, Marlon Riggs, Li-Young-Lee, Norma Cantú Audre Lorde and many, many others have used dance, literature, film, poetry, and essays to represent the self as migrating back and forth across narrow perimeters of identity. To varying degrees, these and other artists have demonstrated how performing subjects often contest crude oppositions between black/white, self/other, sanity/insanity and interior/exterior. Indeed, these artist's efforts have shown how disavowal supports binary relationships by covering over terms that exist between their fixed poles. These artists and their work display how deferred action, the belated realization of what was once disavowed, effectively dis-articulates terms that have been strictly opposed. Working together, disavowal and deferred action both obscure and illumine the enigmatic signifiers marking the limits of bounded groups. Even while the cultural codes and shared gestures used to certify group membership define outsiders and elements designated as foreign, they also reflect characteristics covertly possessed by the most *bona fide* and authentic "insiders." Thus, while disavowal works to assure that what is internal *and* alien goes overlooked, it also marks the precise location where the kernel of deferred action awaits recognition. Identity, from this view, is a cultural performance that holds in abeyance what has been disavowed: the creative dangerous mixing, the threatening "other" within.

Although the question of whether identity politics should ultimately be central to African-American social and intellectual transformation is a matter of urgent debate (see introduction), it does not organize our investigation. Rather, we are interested in a prior, perhaps more fundamental issue. What makes the politics of identity so powerful and so complexly determining of the possibilities for self-imaging? And how is it that the politics of identity can both empower and constrain individuals who find they walk through the terrain upon which the signification of "blackness" takes place? Examining materially grounded acts of historiography, speech, faith, and psychic development in American culture and American Studies, this book incorporates theoretical approaches from the areas of critical race theory, critical legal theory, religious studies of liberative theology, and critical psychoanalysis. It uses these frameworks to analyze cultural productions that demonstrate "creative self-imaging" in contexts such as film production, performance art, contemporary community formation, and social action, exploring each of these domains in successive chapters.

The introduction examines the terrain of academic knowledge production in

relation to the relatively new presence of scholars of color, recommending an attitude of active ambivalence vis-à-vis our sometimes strategic, sometimes forced, but always fraught deployment of identity politics in the academy. Examining the troubled racialization of scholarship, and the signifying activity that scholars of color often undertake to demonstrate their connections to subaltern communities, the introduction critiques the use of "hope" as a vindicating claim and buttress for social action. Chapter 1 focuses on the performance of selfhood as a collective and individual practice of figuring and representing one's person in relation to narratives of self-in-history and self-in-cosmos. Looking to the theological work of Ibn Al-ᶜArabi and James Cone, this chapter demonstrates how both theorists fashioned narratives of self that generate agency and political possibility in contexts where social subjects appear to be operating within the fixed protocols of orthodoxy. Chapter 2 shifts from a conception of self grounded in "exterior" origins of subject formation, to notions of an "internal" subjectivity, developing a critical psychoanalytic framework that blurs the distinction between autonomous ego and omnipotent social force. This framework highlights how socially constructed categories of differentiation like race, gender and sexuality produce real effects at the level of psyche and ramifications in the representation of history and identity. Extending my focus to how traumatic history poses a problem for cultural producers interested in representing blackness as a human and socially viable terrain of subjectivity, Chapter 3 looks toward practices of excision and forms of policing in narratives of racial vindication. It applies the concepts developed in the proceeding chapters to three films, Haile Gerima's *Sankofa,* Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* and Mario Van Peebles' *Panther,* works that exemplify contemporary attempts to fashion counter-memories of African-American reconstructed history. The discussion demonstrates how disavowal and abjection support the films' socio-political investment in visions of authentic black being. Chapter 3 examines how tactics that conflate "African" phenotype with political authenticity, representations of mixed-race bodies, and the idealization of racialized forms of masculinity and femininity, ultimately reproduce the trauma they seek to ameliorate. Finally, Chapter 4 introduces the concept of "trans(per)formance," a mode of cultural production that offers the possibility of creatively responding to the troubling histories and present conditions that social trauma has produced. Rather than arguing for hope or the possibility of transcendence, this discussion centers efforts that work within and against constricting social protocol. Focusing on Marlon Riggs' *Black Is... Black Ain't* and Anna Deavere Smith's performance work this chapter examines how performative features of African-American identity display effects of trauma, attempts at historical recovery, visions of national wholeness, cultural coherency, and ideas of authenticity.

At base, this book adopts a consciously ambivalent relationship with

identity politics. Ambivalently, and with caution it acknowledges that identity politics have saved lives and made pleasure, passion and dignity a possibility for many. At the same time, these chapters record the costs, both personal and political, demanded for even necessary pleasures. Ambivalently, dangerously, cautiously, the present discussion probes representational struggle taking place on the terrain of narrative productions of self-in-community, history and knowledge; and suggests that these processes reflect antagonisms that themselves have everything to do with the "right" to signify and the power to create personal and social change. We must bear in mind that struggles to remember incomprehensible histories, efforts to resist tendencies to fix ambiguous identities, and endeavors to represent desire, are all hotly contested rights that depend in the first instance on one's being conceived as fully human, even and especially when one never has been.

The chapters that follow are not a labor of hope. Rather, they attempt to speak words of compassion for the fluidity of identity and self-definition in defiance of the grainy silence demanded by the still life pictures of political necessity. But what must compassion look like in the reality of what Fanon calls "sociogeny," that space between Freud's *"Umwelt"* and *"Innenwelt,"* that space that creates material conditions and the experience of psychic interiority? Compassion entails the recognition of the play between these two worlds and an acknowledgment of the stakes involved in efforts to create knowledge in their tension. To seriously engage these processes requires disturbing the autonomy of self-conscious individual positionalities, the knowability of standpoint, and the collectivity of a sense of group belonging. Ultimately, there can be no safety when we engage the representation of our own historical trauma, because such engagements force an acknowledgment of the "repetitious desire to recognize ourselves doubly."[2] Active ambivalence commits us to play seriously with borders used to demarcate the limits of our selves, communities, and nations. Active ambivalence elicits the terror invoking awareness, again and again, of our simultaneous occupation of counter posed subject positions—and an awareness that we are, as Homi Bhabha puts it, both decentered and ourselves.[3] Active ambivalence, then, is the engagement with unsettled being, an attitude that prevents a hopeful story simply because hope has everything to do with smoothing over hegemony's bumpy operation.

Jean Laplanche reminds us that "…the human being creates himself, ceaselessly, only by proposing to himself a self-representation, a 'theory', 'version' or 'translation.'"[4] The activity of auto-theorization, of producing a translation, occurs at the nexus, the excruciating interface, Hall proposes between narratives of history and stories of subjectivity. Translations thus composed are, of necessity, always provisional, always arbitrarily closed, and always insufficient to the overwhelming abundance of signifiers that constitute the narratives of a culture. Auto-theorizations, our translations, are constantly

being disrupted and overturned by the emergence of previously un-translated meanings in cultural discourse. This is a condition that, ultimately, requires the ongoing process of what Laplanche terms detranslation-retranslation. *Troubling Beginnings* is designed in this mode. Accepting the *a priori* of a translation and seeking to engage in detranslation-retranslation as a way to disrupt repetitious desires and move toward more creative performances, indeed toward the trans(per)formances of history and identity.

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1. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 26.

2. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 65.

3. Ibid.

4. Jean Fletcher and Martin Stanton, *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, Drives,* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992), 176.

Translations
Translations
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Translations

HereNow and ThereThen
The Ambivalent Politics of Identity

There is no identity—national, cultural, or individual—which does not imply both a place and a time. There is no identity that is not both mise-en-scène and narrative—in personal memory and common history.

Victor Burgin

It is a very grave matter to be forced to imitate a people for whom you know— which is the price of your performance and survival—you do not exist. It is hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.

James Baldwin

From the very beginning, speaking comfortably of African-American identity formation has been a difficult, almost impossible act. For in order to do so, to utter speculations about the being inherent to being African American, one must reconcile the relationship between the African American—optimistically figured as a subject—and the narratives of communal selfhood that have come to constitute African-American history. The precarious status of AfricanAmerican subjectivity, and the often-thorny function of reconstructed AfricanAmerican historical narratives, produces a profound quandary for anyone seeking to understand and represent African Americans as agents in history; theirs is a quandary that leaves one troubled and altogether uncomfortable.

Speaking of African-American identity is troubling and almost impossible not only because of the historical materiality of disturbing moments like the Atlantic Slave Trade, plantation experiences, community supported lynching, Jim Crow laws, systematic social marginalization, and state sanctioned violence and captivity, but also because of the meanings attached to these periods of historical practice, these evidentiary signs of what Baldwin suggests goes "not

seen." The ubiquitous brutality and hardship that constitutes the African-American historical record can neither be conceived nor contained within standard African-American visions of communal selfhood, for it overwhelms their capacity to signify. Consequently unspeakable features of living (and dying), of being (and not), submerged beneath the narratives that comprise African-American history, find themselves overlooked and unexamined: they are what Julia Kristeva might term abjected. Since her important ideas regarding abjection (as they are taken up in her work *Powers of Horror*) will be discussed at length later, suffice it to say now that abjection, the needful expulsion of distasteful aspects of the self, creates the conditions of possibility for the inaugural constitution of the boundaries of one's identity.

Troubling Beginnings asserts that African-American narratives of self and community develop in an American social imaginary that has traditionally dehumanized or dehistoricized "blackness" (sometimes biological, sometimes cultural, but always, at base, a visual artifact). Because those who tell the stories of African-American history and agency work within a social context that has understood African Americans as without historical agency and as lacking full humanity, narratives of self-in-community have had to make use of abjection to function in the service of vindication to both positive and negative effect, and have made it very difficult to write African-Americans into an agency filled story of historical progress. Indeed, what Jean Laplanche calls auto-theorization, has required the conscious and unconscious excising of images suggesting the devaluation, social infirmity, and inhumanity assigned to African Americans as people and "blackness" as a signifier. Thus, "self-writing" has actually necessitated discursive acts of vindication.

Troubling Beginnings traces the positive and negative effects of self-writing and makes suggestions for more productive modes of making history, by raising questions about the simultaneous construction and representation of communal and individual selfhood inherent in the production of what George Lipsitz has called "counter-memories."[1] Examining filmed representations of reconstructed African-American history and other visual performances of black popular culture proves informative because of the increasingly influential role the visual plays as an arbiter of American identities writ large. Stuart Hall's description of popular culture as a "profoundly mythic…theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies…where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves…" directs us to this realm where selves are crafted, represented and produced. We can see in the field of popular cultural production, that it is a place "where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time."[2] To this extent, popular cultural productions obtain a social force and subsequently political relevance.

Films like *Sankofa, Panther,* and *Malcolm X* function as collective social

memories and mediations of African-American historical trauma that work to define, and in critical ways restrict the boundaries of blackness. The ways in which mixed-race bodies, black manhood and womanhood, and African-American authenticity are represented across these films define the limits of African-American identity formation, precisely by establishing boundaries of cultural "authenticity." Wahneema Lubiano has usefully discussed the various functions served by and through the formation of black nationalisms in the United States, illumining both their generative possibilities and limiting pronouncements.[3] Her analysis suggests the how nationalist narratives are, in important ways, vindicatory, even while their potent images get incorporated into the state's oppressive structures. Fortunately, some African-American cultural producers have engaged in the creation of performance work that allows for broadened notions of African-American identity and agency, while also raising important questions about pedagogy. By expanding notions of African-American identity through performance, these cultural producers actually transform concepts of agency and black nationhood and enact, or at least condition the possibility of trans(per)formance. *Troubling Beginnings* conceives of the performance of identity as mediating our relationship to images of our history, future, trauma, ambiguity, and desire, as a way to ask how we imagine and write ourselves in the production of narratives of self and self-in-community in a discursive landscape wherein struggles over identity and subject-hood are fiercely waged.

Identity struggle takes place on the discursive terrain of signification and nation building, a terrain whose topography is marked by sovereignty and the desire to signify one's immanent and autonomous selfhood and valued sense of agency, even while one maintains unquestioned membership in the group that sometimes by fiat and sometimes by necessity, one calls "home." The discussion taken up in the service of *Troubling Beginnings* implies stakes that revolve around the struggle over signifying identity, the right to produce narratives of self that contradict dominant stories, and the possibility of "making" agency in the face of discursive overdetermination. *Troubling Beginnings* also argues that black subjectivity ought to be understood as complex and uniquely located, as an effect of powerful racializing forces, somewhere between intrapsychic experience and the external world of social structures. Blackness, neither the simple expression of an essential nature, nor the predictable seal of structural domination, as a *mode* of subjectivity, is fixed between the pure interiority of drives, desires, and identifications, and the absolute exteriority of history and culture. Indeed, Blackness, we will find, is as elusive as the fields of knowledge production/performance that attempt to describe, explain, and enact it.

Ours is a shifting landscape of knowledge production, identity formation, psychical development, social action, and "being" in history. Like rivers,

narratives of self-in-community flow through and across this landscape and obscure or obliterate the signs of passage and contested signification that mark its surface. In the idiom of consensus politics, racial uplift or collective struggle, this narrative flows over anxieties (and pleasures), both individual and communal, local and global. In the chapters that follow, how these quietly submerged, dammed up, or redirected narratives function in counterpoint to stable and solid images of identity will become apparent, as will the fact that they contribute to a productive and dangerous tension. However, we must interrogate how the performance of identity is routed through racialized images that reflect complex and politically motivated representational practices, and consider how social and personal agency is crafted in the face of overwhelming discursive forces.

Since, in the realm of history making, struggles over the signification of identity tend to cohere around traumatic historical moments, it is important to take seriously the notion of historical trauma and its meaning in relation to contemporary formations of agency. Moreover, since human identity is a condition of narratives that bespeak one's humanity, it is particularly interesting to explore how African-American cultural producers respond when faced with the dilemma posed by a history wherein the point of origin, the troubled and troubling beginning, is located firmly in a site of dehumanization…a site of historical wounding.

Any attempt to explore meanings surrounding momentous and terrible historical events must confront the "difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence"[4], and must face the challenge of making events comprehensible through individual acts of representation. Examining the injuries of history and their traumatic echoes requires making troubling historical events meaningful by locating them in "place and time," within the *mise-en-scène* of contemporary identity formation. The problem of comprehensibility and its ramifications for the potentiality of representation also stands out as a feature of psychical trauma and suggests, therefore, that the developing field of "Trauma Studies" might lend some useful insight into our narrativized responses to unusually horrific historical events. Although theorists like Cathy Caruth, J.Robert Lifton, Dominick La Capra, and Shoshana Feldman have addressed these issues, the racialization of knowledge production has, to this point, limited the degree to which trauma theory has been applied to the specific case of African-American experiences.[5]

Of particular concern is how the stakes inherent to the traumatic nature of African-American experiences and the complex devaluing of blackness assert themselves at the level of visual representation, and the degree to which semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretation can highlight their operation. One's relation to stories of origin, material conditions and future desires (or fears) locates one in discernible social positions. Thus, one's perceived ability to speak or claim a

position within an historical narrative preconditions the understanding of one's self as a subject. Because, we can understand identity as a condition of narrative, and historical narratives as quintessentially manifesting conceptions of identity, it is no wonder that narratives of one's origin and place in communal history stand as both the site and stake of struggles over the signification of identity and group membership. Indeed, it is no wonder also that one's position within groups and one's sense of identity has come to play such an important role in the arena of knowledge production and dissemination. The spectrum of view points regarding the place of identity and identity politics within African-American theorization is indeed broad, and while limited, the following examples highlight some of the rhetorical (though not simply discursive) signifying that has come to define the poles of this spectrum. These examples possess their own historical specificity and have actually been abandoned or amended since their first articulations. It is important to note, however, that although these particular thinkers have changed their opinions, the intellectual positions they espoused still exist as locations within the terrain of knowledge production and as modes in the struggle over signification. While they no longer occupy, draw upon or describe a sense of self-in-community from these signifying locations, many other scholars of color do, and these positions possess functions that remain powerful and telling even now.

Generally speaking, two opposing rhetorical positions have emerged regarding the status of African-American identity politics in the authentication of knowledge production and social action. On one hand we might place the notion that one's identity position or "standpoint" (typified by categories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, region, sexuality, etc., but generally dominated in the U.S. by racial distinctions), determines one's material conditions, social location, and consciousness. This perspective argues that successful social mobilization requires political action organized under fixed signs of identification that derive their meaning and power from ideas of cultural difference: that one's identity determines one's politics. On the other hand and in opposition to this view, we can locate the concept that political organization across categories of difference based on shared grievances and concerns, both strengthens the popular base of social movements and produces a multicultural framework for analyzing social structures: that one's politics shapes one's identity. Because each position has its merits and drawbacks, and because neither position is about to disappear or to subsume the other, we shall not attempt to adjudicate their priority. Instead, we can posit that the tension created by their opposition can help clarify the motivations and drives that both demand and structure contemporary struggles over the signification of identity.

While both of these theoretical and political positions seek to transform structures of social domination, one is grounded in cultural nationalism and the other in multiculturalism. The cultural nationalist view, associated in the

academy with formations like African-American studies, Africana Studies and Black Studies and a long history of connection to political struggle and advocacy, maintains a kind of interiorized conception of black identity. There exist, this position suggests, essential qualities of experience and characteristics of sameness that inform an Afro-diasporic world-view, and, as a consequence, certain ascertainable and essential features of blackness should inform one's scholarship and one's political investments.

Multiculturalist perspectives work with a more exteriorized conception of black being. Blackness, they posit, is a product of cultural and social relation, and social patterns of domination and subordination fix the ways in which it can be experienced or understood. Scholarship and activism, according to a multicultural perspective usually associated with American studies, sociology and cultural anthropology, should privilege analyses of the social structures that shape the formation of identity and social relations. The concerns and issues raised by two scholars who at one point exemplified these viewpoints, when read alongside one another, suggest that an alternative notion of politics based in struggles over identity can help manage the thorny issue of scholars of color, their agency and intellectual performance.

Identity Politics or Beyond: Two Perspectives

In his reflection on contemporary knowledge production "Black Studies, Cultural Studies. Performative Acts,"[6] Manthia Diawara surveys the ideologically problematic effects arising from the relationship between a British Cultural Studies tradition and certain formations of Black Studies in the United States. He worries that contemporary Black Studies seems headed toward a mode of cultural studies that, by his assessment, "…tends to evacuate race and gender as primary issues," because of its emphasis on a figuring of performance that owes too much of its intellectual genealogy and focus to a British Cultural Studies tradition. Diawara bases his argument in an analysis of contemporary performance studies. He suggests that knowledge production figured by identity politics within communities of marginalized scholarship is dangerous, and that its threat lies in how the proliferation of theoretical "standpoints" serves to fracture intellectual positions linked to very real material political struggles.

Black Studies, as Diawara imagines it, occupies an intellectual space that must be highly suspicious of knowledges grounded in poststructuralist or postmodernist ideas because of the "emphasis that these theoretical projects put on decentering the subject politically—as a means to once again undermine the black subject." Indeed, Diawara is right to be wary of how postmodern conceptualizations have often been employed to disable or weaken connections

between academic production and social activism: ideas that have at times provided the intellectual justification for political paralysis by labeling certain modes of political affiliation and action "problematic," "essentializing," the product of "totalizing narratives" or "wounded attachements," or productive of "fictitious unities."

As an academic interested in socially relevant knowledge production, Diawara's project and the position it here represents is politically important to scholars interested in social change who see the academy as one site where that change can be effected. Moreover, Diawara's critiques obliquely, but importantly, call into question the arbitrary boundary drawn between the academy and the "street," a border that works to strictly divide academics from activists as cultural producers and performers. However, in his formulation, Diawara reduces the study of performance to a mode of object study. Instead of seeing performance studies as a methodology or mode of interpretation, he positions the intellectual work to which he objects as necessarily outside the domain Black Studies. Thus, from Diawara's perspective, performance does not naturally occur within blackness, instead, as a kind of intellectual internal alien, it is at best an addition to an already extant foundation of the necessary and sufficient qualities of blackness. This assumption limits the ways in which blackness can be coded by defining it as an ethnically bound category bearing some grounding in an essential and shared experience. However, one of the more promising features of the relationship between Performance Studies and Black Studies is that it allows blackness to signify an ethnic category *and* an interpretive approach bound by acts of performative representation instead of fixed notions of ethnicity. From this perspective blackness can be seen as a signifier conjoining multiple notions of ethnically absolute group cohesion that is a mode of performance in and of itself.

Diawara is specifically concerned that Performance Studies, which he sees as a kind of post-modern symptom as it intersects with Black Studies, focuses on the specific experiences of "the black woman," "the endangered black male," and/or "the black gay or lesbian," and thereby fragments the black community precisely at moments when group solidarity is most necessary. While group cohesion is essential to the politically important task of mobilizing social movement, the way this position frames the boundaries of that cohesion also implies what counts as the necessary and sufficient features of authentic blackness. Diawara's analysis relies, finally, upon fixed notions of group identity based on an interiorized conception of race.

Diawara's argument also suggests a move away from what he calls "oppression studies" and into a more nuanced elaboration of a particularly African-American cultural studies with a specific emphasis on material social relations. Although the context of material social relations facing a particular group must always be a component of relevant intellectual production for or

about that group, such a focus runs the risk of disavowing differences within the community. Putting aside for the moment that gender, sexuality, and class are themselves racialized and intersectionally related, rigid notions of group identity tend to ground their fixity on the repudiation of cultural specificity under the sign of political expediency. While the efficacy of political action and intellectual production must not be undervalued, the costs must be carefully measured. By figuring identity politics in the academy in general and the field of Performance Studies in particular as disruptive of African-American coalition building efforts, Diawara suggests that differences based on gender, sexuality, or mixed racial heritage must be subsumed under the sign of race.

Although it "involves an individual or group of people interpreting an existing tradition—reinventing themselves—in front of an audience, or public…," performance does not occur on top of or layered over some socially authentic real subject that is somehow whole and undisturbed. Performance is not an object whose structure reveals hidden cultural information, nor a cultural artifact that traces patterns of resistance and domination. Neither is it merely a discursive maneuver. Rather, performance is a complex activity located at the intersection between the discursively produced subject, the intrapsychically shaped ego, and the institutionally manufactured citizen. Although subjectivity thus produced may at first seem overdetermined and woefully fixed, the fact that it exists at the intersection between competing "overdetermining" structures renders it ambivalent and provides it with an agency otherwise unavailable.

At the same time that it protects useful notions of cultural specificity, Diawara's approach to the study of performance also depends on an aesthetic grounded in fixity that, as will become clearer later, relies on the repression, disavowal, or simple foreclosure of unstable images. Indeed, his formulation actually creates an aesthetic object (in the psychoanalytic sense of the term), namely UNITY. Again, Diawara seeks to make an important intervention into the proliferation of positionalities in identity discourse that threatens to relativize important political struggles. Still, his method necessitates terms of engagement that have been naturalized through hegemonic processes on the one hand, and that reassert the actuality of the degendered, desexualized, authentically "real" black subject, on the other.

The work of Manning Marable and other theorists who emphasize the shared features of social struggle across lines of race, stands at the other pole of argumentation regarding the usefulness of race as a pragmatic marker of social location and political action. In Marable's case, race, while a central feature organizing social relations, is clearly located in the exteriorized realm as an effect of social structures of relation, a social construct. In other words, race is the artifact produced by oppressed people having to respond to the social structures (institutional state apparatuses) that limit their lives. For Marable, race based identity politics pose a problem for theorists and activists interested in

social change, because such politics correlate certain modes of socially structured suffering with authentic racial identity.

Marable posits that "[i]n the United States, 'race' for the oppressed has also come to mean an identity of survival, victimization and opposition to those racial groups or elite which exercise power and privilege."[7] Marable claims that "survival tales" and "grievances" constitute "an historical consciousness" that then grounds ethnic identity formation. This notion usefully locates identity formation as occurring in direct connection with stories of self in history, and suggests that particular kinds of "survival tales" can themselves be understood as racialized. Marable indirectly posits that by reconfiguring the material relations of marginalized groups it may be possible to de-racialize and in certain ways generalize the common features of their "grievances" and "survival tales," thereby illuminating shared grounds for social resistance.

Altering the nature of material conditions can, according to this position, advance the work of reweaving the "historical consciousness" of oppressed groups into narratives of social agency through coalition based activism. Thus, whereas the position on identity politics represented by Diawara urges the centering of race-based notions of subjectivity and political mobilization, Marable's viewpoint depends upon a notion of social agency that figures the social subject as constructed in relation to material conditions and state sanctioned modes of repression. Marable's position argues the necessity of moving beyond race based identity politics and toward a multicultural approach to social transformation that does not define race as the foremost organizing feature of American culture.

While this impulse usefully decenters race and creates room for more complexly inflected approaches to producing social change that consider other modes of social differentiation like class, gender and sexuality, Marable locates the liberative potential of social action outside mechanisms of identity politics without accounting for the social and psychical costs of enacting such a project of moving on. Indeed, identity politics serve important purposes on the level of psychical and political structure that must not be undervalued because of the discomfort they elicit.

Identity politics provide a place in discourse for the recognition of self otherwise unavailable in dominant narratives. In speaking of the place Negritude held in the development of his self-view, Frantz Fanon writes suggestively:

> I rummaged frenetically through all the antiquity of the black man. What I found there took away my breath… All of that, exhumed from the past, spread with its insides out, made it possible for me to find a valid historic place. The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years

ago. And there was something else, something else that the white man could
not understand. Listen…[8]

That which the "white man" cannot understand in Fanon's narrative is the "zeal"
of experiencing one's own humanity for the first time, the shock of feeling one's
own agency where before it didn't exist. Indeed, it is the revelation of having
one's life saved by an idea that turns the world inside out and makes it full of
possibility when once it was empty and poor. This is the psychical efficacy of
essentialist identity politics, and it carries effects at the level of psyche as real as
those some argue it produces in political struggle, even when moving to
radically different notions of self.

      Critical race theorists have argued the political efficacy of strategically
adopting public positions under the banner of the "victimhood" or "oppression"
of communities bounded by race to achieve changes in social policy. As
problematic as these positions may seem at the level of individualized or private
rhetoric, survival—and in that sense liberation—is often gained by taking up,
even temporarily, unenviable locations like these. Indeed, many current
arguments against affirmative action rest on the notion that specific racial groups
are unfairly awarded material resources (always figured as scarce) based on their
being conceived as victims or as oppressed. And, moreover, that that oppression
is being passed on to dominant groups making *them* victims of discrimination.
In city, state, and national politics, policy is driven by the idea of a community's
"need," and this need is often justified in terms of the unfair, unjust, or merely
uneven distribution of resources. Still, there is another, equally important, reason
to contest the urge to dismiss identity politics out of hand.

      On another, and perhaps further reaching level, we must resist the discursive
effects engendered by the intellectual floating to the "beyond" Marable
suggests. On a semiotic level, his formulation sets up problematic binary
oppositions like identity politics vs. coalition building, nihilism vs. hope, and
survival vs. liberation. Although Marable does not himself argue this, the
metaphoric relation between the first terms of each of these pairings renders
identity politics a crude method of survival that is nihilistic in its social effects
and sources. Moreover, this set of binary relations underlines the way active
notions of liberation and coalition work are all too often hung on the peg of
hope; something that, in and of itself, is not a problem. However, according to
the all or nothing semiotic logics internal to these binary relations (where
coalition building, hope, and liberation are associated paradigmatically), when
one "loses hope," when one cannot "keep hope alive," when one's coalitions fail
or liberative efforts are crushed by repressive state apparatuses, inaction and
political paralysis remain as the logical semiotic options for social response. It is
precisely the logic of the choice that freezes social action.

      In an effort to avoid political paralysis, we must strongly resist the impulse

to move on, over, around or under without moving *through.* To optimistically begin with a political point of departure that disavows identity politics is to also abjure the powerful narratives that both draw subjects to identity based positions and shape the contours of those identities upon their arrival. In fact, encouraging disavowal of identity politics enables "multicultural democracy" (the object of Marable's own—though there are many others who possess it—hopeful desire) to function as a narrativized fetish that promises social reconciliation without working through the conceptualizations of difference that impede it. We can avoid this kind of fetishizing in narratives of social and personal transformation by considering what meanings have been attached to difference as a concept and the work it performs as a discursive object.

Engaging in critically informed labor in this terrain where struggles over the signification of identity occur has never been easy. It has not been easy, here in the American context, to question the formation of borders based on conflated notions of race and culture; where race is encoded by phenotypic and other biological markers. Matters get slippery indeed in a sociological matrix of relations founded upon the sometimes strategic, sometimes inadvertent, but invariably mystifying sliding of race as a signifier between poles of biology, culture, and political formation. Whether as biological fact marking incommensurable difference measurable in the curve and hue of other(ed) bodies, or as a signifier of the socio-cultural specificity (often understood in terms of ownership) of such everyday activities as eating, dressing, voting, thinking and expressing, "race," as a concept, shifts in meaning and effect.

Here in the American field of significance, "ethnic absolutism" has historically encoded the absolute desire to be cognized as human. Consequently, it has always been difficult to remain self-critical in the labor of creating and recreating counter-memories, survival tales, and narratives of liberation. Even with the keen hindsight provided by Paul Gilroy's assertion that a specifically "Black" consciousness should be considered a thoroughly modern construction,[9] ethnically absolute notions of fixed authenticity remain potently seductive precisely because of the possibility of human being they index (what Frantz Fanon expressed quite simply as "reciprocal recognition"[10]). Marable's formulation here offers its most provocative insight into the seductive power of collective narratives grounded in the survival tales and grievances that form the foundation of African-American historical consciousness.

The telling of stories of self-in-cosmos, self-in-community, self-in-society and self-in-psyche *in relation to survival tales and grievances,* constitutes the ground upon which identification occurs. The seductive power of authenticity discourse comes precisely from its ability to foreclose discomfiting moments of ambiguity in the service of cognizing oneself as a modern human subject. Indeed, some social subjects locate the historical origins of their sense of identity in the distant and generally heroic past (Afrocentric discourse is the

most germane example in the context of this discussion). While such gestures might be thought somehow anti-modern or archaic by virtue of their specific content, narratives of origin function in an entirely modern way. Namely, they work in the service of vindication and fetishistically construct visions of agency-filled futures without working through the "traumatic" historical episodes that necessitate (and precondition) their own construction.

Still, neither the needful urge to be cognized as human nor the production of vindicating narratives to achieve this end should be critiqued out of hand. For desire obtains from the intersection between drives and the social reality of their differential fulfillment. Whether for reasons of racialized, classed, sexualized, or gendered marginalization, there are those for whom the world is "poor and empty" to use Freud's formulation, and for whom being understood (and understanding self) as human is more than an academic concern. It is indeed a matter of psycho-social life and psycho-social death when the process of racialization actually serves to position the raced subject, to fix one really, in the neither exterior nor interior space of sociogeny.

Acknowledging the forces that shape us from without while encountering our own private and shifting stories of self, helps to make sense of the amazing pressure to perform produced through complex constructions of simultaneously racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjectivities. Bhabha is correct to assert that the "marginal or 'minority' is not the space of a celebratory or utopian, self marginalization," and to figure subaltern critique as "a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity…that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or ethnic prerogative."[11] Laying claim to authentic membership in marginal academic communities (especially those "of color") can function to carefully pry open moments of discursive possibility in a field where subject positions are repeatedly overdetermined by ideologically produced narratives of and about race, sex, faith, and gender as they pertain to legitimate knowledge production, or the production of legitimate knowledge. Still, the actively ambivalent occupation of these locations conditions the possibility of trans(per)formative activity. "Academics of color," therefore must take up locations in the community thus hailed even while resisting this categorical pronouncement. This is done in order to make a different sense of such categories and to imagine a level of control, a level of willful agency that allows "academics of color" to approach and retreat, as desire dictates, from fixed modes of self-representation. This is not a question of privilege. It is not a question of who is able to cross borders, to transgress boundaries and navigate frontiers…to "pass." This is about active ambivalence, where one is multiply subjective, cognizant of occupying different and often conflicting social locations simultaneously, not successively or strategically. From this vantage

then, struggles over identification might better be understood as markers of the desire to resist the implications of this simultaneity.

Nevertheless, within and outside of academia, discursive opportunities, pried open or not, are always prescribed within specific conventions of scholarship and sense making that themselves code notions of race, sex, faith, and gender. Whether figured in terms of writing style, authorial voice, or modes of self-location, the naturalization and institutionalization of knowledge production mystifies moments of control and policing that operate under the signs "scholarship," "rigor," "common sense," and disciplinary convention.

With the admission of people previously underrepresented into the halls of higher education, academia certainly looks different. Not surprisingly, the presence of people claiming membership within newly arriving groups, and the performances they enact are understood predominantly within the logics of what Isaac Julian has called "look relations" and the rhetorical field of representation. In considering the performances of "scholars of color" then, race might be seen as the dominant register structuring their reception. Therefore, before moving into an examination of the particular modes and ramifications of the performance *Troubling Beginnings* represents, we must briefly locate race as a register that naturalizes difference(s) in symbolics, psyche, and social institutions.

Why Race Matters: Racialization and Knowledge Production

In *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away,*[12] Ramon Gutierrez figures race as a category that promotes a cultural self/other binary. In this dichotomous relation he suggests, and without dependence upon phenotypic criteria, the self in question can be considered among *gente con razon,* while "other" signifies identities without reason, without *calidad,* with neither *a priori* sacred worth nor tradition. Read alongside concepts of race and racial formation that locate the sources and effects of racialized discourse within the bounds of material social relations and social movement, race as social construction with material effects can be evaluated without reducing the complexity of its constitution and the ubiquity of its operation. Manning Marable, for example, suggests that we understand race through its operation as an oppositional category for people of color in the United States, where, he says, it "is, first and foremost, an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership, and privilege within the economic, social and political institutions of society."[13] While Marable's perspective reminds us to think about how race structures the very material principles of reality, the race he envisions is a determined social object. The

ubiquity of viewpoints like this and the inflexibility with which they bind race as ideology of fixity and racism as its material counterpart, obscures how race functions as the categorical ground for images (and the visualizing) of human possibility and agency.

Race functions as a signifying cell that imprisons all those individuals and ideas constructed as alien or illegal; it is a matrix of conceptualization that measures the location of subjects (selves) against the address of objects (others). Moreover, within the logics of simultaneously biologistically and culturally framed deployments of race as a concept, the "other" is perceived as a contagion whose very presence threatens the invented integrity of the imagined social body. At the same time, others endanger the possibility of satisfying desire by producing an anxiety in the cultural self that usually coheres around notions of scarcity or theft. In the *Innenwelt* of intrapsychic experience, race functions to stabilize the unified cultural self over and against the presence of an "internal alien" by marking it as other and enabling the disavowal of its very actuality. This double movement from social structure to psyche and from *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt,* makes racialization a process that fixes racialized subjectivity at the border between internal and external realities. At the level of the social imaginary, the "invasion of aliens" highlights the precarious maintenance of a united national self over and against some foreign other. Moreover, this national self, at moments of cultural contact, is clearly manifest in its most contingent and arbitrary expression. Witness the problematic figuring of syncretism as the mixing of cultural traditions (themselves considered pure, originary, or authentic) that results in the formation of "hybrid" socio-cultural structures. As Hall suggests, refusing simple syncretism in relation to black popular culture "…is to insist that in black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base."[14]

Certainly, the notion of hybridity has made much needed interventions into discourses of cultural and national purity powerfully possible. Nevertheless, hybridity understood as the combination or melding of source cultures (instead of hybridity as marker of indeterminacy), warrants caution and the same sense of playfulness and contingency it brings to notions of cultural homogeneity. Individuals or social formations that occur at points of cultural contact cannot be understood as amalgams of separate and discreet cultures, precisely because of the materially grounded effects traceable in ideas of race based social traits, state control founded on indices of blood quanta measured drop by drop, and

complex arguments for the genetic (usually patrilinear) transmission of social worth and power.

Encounters with difference over extended periods actually impede the emergence of fixed identities, because moments of cultural contact produce less than determinate subjectivities that actually necessitate the formation of performative acts like racialization that socially encode incommensurability and discreet selfhood. Consequently, race engages in the double function of both obscuring ideologies of difference (by naturalizing notions of race based incommensurability) and marking the points where those ideologies are most frayed. Racialized conceptions manifest themselves in coded forms while the struggle for the right to signify the boundaries of racial membership appears to continue. Clearly, ideas of an overarching 'Hope' can have no place in this story, when the psycho-social foundations for the drive to signify remain to be interrogated.

Reflecting on its performance in the American cultural imaginary, Toni Morrison cautions that "…Africanism has become…both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability."[15] Responding to her call, we too can wonder about performance as it relates to scholars of color in the first instance and African-American popular culture producers in the main.

As it is used here, the term "performance" broadly suggests something in between anthropological, post-structuralist, performance, or popular cultural studies perspectives on performance. The work of James Scott, Judith Butler, Peggy Phelan and George Lipsitz is exemplary of these groupings, and usefully reflects how various approaches to analyzing performance represent the subject and agency. In his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* James Scott demonstrates how anthropological discourse tends to frame performance as an expression of cultural knowledge[16]. Coherent subjects perform roles within strict ritual systems, roles that have political meaning and social value that can be read in and of itself. Judith Butler's notion of performativity, argues for the generative nature of structuring categories like race, class, and gender. She suggests that "within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be a performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be." For Butler "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed."[17] Within Butler's framing, the subject exists as an effect of discourse and possesses an identity only in so much as it rests upon the authority of already extant structures that give it meaning. Peggy Phelan's conception of performance gives the subject a strictly embodied coherence that then negotiates with structures of oppression through unitary and irreproducible acts. Phelan likens performance to quantum physics in its undocumentability and insists, therefore, that performance "critics [must]

realize that the labor to write about performance (and thus to 'preserve' it) is also a labor that fundamentally alters the event." By Phelan's account, the fundamentally unique character of any one performance is its use of "the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body."[18] The subject implied in George Lipsitz' conception of performance also enjoys a certain autonomy in relation to social structures of domination. While neither Phelan nor Lipsitz posit an absolutely autonomous subject, they both see cultural performance as possessing an oppositional edge. Due to experiences demanding the "bifocality" of the oppressed, Lipsitz suggests, "minority group culture reflects the decentered and fragmented nature of contemporary human experience." Performance in this context, undertaken by coherent subjects, self-consciously and sometimes inadvertently works to "fashion forms of cultural expression appropriate to postmodern realities…rich culture[s] of opposition… designed to preserve the resources of the past by adapting them to the needs of the present."[19]

Rather than placing these theoretical approaches in opposition to each other, performative (and more specifically trans(per)formative) acts are best examined and understood from various perspectives because they function differentially across situational contexts and necessitate different explanatory systems. In analyzing racialized notions within the academy from the perspective of performance theory, this story asks how our actions as bodies turning in space and as scholars of color constructing bodies of knowledge, constitute a performance that is performative.

In *Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance,*[20] Lawrence Sullivan suggests that performative practices prove important because they render "perceptible a symbolism of the unity of the senses" which "enables a culture to entertain itself with the idea of the unity of meaning." That is, performative acts allow the performing body the opportunity to enact and describe a moment and space for occasional reflections "on the unity of that body of cultural knowledge" that serves to delimit the boundaries of group membership and the possibilities of identity formation through identification. The particular modes of performance required by academics of color to insure legitimacy of voice and legality of position in relation to the accepted rules of discourse within a closely policed dialogue, serve to narrate boundaries that constitute certain scholars as intellectuals of color. Thus, academic expectations to engage certain canonized scholarship (generally Eurocentric) and to abjure anything marked as political, activist oriented, biographical, or otherwise subjective, marks for scholars of color the boundaries of disciplinary convention. Moreover, the historical circumstances that have led to the increasing presence of ethnically underrepresented scholars (civil rights and community-based activism), also inform the decisions scholars of color often make in relation to their knowledge production. Consequently, many scholars of

color find themselves balancing between producing scholarship from publicly subjective political and personal needs, and the objective aims of academic discourse. Moreover, scholars of color often do this while always being aware of how we, our work and the production expected of us, are first racialized and then disciplined.

Although this tense and disciplined constitution has resulted in the development of important fields and methods of study, it has also led to a full spectrum of responses to work by scholars of color. These responses stretch from the hopeful celebration of new perspectives and critical sensibilities, to suspicious rejections of subjective or self-referential scholarship. Unfortunately, even the inclusion of "area studies," and those scholars who produce them, does not ensure full response to the generative critiques they sometimes produce. The development of "scholars of color" as an intellectual formation and the predicaments many of them face, should not be received as a kind of authentic origin story told by a native informant. For the double-edged nature of history making, of telling origin stories, serves functions both disparate and co-constitutive.

At the same time that performing origin stories in the service of bringing individuated selves together under the banner of community can provide groups with a sense of "the unity of meaning" around a "body of cultural knowledge," such performances have their dangers. Brenneis and others have shown that origin stories can become institutionalized in their control of context, and that they can function as "powerful means for the [reproduction of] social relations of dominance" that have historically limited the liberative effects of marginalized communities' performative endeavors.[21] Reading how *Sankofa, Malcolm X*, and *Panther* function to delimit the identificatory possibilities described by the signifier blackness, and highlighting other performances that expand the expressive possibilities for telling stories about history and being-in-community, resists the ways in which authenticity discourses threaten to wash away the traces of their own academic performance through claims on the real and the practical.

To make matters worse, because the wound of historical legacy runs through the site of struggle academics of color have chosen, discussing race is all the more difficult. Indeed, processes of racialization still richly determine the modes of interaction scholars of color encounter and develop. And yet the wound goes unacknowledged, prompting Toni Morrison to note that "when matters of race are located and called attention to…critical response has tended to be on the order of humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by the label 'political.'"[22] Morrison cautions that "[e]xcising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly." And while she considers this erasure "a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery," we can speculate that these self-surgeries actually serve to artificially

recuperate—through often ungainly suturing—a solidified sense of selfhood in the face of the loss of subjective coherence initiated with the emergence of violent colonial contact. Claiming membership in the group "scholars of color" or engaging in the production of reconstructed historical memories is performative because such claims draw upon the citational authority afforded by already extant patterns of relation.

Trans(per)formative cultural performances, however, are more promising because they can create moments of uncommon-sense and thereby reproduce something other than old outsider/insider politics. Nevertheless, mainstream academic nostalgia for the new and originary in combination with its simultaneous championing of "traditional" forms of discipline and certification, makes trans(per)formance difficult. Often, critical perspectives scholars of color bring to the intellectual table are ascribed a certain charisma of novelty that, as an ideological apparatus, sets the terms of engagement to which all academics must adhere and poses only limited challenges to the troubling foundations that support contemporary knowledge production. Indeed, this dynamic largely determines how scholars of color and their work are received by that imagined "mainstream."[23]

One way to make sense of changes in the academic environment is to consider them as analogous to patterns of American immigration and acculturation. From this perspective, Omi and Winant's "ethnicity paradigm" of racial meaning provides a way to understand how the academy makes sense of the presence of scholars of color.[24] Scholars of color, as those most recently arrived, are expected to contribute to an intellectual cultural pluralism and follow a pattern of smooth assimilation into the academy. Thus, while the new and originary may signify a certain competency in struggle for those scholars who consider their voices to have been historically marginalized, it is differently symbolic to the members of the "dominant" academic culture. For example, some scholars of color cite Antonio Gramsci's notion of organic intellectualism to legitimate the proclamation of presence their academic pursuits represent. While other intellectual figures might work equally well to establish citational legitimacy (thinkers like Sojourner Truth, Harold Cruz, Frantz Fanon, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B.Dubois come to mind in the African-American case), Gramsci's theories have possessed particular currency in studies of popular culture by scholars of color. Perhaps owing to his being a "certified" cultural theorist and racially unmarked activist, citing Gramsci doubly functions to signal to the intellectual mainstream left (writ large), a hopeful political moment that has long slipped into the romantically figured originary past of civil unrest, and popular movements of social protest in the United States.

Beyond re-presenting the work of one of the few already legitimized theorists of ideology and hegemony, citations of Gramsci's scholarship have come to have a specific intellectual value or capital, that marks those scholars of

color who cite his work as a particular sort of intellectual. Whether as organic intellectuals who both represent and remain connected to their communities, signaling the intention to use "book learning" to engender revolutionary practice and revolutionary culture; or as the return of the suppressed public intellectual tradition loosed from the "hush arbors" and "mean streets" of academic peripheralization, scholars of color often signify a kind of intellectual commitment to the "masses," and the "uplifting of the race." Moreover, while acting upon a sense of displacement and always ending migration across borders, scholars of color become naturalized citizen subjects of academia by linking the content of Gramsci's "Notebooks," to the day-to-day context of political struggle. With performative gestures and nods, scholars of color demonstrate vocational (and therefore more organic) efforts to notarize retranslations of historical accounts as a means of disavowing the deliberate (and politically unjust) nature of the erasure of the histories of various diasporic groups who only recently have begun telling their own stories in the context of American academic knowledge production and transmission. These are narratives of position and strategies, not hope.

When operating within an academic context that in every instance has already marked the borders around the insider/outsider binary construction, scholars of color cannot determine the ways in which their citations of Gramsci's imprisoned cipher are interpreted. In a social context where changes in racial formation have developed amidst social formation, the promise of social transformation has come to be predicated upon reorganizations of racializing practices. Consequently, references to Gramsci's organic intellectualism made by scholars of color are "hopefully" understood as symbolic of the development of what Gramsci referred to as the proletarian hegemony. That is, academia itself hopes that the emergence of organic intellectuals speaking from a repressed and originary location in the "real world" might signal the impending arrival of fundamental social transformation, of a move towards a basic mode of "species being," something perceived as absent in the nostalgic melancholy understood to have it origins in the speedup of the academic industry, and the resentment born of the imagined intellectual "lock down" issuing from the moral (figured as repressive) force of identity politics. While the charisma (and, indeed, power) of novelty does increase the cultural capital associated with work produced by scholars of color, this construal becomes problematic when read against the ways in which social movements representing both the political left and right, have at various historical moments incorporated people of color's civil or human rights movements and/or rhetoric into their own political projects as a source of both transformation and encouragement.

Whether organized around anti-war, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-liberal, labor union, or coalition building struggles, racialization as an

organizing logic of the very relations that contribute to the political effectivity (and affectivity) of civil rights rhetoric, has repeatedly been relegated to aspect status. Where racialized patterns[25] of categorization and institutional oppression can be thought of as an aspect of classism, or merely a by-product of working-class exploitation. From the suffragist movement of the mid nineteenth century, labor union struggles of the 19-teens, Vietnam resistance of the 60s, "first wave" feminist coalition building efforts of the 70s and 80s, Act-Up protests in the 80s and 90s, to right-wing anti-liberal rhetoric of the 90s, and roll-back of social equality legislations that have brought in the new millennium, the hopeful narrative of social change has supported social movements and, at times, stepped over immediate concerns for social justice grounded in the need to alter racialized and differential material social conditions. In a context where the rhetoric of resource scarcity is assumed, we must ask how to untangle and analyze the confluence of narrative.eddies and flows that swirl and conflate such complicated and specific notions as identity, ethnicity, race, difference and incommensurability. How shall we do this? Toni Morrison's exploration into the presence of what she calls the "Africanist personae" within the literary imaginary of American literature, provides a useful method of approach to managing this whirlpool of sign and symbol interrelation.

Morrison suggests that "[w]hat became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence."[26] Similarly, constructing academics of color as constituting the proletarian hegemony feeds into (and is fed by) a powerful narrative of hope and redemption that is the religio-ethico foundation of American identity. What aught to concern us is the way in which hope and redemption as a discourse of surprise salvation was transformed into a narrative of redemptive suffering in the context of African-American social action. This transformation, in itself, was not entirely problematic for it conditioned the possibility for the development of African-American social institutions of survival and liberation, and even set the stage for a resurgence of Black Power and Black Nationalist ideology. However, this ideological transformation, for itself, was produced by, was an apology for, and was productive of dominant racialized power relations. Indeed, hope has functioned as a discursive agent that has smoothed over with the sharp edged trow of redemptive suffering, the awareness of differential power relations, the response to which could only bring, some 40 years ago, humiliation, social alienation, or death. Today, however, responding to uneven power relations in the academy carries only the threat of intellectual marginalization, institutional transience, and the frequent impugning of scholarly rigor.

In either case, the routinization of charisma through the reproduction of hegemonic power relations freezes political possibility and traps the image of

(comm)unity in the frozen moment, like a mosquito in amber, a still life of political promise that both reminds activists and cultural workers of the 60s and 70s of a productive past instant, and promises the agency-filled potential of a hopeful future. Moreover, reconstructed histories produce a similar effect by insisting, in the name of political efficacy and representational reality, on reproducing the same patterns of cultural inclusion and exclusion that they seek to resist, while actually making a fetishized translation of cultural rememory that disavows the social complexity of its own formation. And just as the mosquito is immobilized by the rigid amber structure, so to are African-American cultural producers (scholars and others) who recapitulate social relations of dominance and submission inherent to established modes of performing self-in-community, constrained within tight parameters of identity.

Not only are the political promises attendant with ideas of redemptive suffering envisioned as existing somewhere in the recent future, but they are too often framed merely as possible eventualities, allowing a materially detached and intellectually spurious response to existing conditions. As a sign, "hope" always points to a moment not yet arrived, and as a narrative, it floats our gaze and consciousness away from this moment, thereby standing in as an ideological apparatus discouraging, but not immobilizing, efforts to image immediately available social and political transformation. Consequently, even as *Troubling Beginnings* contributes to the ongoing production of hope in the academic context, it speaks against, across, and over optimistic chronicles of community and nation that project nostalgia into the imagined future to tell stories of triumphant returns to former greatness all in the idiom of hope. The trans(per)formance it encourages also depends on imagining. It is, however, a self re-imaging that necessitates the production of new stories, not the projection of old ones.

The refutation of hope is political because it conditions trans(per)formance. The renunciation of hope as a signifier proclaims an unwillingness to remain fixed, and a refusal to easily move on beyond the political efficacy of identity and the psychical comfort of individuality. Stuart Hall has suggested that "all the social movements which have tried to transform society and have required the constitution of new subjectivities, have had to accept the necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity, of the arbitrary closure" which, he reminds us, " …makes both politics and identity possible."[27] However, closures that manifest themselves in the realm of reconstructed histories are anything but arbitrary, and we must question the modes of self-imagining and political action these seemingly arbitrary closures precondition.

The Seduction of Fixed Images: Vindicating Narratives in the Tele-topological Space

In the domain of American cultural studies Black Popular Culture, like other African-American narratives of self and community, has developed predominantly in the service of vindication and has created effects both transformative and forestalling of social change. Inasmuch as ideologies reproduce the patterns of social relation that define and describe them, no knowledge production stands outside the bounds of complicity. Nevertheless, since "…questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation… [have] a formative…place in the constitution of social and political life,"[28] this narrative continues to unfurl with the expectation that perhaps through its own trans(per)formance it can inform the discourses of which it is a part, even as it is shaped by them.

Homi Bhabha has suggested that "[t]he 'other' is never outside or beyond us," that "it emerges forcefully within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves.'"[29] Following from this observation, this is not a legitimate story of transcendent Hope, for it originates in the very cavernous space "between ourselves," of which Bhabha speaks. *Troubling Beginnings* examines contemporary reconstrueted African-American histories, and argues that films like Haile Gerima's *Sankofa,* Mario Van Peebles' *Panther,* and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* function as collective social memories and mediations of historical trauma that work to define, and in critical ways restrict the boundaries of blackness. Further, it suggests that the patently overdetermined ways that mixed-race bodies, black manhood and womanhood, and African-American authenticity are represented across these films, define the limits of African-American identity formation and, through the production of "authenticity discourse," guarantee what Judith Butler has called the "impossibility of full recognition."

In her article "Critically Queer," Butler describes performances, those "speech acts that bring about what they name," as instances of power acting as discourse.[30] Departing from Derrida and Foucault, Butler suggests that the (always provisional) success of a performative act does not depend on intentions. Rather, it proves effective because it "echoes a prior action, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices"* by *"[drawing] on and [covering] over* the constitutive conventions by which it was mobilized."[31] African-American histories represented in film, work to constitute conventions about and "accumulat[e] the force of authority" for the restriction of the formation of black subjectivity and the narratives of community that play such a crucial role in

identity formation. In discussing the formation of the subject in discourse, Butler suggests that:

> Where there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which proceeds and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus, there is no 'I' who stands behind and executes volition or will through discourse. On the contrary, the 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpolated (to use the Althusserian term), and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the 'I'; it is the transitive invocation of the 'I'…the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject but forms that subject…[32]

What Butler's theory cannot account for are the particularities of the black subject's coming into being through engagements with narratives like *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther.* Do these particularities matter? Of course they do. They do, if Frantz Fanon's telling of the predicament facing the "blackskin" subject is to be heeded. Indeed, Fanon suggests that the primary difficulty binding the blackskin subject that constitutes its sense of self within the context of a "white racial phantasm," lies precisely in the fact that its self-telling practices begin at the starting point of hegemonic representational strategies. Thus, in the dominant scopic regime of American image production, where blacks are subject to the representational extremes of rigid determination or unabashed omission, the impossibility of full recognition produces reliance on imagistically represented reductions of characteristics of sameness. These images, defending against popular stereotype in an attempt to vindicate "the race," have taken the form of a visual discourse of authenticity.

To understand how the internal alien or other within continually reasserts its presence and intervening fact of being over and across discourses of authenticity, we must return to Butler's impossibility of full recognition. For Butler "the impossibility of full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject formation." The "I," she suggests "is thus a citation of the place of the 'I' in speech [or images], where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historical revisability of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak.[33]

The impossibility of which Butler speaks, perhaps half of that to which Fanon refers when he laments the unlikelyhood of reciprocal recognition, might be thought to result in what Kobena Mercer has called the "ambivalence of identification," or what Fanon could only conceive of as a kind of neurosis

produced in and through colonial relations. As Mercer sees it, in this unfortunate position, the self "oscillates" between "positions of subject, object, or spectator."[34] However, contemporary image proliferation produces a significantly different condition. One wherein the subject simultaneously occupies the spaces of subject, object, spectator, and most importantly actor, and is the potential initiator of trans(per)formed modes of self-imaging. Rather than producing subjectivities out of some "ambivalence of identification," struggles over identification that occur in what Paul Virilio calls the "tele-topological space"[35] come from *active ambivalence*, where one's multiply subjective notions of self constantly wrestle past the gatekeepers of discourse.

In *The Lost Dimension,* Virilio reflects on the psychical and perceptual consequences of developments in the technologies of image production. Virilio suggests that "the sudden reversion of boundaries and oppositions introduces into everyday, common space an element which until now was reserved for the world of microscopes." "There is no *plenum*" he asserts, "space is not filled with matter. Instead an unbounded expanse appears in the false perspective of the machine's luminous emissions. From here on, constructed space occurs with an electronic topology."[36]

In Virillio's telling, ours is a world where the distance between here and there, the dimension of depth (previously the primary unit of measurability and truth testing) has expanded and given way to the measure of the speed and technological accuracy of information transmission, and the fidelity of the interface between the subject and representations in the image environment. The image environment has become the "tele-topology," the "technological space-time" wherein are generated the effects and proofs of what is determined "real." As a consequence, Virilio posits, "the classical depth of field has been revitalized by the depths of the time of advanced technologies" of representation. Virilio's assertion that the contemporary mode of representation possesses an aesthetic no longer grounded in "the appearance of a stable image," but rather, in the "disappearance of an unstable one,"[37] shall prove very important to the discussion in the following chapters.

Reconstructed histories, counter memories, or claims of categorical group membership that work in the service of vindication, all represent the impulse to fix images, to repeatedly introduce (over)determined images into and within the tele-topological space. Virilio cautions that "we are directly or indirectly witnessing a co-production of sensible reality, in which direct and mediated perceptions merge into an instantaneous representation of space."[38] Because of their formation and transmission in the tele-topological space, historical narratives, counter memories, stories of cultural membership and the duplicated images that organize them, all work to concretize common sense and, ultimately, encode and naturalize the boundaries of authenticity. Put another way, narratives of authentic group membership, counter memories, and reconstructed histories,

as they are represented in film, provide visualized referents for identity formation that while offering the *possibility* for "full" or "reciprocal" recognition, simultaneously police the process of subject formation by presenting, in the confines of authenticity discourse, images whose fixity depends on the disappearance of "unstable" and destabilizing images of blackness.

Inasmuch as *Troubling Beginnings* examines the interplay between African-American patterns of fixed self-imagining and constraining historical representation, it focuses on the socio-political and intra-psychic factors that delimit modes of identity formation and ambivalence. At the same time, it highlights imaging practices that enable willful acts of trans(per)formance that do not work to keep one's pieces together or imagine one's self in previously authorized ways. Indeed, this narrative continually pushes us to let our fragments fly, without discipline and without apology, in the face of discursively policed expectations.

It is important to explore the fictional necessity of the necessary fiction of self and self-in-community that has come to figure the production of African-American liberative history, filmicly represented reconstructed histories, and acts of contemporary history making. Not because these necessary fictions are somehow suspect, but because they exemplify necessary processes. Processes that produce commonly accepted translations of interiority and exteriority that are called upon to frame the context in which cinematic reconstructions of African-American history occur. Moreover, acts of detranslation can also be engaged when the neatly bounded interior and exterior spaces constituting translations, are allowed to give way to the weight of particular social situations, because in moments of social contact and material specificity, necessary fictions of identity and politics stand out in their most recklessly audacious manifestations. And through it all, we will undertake the retranslation of identification practices into the more creative, and in that way better, act of trans(per)formance.

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1. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 212–213. Lipsitz calls counter-memory "a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history,

counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past."

2. Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Black Popular Culture,* ed. Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press), 1992) 32–33.

3. Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing ourselves and Others," in *The House that Race Built,* ed. Wahneema Lubiano, (New York: Pantheon Books 1997) 232–252

4. Cathy Caruth, "Psychoanalysis, Culture, Trauma II," *American Imago,* Vol. 48, no. 4, (Winter 1991): Introduction

5. One notable exception can be found in the collection of essays edited by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally entitled *History & Memory in African-American Culture,* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994. Significantly, these essays respond to the assertion (usually associated with questions of representability in relation to the Holocaust) that history-making can only begin once memory ends, by positing geographical sites of memory as enabling acts of re-memory that are, themselves, historicizing. Still, even this important effort to call attention to alternative forms of collective memory has been critiqued as a kind of privitizing of history that reduces its communal importance (see, for example, Michael S.Roth's *The Ironist's Cage*).

6. Manthia Diawara, "Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Performative Acts," *Afterimage*, (1992):476

7. Manning Marable, "Beyond racial identity politics: towards a liberation theory for multicultural democracy." *Race & Class,* 35.1 (1993):113–115.

8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks,* (New York,: Grove Press, 1967), 130.

9. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993): xi

10. F.rantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks,* (New York,: Grove Press, 1967), 218.

11. Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration,* (London: Routledge, 1990)

12. Ramón Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991)

13. Manning Marabel, "Beyond racial identity politics: towards a liberation theory for multicultural democracy," *Race & Class,* 35.1 (1993):116

14. Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Black Popular Culture,* ed. Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992): 28.

[15]Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): p.7.

[16]James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990): 55–58.

[17]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 24–25.

[18]Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the politics of performance,* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 150–151.

[19]George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 135–136.

[20]Lawrence E.Sullivan, *Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 6.

[21]D.Brenneis, and F.Myers, *Dangerous Words: Language and Politics in the Pacific,* (Prospect Heights: Waverland Press Inc., 1984): 23.

[22]Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark.,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 12.

[23] This was very clearly exemplified during the "Cannon Wars" of the early 1990's that are again resurfacing in fields like American Studies debate about what it means to "include" area studies contributions from women's, queer, and various ethnic studies scholars.

[24] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from 1960's to the 1990's,* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 15.

[25] It is important to note that although color was often the marginalized discursive object, what I am here concerned with are the ways in which racialization functions to organize multiple axis of social location. That is, the way in which categories of one's race, class, gender, sexuality and faith are mutually constituted. What has tended to be dropped from discussions within these movements then, is not merely the issue of race strictly speaking, but analyses of how gender, class, sexuality, etc. are themselves racialized and how gender, class, sexuality, etc. function to produce social effects articulated through the category or analytical mode of "race."'

[26]Morrison, *Playing in the Dark,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 17.

[27]Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves." in *ICA Documents 6,* (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1987)

[28]Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities." in *ICA Documents 6,* (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1987): 27.

[29]Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration,* (London: Routledge, 1990): 4.

[30]Judith Butler, "Critically Queer." *GLQ* 1 (1992): 17.

[31] Butler19.

[32]Butler 18.

[33]"Ibid. op. Cit.

[34]Kobena Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia." in *ICA Documents,* (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1995): 11.

[35]Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension,* (Brooklyn: Semiotext(e), 1991): 60.

[36]Virilio 13.

[37]Virilio 25.

[38]Virilio 31.

Detranslations
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Liberating Theologies
Ibn Al-ᶜArabi's *Bezels* and James Cone's Christ

…for a people to establish themselves as absolute in their world leads inevitably to an identification with the religious persuasions of that same community; that is, religion and nationalism in their final apex and development are the same.

<div align="right">

Gary Lease

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Desperate attempts are made by many survivors to restore and maintain their faith in God. However, the problem of aggression, and the actual destruction of basic trust which result[s] from the events of [traumatic histories] makes true faith and trust in the benevolence of an omnipotent God impossible.

<div align="right">

Kai Erickson

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The primary function of our argument thus far has not been in the service of vindication, where the repetition of fixed images and ideas recuperates disrupted relationships between the past and the future by sacrificing subject positions in the present. Instead, our initial translation has argued for an investment in "trans(per)formative" acts in place of sacrificial ones, and has taken as central to this discussion the problem of how usable senses of self are constituted in a context of historical and discursive over-determination. To proceed in the movement of translation, detranslation-retranslation suggested and enacted in *Troubling Beginnings,* Chapters 1 and 2 will illumine the theoretical and social imperatives that provide a compass for this project's investigations.

   Analyses of mediated nationalist images and the power they posses to both mobilize and constrain various forms of racialized understandings and political action, bear continuities with the methodological approaches of the Black liberative theologian James Cone and Sufi philosopher Ibn Al-ᶜArabi. Because

liberative traditions originate and develop within orthodox discourses that present apparently little room for ideas that challenge doctrine, they constitute a rich site through which to contemplate the significant social possibilities created through discursive struggle. Whereas orthodoxy as dominant narrative arbitrates what knowledges shall be "common sense," liberative heterodoxies resist their hegemony, constructing un-common sense by defamiliarizing and denaturalizing assumed truths, and asserting new ones. Clearly religion, (until the advent of science) has been unmatched in its ability to replicate itself through the production of knowledge and history, structures that both define and delimit a culture's social memory. Historical examples abound wherein competing religious narratives collide, producing apparently syncretic practices at points of cultural contact, and radically conservative reavowals of doctrine within the boundaries of orthodoxy. On several occasions, there have also developed mystic traditions within the bounds of orthodox hegemony, that make use of doctrinal signs and symbol systems to carve out areas of religious liberation and political potential. These liberative traditions are appealing because they promise the possibility of utilizing the limited signs and symbols offered within a dominant discourse, especially those that are pivotal in defining the parameters of possibility for subjects who have been subordinated within social systems, and thereby mobilize action instead of hope. Often fueled by the blood of martyrs, innocents or heroes, counter-narratives of liberative theology allow for the creation of moments of perceived agency by actually redefining the measure of identity in relation to explanatory narratives like history, social expectation, and eschatology; thereby transforming commonly held perspectives regarding the world and personal agency.

The methodologies and radical assertions set forth by black liberation theologian James Cone and Sufi philosopher Ibn Al-ᶜArabi are useful because the content and form of their respective theologies derive from the subtle but insistent force religious narratives exert upon even the most apparently secular of social institutions and interactions. Moreover, Cone's and Al-cArabi's ideas and practices, while executed in dramatically different social and temporal contexts, similarly challenged and changed the limits of discursive possibility in their particular cultural settings. Both performances evolved in contexts notable for their dramatic social change and ideological upheaval. Both rearticulated fundamental notions of being and agency by highlighting the connection between political and religious activity. And both took seriously the social implications of religious discourse by insisting on politically just behavior grounded in religious faith.

Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, for example, was able to use signs and symbols intrinsic to orthodox Islamic discourse to reframe the relationship between humanity and the Beloved, that is, to re-order Islamic notions of self/other relations and thereby broaden the limits of everyday social interaction. James Cone's radical

refiguring of contemporary notions of religious authority, grew from his locating God's action in the context of American social relations in general, and the history of African-American oppression in particular. For Cone, the suffering of a modern Christ was synonymous with black oppression, and the divine imperative of Christian activity was the social and historical liberation of black agency and humanity. By locating human activity precisely within the process of Divine creation and ongoing historical transformation both Cone and Al-ᶜArabi, in their own ways and settings, created space for subject agency that simultaneously originated within and transcended the limits of orthodox doctrine, while speaking directly to social and often secular movement.

Ibn Al-ᶜArabi's *Wahdat al-Wajûd* the Unity of Being

The relationship between Sufism and traditional Islam exemplifies the tension between orthodox discourse and liberative traditions. Speaking very generally, as there were many specific forms of Sufism even in the period contemporaneous with Al-ᶜArabi, the belief in Sufism has developed in the context of Islam and emphasizes the notion that everything existing in creation constitutes the manifest presence of the Beloved (the Divine). Sufism, much less a structure grounded in doctrine than a perspective on lived existence, uses doctrine and practice as vehicles through which one can achieve a sense of nearness with the Beloved. This "nearness," a kind of personal agency that is ubiquitous within Sufism, offers the individual access to the possibility of transcending religious structure and obtaining an unmediated connection with the source of religious authority. While observance of doctrine and practice is functionally important to Sufism because of the essential role it plays in assisting one in remembering the immanence of the Beloved in the world, for Sufis the actual act of remembrance *(dikhr)* takes undisputed primacy in the realm of religious practice. Moreover, acts of remembrance provide the context for engaging in the socially and psychically liberative action of translating or weaving memory—of treating remembrance as an act or performance that can be (and in strict Sufi terms, *is*) trans(per)formative. Conceptualizing memory as an act, a performance, proves useful for two reasons. First, it parallels our concern with the central function historical writing and imaging have in the formation of identity, and in relation to processes of memory and re-memory. Second, at the level of symbol systems, performing memory produces space within discourse to re-imagine a subject with agency enough to actually participate in the transformation of the very discourses that inscribe that self-same subject.

Ibn Al-ᶜArabi's interventions are important for three reasons. In his work *The Sufi Path of Knowledge,* William C.Chittick suggests the first when, speaking of the Sufi philosopher, he writes:

> In the Islamic community itself, probably no one has exercised deeper and more pervasive influence over the intellectual life of the community during the past seven hundred years. He was soon called by his disciples and followers al-Shaykh al-Akbar, "the Greatest Master," and few who have taken the trouble to study his works would dispute this title…[1]

While it is unclear who exactly comprises the Islamic community to which Chittick refers, it is significant that perhaps owing to the specter of sacrilege often attributed to Sufi philosophy by other Muslims, Al-ᶜArabi's workismore widely read and has subsequently filtered into orthodox thinking more systematically than any other Sufi thinker, with the exception of the 13th century mystical poet Maulânâ Jalâluddîn Rûmî. The second reason to insist upon the usefulness of Al-ᶜArabi's contributions revolves around the context of his cultural, social, and geographical position within an Islam undergoing dramatic changes that resulted in the production of a philosophy informed by diverse social, religious, and cultural perspectives. Al-ᶜArabi's was a context of social flux that in important ways preconditioned both the need and possibility for the emergence of his particular hybrid form of socio-religious thought. Finally, Al-ᶜArabi's notion of the "Unity of Being" *(wadat al-wajûd)* privileges the co-constitutive relationship between Creator and created. Indeed Al-ᶜArabi's systematization of Sufi thought and his highlighting of its most subtle nuances demonstrates how spaces can be fashioned within the most strict corridors of orthodoxy for the re-envisioning of agency and selfhood, and makes his work useful to this project. Before addressing how Al-ᶜArabi's thoughtprovides an appropriate optic through which to examine James Cone's work, Al-ᶜArabi's cultural context must be outlined.

In the introduction to his translation of one of Al-ᶜArabi's better-known works, *The Bezels of Wisdom,*[2] R.W.J.Austin gives a rather detailed account of the great philosopher's early life. He reports Al-ᶜArabi's birthin1165 A.D. in Murcia, a moderately sized township in Spain, where Al-ᶜArabi's father enjoyed political power and prestige. Al-ᶜArabi claimed Arab lineage and his family had long-standing connections to the Muslim community and religious structure. Both prior to and during Al-ᶜArabi's intellectual and spiritual development, most Muslims who had internalized fairly orthodox Islamic beliefs, viewed Sufism as a divergence from those beliefs and the internalization of new and alien ideas. However, because he was raised in a Sufi environment, Al-ᶜArabi's sense of self developed within the context of Sufism and during a time in which Islam experienced considerable change in the face of extensive cultural contact with

non-Islamic philosophical traditions. Indeed, it was in the cultural milieu of twelfth century Spain where Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophies intermingled, that Al-ᶜArabi cultivated his unique approach to religious interpretation.

Within the constant flow of new ideas and philosophies, and the relative openness with which Sufism engaged these ideas, Al-ᶜArabi was able, and in many ways required, to draw from different orthodox traditions as he crafted an eclectic form of Sufism that made sense in the context of the cultural diversity of a"Levantine Europe."[3] In his work *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture,* Ammiel Alcalay describes the "Levant writ large" as including "present-day Portugal, Spain, southern France and Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Isreal/Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and even parts of West Africa and India."[4] Jews, Arabs, Christians and many other people (and their religious and social philosophies) "inhabited this space…they recognized each other, implicitly and explicitly."[5] Thus, not only were Al-ᶜArabi's perspectives reflective of various cultural influences that shaped him, but the very interpretive methods he employed derived from this amalgam of cultural influences.

By extracting particular Qur'anic verses and interpreting them with a greater degree of literalness than is usually applied even in strict Muslim exegesis, Al-ᶜArabi appeared to use conventional Qur'anic exegesis, while actually putting forth non-conventional ideas. Al-ᶜArabi's strategic interpretation is exemplified in his having chosen the method of strictly exoteric exegesis in reading Qur'anic text to link popular ideas of femininity with the Breath of The Merciful. Although this had not previously been exotericly suggested, Al-ᶜArabi was able to make literal connections between the religious notion of The Beloved in the compassionate act of creation, and the social position of women in Islamic culture. Significantly, this intervention worked to mitigate against the way in which Islamic *Shariah* (the system of religiously based legalistics) and de facto practices of gender based segregation within Sufism as well, institutionalized women's social inferiority. Annamarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* presents a very cogent discussion of the various perspectives of the "feminine" in Islam and Sufism as they are religiously delimited.[6]

Another point where Al-ᶜArabi's interpretive strategy differed from traditional Qur'anic exegesis revolved around the process of Qur'anic interpretation itself. As the Qur'an is considered the direct word of the Beloved *(Allah),* interpretation of its verse becomes rather delicate and is fairly closely regulated by the expectations of religious scholars[7]. When the Qur'an is held to reflect the direct word of the Beloved and its recitation a process of actually speaking the Beloved into being, it is easy to imagine how nontraditional readings could cause serious controversy and even claims of heresy.

In his commentary on the Surah of Noah in *The Bezels of Wisdom,* Al-ᶜArabi approached this self contained and apparently polemical *Surah,* and interpreted it in such a way that its polemical nature was lost through his reversal of its meaning and his reading it in relation to his basic theory of the Unity of Being. At one point in the *Surah,* Noah castigates the "wicked" and warns them that "because of their transgressions" after being confused through their worship of idols, they would be "cast into the fire…when the sea swells…[and that they would not] find any helpers apart from the Beloved."[8] Making use of the oceanic metaphor, Al-ᶜArabi interpreted this *Surah* as pertaining to the Gnostic's experience of the Immanence of the Beloved, wherein the Gnostic is drowned in the fire of annihilation of the self through the remembrance of the Beloved. He suggested that in that mystic state there could be no "helpers apart from the Beloved" because the Beloved, as experienced in a Unity of Being, negated the existence of the subject/object relationship necessary for the existence of "helpers." More importantly, Al-ᶜArabi posited that to encourage the Gnostic out of the "sea of Gnosis" would be to diminish that person's experience of Unity. Thus, in one rhetorical gesture, Al-ᶜArabi was able to use Noah's words to make a heretical claim. Reading the *Surah* in this way, Al-ᶜArabi drew attention to his theory of the Unity of Being, challenged Qur'anic notions of dualism as expressed in the *Surah's* polemics, and enlisted an exoteric interpretive style consistent with dominant conventions of orthodox religious exegesis.

Understanding Al-ᶜArabi's conception of creation and *wadat al-wajûd*, illumines his perspective on religious structure and the place of human agency within it. Briefly explicated, Al-ᶜArabi's theory suggests that before creation there existed a state of undifferentiated wholeness, which he called the Reality. He took as his point of departure a verse in the Holy Tradition stating "I was a hidden treasure, and longed to be known, so I created the Cosmos."[9] In this act of Creative Imagination wherein the Undifferentiated whole created the illusion of a subject/object relationship, can be found the key to the co-constitutive aspects of the relationship between the subject and the divine. However, as Austin suggests, Al-ᶜArabi connected this complicated relationship to the fact that since the created Object and the creative Subject are merely aspects of the Reality, they necessarily cannot be considered in a relationship of activity/passivity or dominance/submissiveness[10]. Since they exist through the Creative Imagination, as opposite poles within the same unity, subject and object must also necessarily constitute each other through their differentiated existence. Thus the "Hidden Treasure" that desires to know itself, does so through the creation of the "plurality of things" thereby creating a set of concepts that reflect its existence to itself.[11] The discursivity of trans(per)formance is evident if we frame the subject's efforts to detranslate-retranslate the very discourse that represents and constructs it, as analogous to the co-dependent origination of the

Hidden Treasure and the plurality of things. The seemingly monistic and even pantheistic ramification of this thinking suggests that everything humanity can conceive must exist within the plurality of "created things," and that, because created, can be engaged in a creative and interactive relationship. This perspective had liberative implications when applied to notions important to the Islamic religious structure.

Since everything that exists in the plurality can in reality only mirror the potential for a unified relationship with the Beloved, all notions, even that of *Allah,* signify something beyond understanding that can only be apprehended through an annihilation of the self *(fana)* that automatically negates the independent existence of that notion. Thus the concept of *Allah,* which is of vital importance to Islam, loses significance in its absolute relativity to the Unity of Being. Since the Sufi's penultimate goal is to experience the "intoxication" of Oneness of Being, intoxication then would also entail one's realizing that *Allah* is merely a notion, one of the many signifiers of the Reality. As Austin explains:

> The term *Allah* is also the Supreme Name, the Name of names, which as the title of divinity establishes the whole quality of the relationship between the two poles, the one being divine and necessary while the other is non-divine and contingent. The other Names represent the infinite aspects or modes of the relationship in its infinite variety of qualities. The term *Allah,* however, when used precisely by Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, is not the same as the Reality, since , as he would say, divinity as such is in a state of mutual dependence with that which affirms or worships it as divine.[12]

Clearly, in a religious structure that privileges and specifically circumscribes the notion of *Allah,* concepts such as this one prove troubling because they enact a reversal of meaning within orthodox discourse through the reinterpretation of terms integral to its most basic claims on legitimacy. More interestingly, this relationship to the term *Allah* also suggests that the process of creation could not proceed without the participation of the *agent* who undertakes the act of remembrance. Indeed Al-ᶜArabi makes this point clearly when he says of the Beloved:

> He praises me, and I praise Him,
> and He worships me and I worship Him.
> How can He be independent,
> When I help Him and assist Him?
> In my knowing Him, I create Him.[13]

This proposal is particularly important to the notion of trans(per)formative acts as they pertain to the detranslation-retranslation of traumatic histories because it

highlights the possibility of reshaping one's social and psychological agency within discourse precisely through discursive acts. The concept of the Beloved's Will, another notion important to the Muslim religious structure, also received a fairly radical treatment within Al-ᶜArabi's philosophical system. This concept and the way it foregrounds the centrality of ambivalence in Al-ᶜArabi's thought can be seen in the Sufi representation of *Iblis,* the Muslim figure of the Devil.

In some Sufi interpretations of the myth, *Iblis* was called before the Beloved following the creation of Adam and ordered to bow before Him. *Iblis* refused on the grounds that his love for the Beloved was so great that he could not do as commanded. The Beloved decreed that He would punish *Iblis* by casting him out of heaven, whereupon *Iblis* argued that the Beloved, being omniscient, knew that he would refuse, and being omnipotent, created him that way. In this interpretation, the Beloved's Will was actually that *Iblis* act in the way that he did, and that *Iblis* was not guilty of disobeying the Beloved, but rather had been a faithful servant. It is further maintained that the Beloved so loved *Iblis,* and knew his strength that he gave him the greatest gift, that of absolute distance from the Beloved, by way of creating a space between them wherein humanity could reside.

This perception of *Iblis* calls into question the notion of Divine Will and its relationship to the Divine Wish. Austin attributes to Al-ᶜArabi a perspective that divides the concept of Divine Will into two concepts, one Al-ᶜArabi calls the Creative Command or Divine Wish and the other the Obligating Command or Divine Will. Austin posits that for Al-ᶜArabi:

> The Will of the Beloved, as opposed to the Wish of the Beloved, is the infinitely creative power that effects the endless becoming of the primordial other in all the complexity of its aspects and derivations…everything it wills comes into existence, there being no question in the case of the Will, of obedience or disobedience, being purely existential in its effects… It is clear from this that this notion of the two modes of the Divine Will implies considerable tension between the two modes and presents theology with a major paradox. In other words, while the Will is dedicated to cosmic actuality, irrespective of its implications for faith, morality, or ethics, the Wish demands the recognition of certain truths…the one serving the existential pole of the Reality, the other the sapiential or spiritual pole.[14]

Thus, an *Iblis* concerned with the Divine Will over the Divine Command participated in an act that was structurally wrong, but correct on an existential level. By suggesting that the individual should be aware of the Divine Will, as well as the Divine Command, Al-ᶜArabi both supported the notion of the individualized experience of internal inspiration and subjectivity and called attention to the state of ambivalence that I suggest best informs creative modes

of liberative self-imagining. It also points to sociogeny and suggests the position of the self as both a component of social structures (Will), and the subject who acts on a notion of agency to respond to or resist the mandates or protocols of those structures (Command). Although the text implies the co-constitutive nature of Divine Wish and Will, it is clear that Al-ᶜArabi privileges Divine Will over Divine Wish in the context of a Unity of Being, because it disallows dualist notions and is more complicated than the social expectations concomitant with essentialized ideas of communal unity. Indeed, it is an analogous tension that can result in active ambivalence; a tension that derives from the fact that we are at once subjects produced through discourse and individuals who consider ourselves capable of exerting a will of our own, of being internally inspired. We cannot resolve this paradox by knowing ourselves to be merely overdetermined through and by discourse, products of a kind of Divine Will. Rather, ambivalence allows us to struggle with the paradox as we perform our way through social articulation.

The idea that aspects of the Divine remained unconscious to Itself allowed Al-ᶜArabi to formulate a perspective that did not require mediation and could not be controlled by a church orthodoxy that demanded certain practices as a sign of belief. Furthermore, this interpretation created a space within Sufi philosophy for the emergence of a paradox common to humanity and the Beloved: the possibility of possessing aspects of the self that are simultaneously known and unknown. Although posited in the middle of the 12th century, this notion prefigures the 20th century concept of deferred action. The simultaneous and superimposed nature of incomprehensible events and the production of narratives of self make the coalescence of memory and identity such arrestingly complex and potentially liberative occurrences.

In *The Bezels of Wisdom,* Al-ᶜArabi framed humanity's existential condition as one of supreme paradox. The individual exists in a state of being both conscious of an imagined subject/object relationship with the universe and, at the same time, an existence within the undifferentiated Unity that is in fact the Reality of the Beloved. Austin describes this "double consciousness" well when he concludes that:

> …man may be said to combine in himself, simultaneously, the possibility of supreme significance and utter insignificance, just as he combines in himself a strong sense of the Absolute and the Infinite, without being either. Half animal and half angel, he serves to transmit to the Cosmos the truth of the divine subject, while also acting as the reflecting image of the cosmic object to the divine observer… At the heart of his humanity, however, man is both vice-regent and slave, male and female, spiritual and sensual, in one human selfhood, being never either one exclusively or completely. Whatever his degree of spiritual attainment, man remains, in his human nature, forever a slave, and

whatever degree of his involvement in the Cosmos, he remains, in his human spirit, an agent, and it is his charge never to forget either aspect on pain of absurdity and nothingness.[15]

This tension is precisely what faces the subject interested in trans(per)formance, for it describes the location between *Innenwelt* and *Ummwelt* that is shaped by psyche and social institutions. Black subjectivity, viewed from this vantage, must continually struggle to remember and create "significance" while always threatened with "utter insignificance" and social death. Indeed, re-memberance practices like socio-psychological retranslation and the construction of counter-memories provide the possibility of never forgetting the multiply subjective nature of being in and through narratives of self-in-community. But rather than holding the "pain of absurdity and nothingness" at bay, these memory acts actually derive their impetus from the discomfort generated through complex moments of social interaction and cultural indeterminacy. Al-ᶜArabi's philosophies worked to destabilize the powerful narratives of Muslim self that drew strict boundaries between Islam and its constitutive outside.

Muslim religious structures play an important role in placing the individual existentially within the context of Islam, and thereby mediating the experience of religion at the level of shared obligations and the individual's position within the religious community. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi has said of expectations in the Muslim community and their relationship to the Divine, that:

> …by using [communal obligation] the Beloved has reminded mankind that every promise, agreement and undertaking is a kind of bondage from which man cannot free himself except by its fulfillment. That is why we find in the Islamic traditions that "Man is a slave of his promise."[16]

Al-ᶜArabi's workmakes space for individualized spiritual imagining from within the bounds of bondage represented in the covenant between humans and the Divine. His notion of the Divine Wish suggests that one can come to a deferred awareness of one's role in the Cosmos. Thus he implies that one's internally inspired experience of will and the path by which one enacts it are both free from and dependent upon hegemonic expectation. The notion of internal inspiration is pivotal to Al-ᶜArabi's thought and to the concept of trans(per)formative action. In a meditation on "The Wisdom of Divinity in The Word of Adam," Al-ᶜArabi reflects on the relationship between internal inspiration, rational thought, and individualized agency and writes:

> This [knowledge] cannot be arrived at by the intellect by means of any rational thought process, for this kind of perception comes only by a divine disclosure from which is ascertained the origin of the forms of the Cosmos receiving the

spirits. The formation is called Man and Vice-Regent…by him the Beloved preserves His creation, as the seal preserves the king's treasure.[17]

Placing agency in the context of Divine creation through this interpretation, allows Al-ᶜArabi to suggest that the ambivalent relation between the information received through Gnostic revelation and information filtered through scripture, exegesis, and doctrine. There obtains a tension between the limits of discursive prescription and the possibility of unmediated self-imagining, which is, in effect, the representation of *how* one experiences agency. This tension links the positions of simultaneously being one of many creations and being an active agent in the ongoing creation of the cosmos. Perhaps understandably, laying a foundation like this made Al-ᶜArabi a target for vociferous attack from orthodox Muslims around concerns basic to the maintenance of Islamic community. This was especially true with regard to his philosophy's implications for strictly delimited narrations of Muslim self-in-community.

In his 1932 work, *Mystic Tendencies in Islam in the Light of The Qur'an and Traditions,* M.M.Zahur' D-Din Ahmad makes a broad based critique of Sufism in general and Al-ᶜArabi in particular. One revealing critique coheres around Al-ᶜArabi's notions of love. According to Ahmad:

> …[Al-ᶜArabi's] theory while extending the scope of love among human beings at large, weakened the bond of love and sympathy among the Muslims as a class. According to this theory there was no fundamental distinction between believers and un-believers, and the former therefore, had no reason to prefer their brethren in faith over the others… Islam itself had leveled all distinctions of nationality, locality and blood, but it had emphasized the distinction between belief and unbelief and between good and bad… Even this was brushed aside by his theory of the Unity of Existence…[18]

Ahmad's critiques reflect the anxiety created by Al-ᶜArabi's disruption of the common sense notions of morality that supported ideas of the binary relations between insider/outsider, believer/unbeliever, and good/evil so important to Muslim theology. In effect, Al-ᶜArabi's interpretations of religious text placed him in an ambivalent relationship to concepts that buttress very basic notions of self. In this way, the syncretic religious tradition that he developed helped to establish a strong base for Sufism as a religious tradition rich in its complexity and potent in its ability to provide a position from which the subject could imagine itself as having personal, political, and spiritual agency.

As it concerns religious discourse, Al-ᶜArabi's trans(per)formative act spoke within and across borders of Muslim communal identity. Because Islamic religious narratives function to locate the subject in relation to the Islamic

religious community or *Ummah,* Al-ᶜArabi's scriptural reinterpretation of the limits of Islamic community significantly refigured its membership. Indeed, his theological contributions are trans(per)formative precisely because they use the terms, formulae, and symbols generally mobilized in the service of defining Muslim self. In this way, Al-ᶜArabi fashioned a space within hegemonic discourse for alternative forms of self and community imagining.

While speaking from the space of complex identity, Al-ᶜArabi's theory also addresses the complicated ways in which boundaries of identity are constantly permeated, transgressed and crossed. His mediation of the relationship between internal inspiration (gnostic revelation or one's sense of subjectivity) and the commands of community expectation (hegemonic notions of authentic being and protocols oriented around ideas of race, sexuality, gender and class), illumines contemporary struggles over the sign of blackness. There is, of course, a very long history of connection between African-American Muslim social and spiritual practice and Islamic traditions from Spain to North Africa that links, sometimes directly, Black Islam in the United States with other negotiated faith practices. An important legacy of Al-ᶜArabi's Sufiphilosophy is the way it usefully centers the act of remembrance while maintaining an acknowledged and ambivalent sense of the pain and pleasure inherent in acts of (re)memory. Because his work reminds us of the fluid nature of identity and the ubiquity of subject agency even while responding to our construction in and through very rigid structures of meaning, Al-ᶜArabi's ideas provide a revealing optic through which to examine the work of James Cone.

In a setting similar for its social flux and entirely different for the contextual forces compelling its articulation, theologian James Cone also worked to define a liberative religious tradition. Cone labored to develop transcendent notions of selfhood and communal significance capable of responding to changing social conditions and ontological dilemmas. Whereas Ibn Al-ᶜArabi formulated his ideas amidst Spain's "Golden Age," Cone conceived a Black Liberation Theology in the heart of a uniquely American, though no less pivotal, crisis in social and civil meaning: the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Our examination of Ibn Al-ᶜArabi's work and philosophy provides an illuminating paradigm with which to understand the full significance of Cone's contributions. Gary Lease's assertion of the coterminous relationship between religion and nationalism and Al-ᶜArabi's destabilization of the integrity of a nationalist body and the national subject, set in relief the work of James Cone. In the context of evolving black nationalist formations, Cone's work articulated a black nationalist body whose borders were those named by Black Power adherents and Black Muslims: Black skin, Black pride and Black sovereignty. Even more importantly, Cone told the story of something Black that brought heaven and earth together; he spoke of a Black soul that was the lost and recovered treasure

of a Black God whose fiery bush was, in branch and flame, the history of African-American oppression.

James Cone: The Articulation of a Radical Black Theology

Owing to more than the Great Migrations, labor struggles, the Harlem Renaissance, WWII, and the Great Depression, the period between 1920 and 1950 in the United States saw notable class stratification, the rise of seemingly secular non-church affiliated black communal organizations, and "the withdrawal of some black churches into a sphere of personal piety and religiosity."[19] At the same time, advocation for civil rights and the growing black consciousness movement of the 1950s and 60's, clearly demonstrated the ongoing impact of black churches in inflecting notions of black identity. In their study of black churches, *The Black Church in the African American Experience,* C.Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H.Mamiya discuss the "revolution of consciousness" that affected the entire black community and constituted the context for the development of Cone's theory: The antecedents of the black consciousness movement were several. The first of these was the very process of urbanization, and its by-products. Along with large concentrations of black people in the urban settings came a greater awareness of African Americans as a distinct social group. Through the labor movement, urban black workers were exposed to the protest tactics and possibilities of organizing for social change. Black churches grew in size, establishing relationships with one another through citywide and later statewide ministerial alliances. In addition to this vital communication network, new modes of communication—radio, telephones, movies, and later television—presented themselves. Each of these factors contributed to the ongoing formation and representation of group identity.[20]

Through the Civil Rights Movement in the mid 60's, and into the 70's, black churches played an instrumental role in defining goals and ideals for the achievement of racial equality in the United States. However, the new context of contact between Black Churches and the Black Power movement necessitated that black theologians increasingly confront political, economic, and social issues raised by members of the Black Power movement; issues a Black Church increasingly viewed as politically irrelevant were pressed to engage. This need resulted in the construction of a systematized understanding of social action within the theological context of the black church. Seminarians of various denominational affiliations (Baptist, Methodist, Church of God In Christ, etc.) were called upon to delineate religious models that would be sufficient to the emerging desires produced by rapidly changing social relations during the 60's and 70's.

To understand the emergence of a radically liberative tradition within the Black Church, especially as articulated by the seminary-trained black Methodist theologian James Cone, one must consider the state of religious social action both within the American context and at the global level as well. One needs to reflect on the conservatism of the Catholic Church in the 50's and 60's and on the European socio-political climate that found Catholic seminarians in Europe working to reconcile the social imperatives espoused in socialist doctrine with the conservative political/economic interests of the Catholic Church. One would see the relocation (read: exile) of socially and politically active priests to church "outposts" in Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Mexico. Indeed, one would also see that it was in Latin America that a politically invested liberation theology movement first took shape.

James Cone looked to these developments for inspiration and guidance. Although influenced by prominent religious and social thinkers like Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Jürgen Moltmann, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Satre, and Frantz Fanon, Cone's writings also reveal the degree to which he was shaped by the profound effect and example of Emilio Castro, Gustavo Gutierrez, Camilo Torres, and the Archbishop Romero. Building on their ideas, Cone imported their political and spiritual radicalism into the American social context and applied it to social issues important to African-American social movement, especially as espoused by Black Power advocates and members of the Nation of Islam. While most forms of Latin American Liberation Theology took the position that there was no biblical justification for *not* engaging political struggle, and that God's message, as revealed in the Bible, was one of social justice and equity, Latin American liberation theologians did not generally make the sorts of radical claims that characterized Cone's philosophy. Cone developed a black liberative philosophy (later to be called Black Theology) that began with the assertion that Christ's own teachings provided the biblical imperative for immediate social action and political intervention. Influenced by his engagement with Black Power discourses and profoundly informed by people like Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, and Malcolm X, Cone insisted that the modern Christ could only be understood in the context of the history of black oppression in the United States and that anything less than taking direct action to change repressive social relations was thoroughly un-Christian.

The emergence of the radically liberative Black Theology represented by Cone's work, grew from the hotly contested relationship between mainstream Black Churches (as popularly represented by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and the secular Black Power movement. One chronology of the institutional radicalization of black religious thought might begin as early as 1966 when less conservative members of the SCLC decided that black churches ought to respond to the fact that parishioners were leaving in growing numbers. Increasingly, ministers knew they had to answer charges that black churches

were unable to meet their communities' social, economic, and political needs to the degree the political activism of Black Power movement groups imagined possible.

Cone believed that America needed a theology that would take the African-American social and historical context as its point of departure. He imagined "…a theology whose sole purpose [was] to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."[21] Before Cone's intervention, dialogue about the possibility of a Black Theology in relation to white ministries came to a halt around the notion of a "color-blind" interpretive approach to the bible. In this context, like the one Ibn al-cArabi faced following his arguing the status of *Allah* as mere signifier, it was difficult (if not blasphemous) to conceive of a self-consciously *black* theology that could simultaneously be a *Christian* theology. Cone circumvented this claim to the need for universality by insisting that since the "fact of blackness" in the American setting determined the racialized nature of one's reality, any concept of the "Ultimate Reality" would have to respond to the "very essence of blackness."

In July of 1966, an "executive" of the National Council of Churches Commission on Religion and Race, Dr. Banjamin Payton brought several radical ministers together to discuss possible modes of response. According to Gayraud Wilmore "…the purpose was to discuss the hysterical reaction of some white ministers to black power." Wilmore suggests that the meeting resulted in the formation of an "…ad hoc group called the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC)" with the intention of "…mobilizing the increasing numbers of radical black ministers in the North for leadership in the next stage of the struggle."[22] The committee drafted a "black power statement" that was published in the July 31, 1966 edition of the New York Times. Among other things, the document stated that:

> As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield "black power," we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today. It is not enough to answer that "integration" is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged… Without…[the] capacity to *participate with power*—i.e. to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts- integration is not meaningful… We regard as sheer hypocrisy or as a blind and dangerous illusion the view that opposes love to power. Love should be a controlling element in power, but what love opposes is precisely the misuse and abuse of power, not power itself. So long as white churchmen continue to moralize and misinterpret Christian love, so long will justice continue to be subverted in this land.[23]

While against contemporary standards this statement may seem relatively non-threatening, it was radical in the context of its production. More importantly, it opened a space for creative imagining within black church structures that resulted in other overt statements of agency and demands for change. One of the first of these enactments of agency occurred in Washington, DC in 1967 with the convening of a conference on "the urban crisis" by the National Council of Churches' Division of Christian Life and Work. At this inter-denominational, interracial gathering of church activists and "race relations executives" black members demanded that the conference divide into black and white caucuses. Each of the caucuses drafted statements that resulted in the formation of black clergy caucuses in predominantly white churches and the organization of "pressure groups in almost every major denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church."[24]

The next major development came in April of 1969 when the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) organized a Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, out of which was generated the "Black Manifesto." IFCO's director Rev. Lucius Walker intended the conference to "help coordinate Black economic development and community organization efforts, and to give members of the Black community a chance to develop an agenda for total community development." Walker invited prominent clergy, academics, social theorists, and political activists to participate. Interestingly (and perhaps strategically), Walker refrained from providing an agenda for plenary discussions and, thereby, provided a space for "grass-roots" intervention. The intervention came in the form of a Black Manifesto presented by James Forman, the international affairs director of SNCC and prominent member of its "Mississippi Project." Forman penned the manifesto's preamble, causing "the greatest alarm and the strongest rebuttal from white churchmen."[25] Among other things, the Black Manifesto called for:

> A southern land bank to secure land for black farmers;
> Black-controlled publishing and television broadcasting facilities;
> Research and training centers for community organization needs and the development of various communications skills;
> Funding of organizations assisting welfare recipients to secure rights and influence the welfare system;
> Establishment of an International Black Appeal for financing cooperative businesses in the United States and Africa;
> Establishment of a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund for workers fighting racist employers;
> Establishment of a national black university.

This Manifesto "…in the context of black power and Third World revolutionary rhetoric…contained…the organizational and communications apparatus for institutionalizing black power in the United States."[26] Unfortunately, this would not come to pass, for not only did the Black Manifesto cause an uproar in mainstream white religious circles, but it also found staunch resistance from black churches (often dividing along denominational and regional axes) owing to its being perceived as politically alienating and too secularly oriented. One positive effect of this process was the way it called attention to a principal stumbling block to the formation and implementation of a radical black theological tradition. Namely, the need for an instrumental ecumenism in any "grass-roots" oriented, politically invested, and socially interested religious project.

While these events unfolded, there had already begun a concerted effort to outline a theological perspective that could contain both the radical politics of the Black Power movement and locate those politics within the trajectory determined by the historic social responsibilities of the Black Church. The radical Black Church leadership wanted a religious philosophy "…that went beyond the universalism of the love ethic as King understood it. What was sought for [then] was an interpretation of historic black faith grounded in the experience of suffering and struggle, but also in a realistic appraisal of the depth of white racism and the possibilities of black consciousness and power."[27] This desire conditioned the production of specific constructions of black history that privileged the legacy of a prophetic black (male) religious tradition. Moreover, this tradition later became one of the centerpieces to Cone's justification for articulating his particular version of black liberative theology and notion of a rehistoricized black identity.

Indeed, by 1968 there was a growing body of theological reflection interested in the project of finding space within the black religious tradition for a powerful black social movement itself faithfully working for substantial social change. "Scholarly ministers" representing a kind of organic intellectualism, and university and seminary bound theologians had begun equating the "eclectic spirituality" of the Black Power Movement with black religion's social functions *writ large.* However, the Rev. Albert Cleage Jr. of Detroit ministering at the United Church of Christ as the pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, made some of the first obvious links between the Black Church's biblical imperative and black resistance to systematic institutional oppression (Rev. Cleage's book *The Black Messiah* came out in the late 60's following the Detroit riots of 1967).[28]

This intellectual, philosophical, and theological stand alongside the controversial Black Power movement initiated a rift in the black church structure that remains today. Gayraud Wilmore suggests that these inter-church struggles were:

…one reason why the Black clergy who gathered in Harlem early in July 1966, during one of the "long hot summers" of revolt and guerrilla warfare, broke with Dr. King's interpretation of Black Power as "a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win." Under the leadership of Benjamin F.Payton, then executive director of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches and a Harvard-educated Baptist preacher, they affirmed the Black Power statement and derived from it a theological analysis that set the stage for the emergence of Black Theology…
It was a time of great soul-searching and ambivalence for the Black Church in the more than 128 cities that erupted during the period 1963–1968. Some of the ministers found themselves reading David Walker, Frantz Fanon, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the first time, seeking ethical guidelines for the unfamiliar situation into which they felt drawn by inexorable circumstances-or was it by the hand of God? What is the responsibility of the churches of the oppressed when the oppressed revolt?… What should be the Christian position regarding violence…[29]

Cone emerged in this socio-political milieu and turned his radical reading of New Testament scriptures to the difficult questions of reparations, violence, political action and notions of universality.

In order to support the argument for the Black Power movement's compatibility with Christianity, Cone turned to the New Testament for biblical support. He found that support in the book of Luke where Jesus described his ministry.[30] In the words of Christ:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at Liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

<div align="right">Luke 4:18–19, RSV</div>

In his dealing with the perennial issue of the role of violence in social transformation, Cone began by citing Jesus' famous request,"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," as a way to ask "[i]s it true that the power of love as expressed in the life and death of Jesus eschews the use of violence and emphasizes the inward power of the Christian… to accept everything the enemy dishes out?" In setting up this straw figure position, Cone shifted the terms of the argument and suggested that in Black Theology, violence was a "subordinate and relative" question. He drew support from the philosophy of the Latin American liberation theologian José Bonino who

believed that the issue of violence was subordinate because "…it [had] to do with the 'cost' of desired change…a cost that must be estimated and pondered in relation to a particular revolutionary situation." In this way, Cone was able to argue that revolutionary violence had to be measured against the violence that was invested in the maintenance of social systems of domination and subordination.

Cone also found biblical justification for Black Power demands for economic reparations. In much the same manner as the framers of the 1969 Black Manifesto, Cone saw the payment of reparations as a first and important step in achieving Christian reconciliation. In biblical terms, reconciliation involved the relationship between humans and God. By referring to the idea that humanity's treatment of God was reflected in their treatment of the least of one's neighbors, Cone argued that any reconciliation between humans and God had to begin with a reconciliation between humans who dominate and those who are oppressed. Thus reparations at the level of material conditions between people were, in effect, modes of reconciling humanity's relationship with God.

Another more difficult concept that Cone had to engage dealt with the issue of eschatology. One of the basic arguments that many proponents of a secular Black Power movement (not to mention prominent members of the Nation of Islam!) had against the social function of the Black Church, revolved around the idea that Christianity—particularly the form practiced in the Black Church—emphasized an eschatology that encouraged blacks to endure the suffering of the present by focusing on the hope of the heavenly treasures of the future. In formulating a Black Theology that would attract those individuals who identified with the Black Power movement, Cone needed to show how Black Theology could be an "earthly theology," something, he did in two ways. First, Cone altered the terms of the argument by suggesting that "[i]f eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of men because he is preparing them for another world, then Black Theology is not eschatological."[31] Second, he constructed a particular notion of black history that could fit within the creatively imagined history of the black church as a revolutionary instrument of God's will. In his work *A Black Theology of Liberation* Cone asks powerfully:

> How can we speak about God's revelation in the Exodus, the conquest of Palestine, the role of the judges of Israel without seeing parallels in black history? In Israel the judge was a charismatic leader, endowed with the spirit of Yahweh; he led his people in battle against the enemy. Is it really hard for us to believe that black examples of this would be Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Malcolm X? These leaders represent the "soul" of blackness, and what blacks mean by liberation. They are the black judges endowed with the spirit of Yahweh for the sole purpose of creating a spirit of freedom among their

people…liberation means that the oppressed must define the structure and scope of reality for themselves; they do not take their cues from oppressors.[32]

Cone both argued that Black Theology had to reject any interpretation of scripture that represented black suffering and oppression as the will of God, and that "radical obedience" to Christ's ministry demanded that reward not be the motivating force for social action. Of historiographic significance was Cone's locating his argument *in the context* of a re-envisioned Black history.

The most radical aspect of this interpretation, vis-à-vis standard understandings of the relation between sacred and social action, was Cone's insistence that Black Theology "…reject the tendency of some to interpret eschatology in such a way that a cleavage is made between our world and God's."[33] For Cone, "genuine biblical faith relates eschatology to history," and frames historical events as informing personal action in the face of one's dissatisfaction with immediate social conditions. Thus, Cone re-imagined black history as God's history and used the converse argument to suggest that "Black Power, though not consciously seeking to be Christian, [seemed] to be where men [are] in trouble. And to the extent that it is genuinely concerned and seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed, it is the work of God's Spirit."[34] Black Power, Cone implied, was nothing less than the worldly manifestation of God's power/knowledge. While these biblical interpretations were radical in Cone's context, they did not approach the level of risk he took in making one of his most fundamental scripture-based interpretations of the interrelated issues of religious authority and the relationship between white churches and Black Power.

For Cone, the question of religious authority needed to be located by virtue of one's perception and representation of God's presence in human social relations. In the framework of American Black Theology that position was clear, for "…black people [had] come to know Christ precisely through oppression, because he [had] made himself synonymous with black oppression."[35] In this way, Cone maintained that the religious authority of Black Theology originated precisely in the everyday social experience of black oppression itself. Besides locating the action of God in the context of social relations, this interpretive gesture opened easily into a scathing indictment of white churches. Cone argued that white churches were not God's "redemptive agent[s]" as they liked to represent themselves, but rather "agent[s] of the old society." Citing traditional religious scholars, Cone castigated white churches for committing what Jesus called the "sin against the Holy Spirit." Namely, "the enshrining of that which is immoral as the highest morality."[36]

Cone's powerful challenge makes the most sense in relation to an historic dilemma faced by black religious thinkers that began with the question "what access do black people have to the power of a white god?" This was also a

question framed as a critique lodged by Black Power activists and Black Muslims alike. By taking God's power and the Bible's redemptive potential and placing it directly into black history and black struggles for civil rights, Cone countered arguments from all corners that framed Black Christianity as politically debilitating and black political activism as merely secular. Additionally, Cone answered the resistance of White ministers to Black Liberation Theology's figuring of God, Christ, and indeed the entire biblical family as black. Not only did Cone stave off their attacks with biblical justification and support, but he also challenged the legitimacy of White Church claims to moral or ethical superiority and even validity. Still, Cone took his assertions yet further in his effort to trans(per)form dominant religious discourse.

Indicting racism as "a complete denial of the Incarnation and thus of Christianity," Cone boldly insisted that white denominational churches could only be considered "unchristian." Cone also maintained that being a racist and perpetuating racism fell clearly outside of the domain of Christian behavior and the Christian church, thus positioning himself to declare that, in fact, "…[i]f there is any contemporary meaning of the Antichrist…the white church seems to be a manifestation of it." In addition to drawing upon the common social knowledges about long-standing connections and even coalitions between white churches and the Ku Klux Klan, Cone cited the pivotal role white churches played in "establishing slavery as an institution and segregation as a pattern in society by sanctioning all-white congregations." In this way, Cone both attacked white churches as manifestations of the Antichrist in society and made the history of black oppression, instead of dominant historical narratives, the yardstick by which White Christian morality would be judged. Working from within the logics of White Christian discourse, and locating the actions of both Christ (in the form of black oppression), the Holy Spirit (as manifest in Black Power activism) and the Antichrist (evidenced in racialized patterns of social relations) within the context of the history of American racialized oppression, Cone created a moment of trans(per)formative possibility. It was a moment of possibility for individuals attempting to fashion a sense of historically supported agency within the context of black churches, the Black Power movement and their ideas of self-in-cosmos.

Pursuant to the articulation of Black Liberation Theology and the contact between the Black Church and civil rights activism, what might be described as the legacy of Cone's work would be the marked shift in the Black Church as a social structure supporting African-American community formation from a survivalist to a liberatory communal structure. While the Black Church has always exhibited an interest in liberation and still concerns itself with survival, it is apparent that parishioner and ministerial support for church participation in

political activism and organizing grew to more than 90% in the years following the Civil Rights Movement and the articulation of Black Liberation Theology.[37]

Although Al-ᶜArabi's work can be critiqued for its individualism and subsequent centering of an at times and in some ways coherent ego, and while Cone's work suffers under the weight of hyper-masculinization and binaristic racial essentialism, their efforts to craft new possibilities for self understanding and social agency inspire the work of trans(per)formance. In terms of performance writ large, the way these scholars used orthodox modes of discursive representation to articulate and re-present images of subjectivity, while simultaneously centering notions of agency and political promise suggests that large scale trans(per)formance can occur and that cultural performance and production can foster its enactment. In relation to discursive acts, their projects turned or reversed paradigms of understanding, paradigms that demand a reckoning through the repetition of self representational acts that call dominant social relations into question *and* instigate individual and communal reflection on the stories of self-in-cosmos that play such an important role in establishing notions of one's existential value as a human possessing agency. Al-ᶜArabi articulated a relationship between the Lover and the Beloved that broadened possibilities for self-imagining, and Cone made of African-American history something that told the story of divine plan instead of a myth of cultural lack and inhumanity. Moreover, the spiritual bases of their respective projects ground transcendent notions of history and divinity—as they relate to subject formation—precisely in points where everyday material, psychical, political, and religious conditions intersect.

In this sense, Cone and Al-ᶜArabi's work is not radical only because they used symbols and signs that support dominant ideology as tools to articulate positions that undermined its power, but because they articulated their reconceptions of self from within the tension that exists between one's sense of self-in-community and the material and political conditions of one's experience. Ibn Al-ᶜArabi worked to create a space within Muslim orthodoxy for a subjectivity with an internally inspired agency and with an unmediated relationship with the Beloved, thereby fashioning new modes for imagining self-in-community as read through one's relation with the Cosmos. Cone similarly took the strictly racialized discourse of Black history and, reading it through a radical interpretation of Christian living, occasioned new possibilities for imagining community-in-history. While the important work these scholars have undertaken to fundamentally alter notions of self and community does reflect features of trans(per)formance, their efforts are better understood as indicators of the promise and possibility trans(per)formance entails. Still, in general terms, their work displays the trans(per)formative aspect of creating space within already constraining discourse (with its citational power to fix one's subjectivity) to re-imagine one's self and cultural situatedness. Enacting

trans(per)formance requires creating the space to re-imagine self, re-write agency, and finally to engage in psycho-social pedagogical activity that one might not have represented as within the realm of possibility at an earlier moment. In the following chapter, we will look to Frantz Fanon's work and examine some of the psychical dimensions evident in complex processes of imagining self within the context of discursive overdetermination. To do this, however, we will have to recreate (and maintain) the tension exemplified in the work of Al-ᶜArabi and Cone, precisely because it is the space wherein active ambivalence can condition the possibility of signifyin' practices that trans(per)form "a way out of no way."[38]

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1. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): x.

2. Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* trans. R.W.J.Austin, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980).

3. Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 6.

4. Alcalay 21.

5. Ibid.

6. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975): 426–435.

7. It is important to note that the only "miracle" recognized in the Muslim tradition has to do with the production of Qur'anic texts. It is maintained that Mohammed was illiterate and that Allah's words were inscribed upon his heart by the angel Gabriel and later transcribed by Mohammed "from memory". This is particularly noteworthy given the literary sophistication and quality of writing evidenced in the Qur'an's Arabic representation. According to the Holy Traditions, there can be no translations of the Qur'an. Versions in languages other than Arabic are considered "interpretations."

8. Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* trans. R.W.J.Austin, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980). As translated by R.W.J.Austin, 1980, 79 (footnotes 57 and 59 citing Qur'an LXXI:25, and LXXXI:6).

9. The Holy Traditions

10. Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* trans. R.W.J.Austin, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980):25.

11. Austin 27.

12. Austin 30.

13. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975): 266.

14. Ibn. 31

15. Ibid. 39.

16. Rizvi Dar Rah-e Haq Sayyid Saeed Akhtar, *Inner Voices* (Qum, Iran: The Islamic Institute, 1969): 54.

17. Ibn Al-ᶜArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* trans. R.W.J.Austin, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980):51.

18. Ahmad Zuhur' D-Din, M.M., *Mystical Tendancies in Islam: In Light of the Qur'an and Traditions* (Dehli: Day Publishing House, Nai Sarek, 1932): 163.

19. C.Eric Lincoln, Lawrence H., Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990): 165.

20. C.Eric Lincoln, Lawrence H., Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990): 165 and endnote for chapter 7 on 432.

21. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1969): 31.

22. Gayraud S.Wilmore, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1983): 196.

23. Wilmore 197.

24. Wilmore 199

25. Wilmore 203–5.

26. Ibid.

27. Wilmore 211.

28. Wilmore 213.

29. Wilmore 214–5.

30. Wilmore l23.

31. Wilmore 123.

32. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: J.B.Lippincott Co., 1970)

33. Cone 126.

34. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,,* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1969): 60.

35. Cone 120.

36. Cone 72.

37. C.Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence H.Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990): 225.

38. I have to thank the acapella singing group *Sweet Honey and the Rock* for their inspirational work and this lyrical fragment that I feel encapsulates the dilemma and challenge facing the subject in and of contemporary discourse.

Flesh and Facts
Toward a Critical Psychoanalysis

The colonial subject is always 'overdetermined from without,' Fanon writes. It is through image and fantasy—those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious—that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition.

Homi Bhabha

Co-Performing Nations and the Distaste for Memory

The fact that narratives of self require the construction and enactment of histories condensed around "collective memories" and centering questions of identity and privileging identity politics, suggests that "[t]ime, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible."[1] In consideration of the ways spatially and temporally located subjectivities have been translated into narratives of self in community, it is helpful to look to Paul Virilio's concept of the tele-topological space of mediated images. However, rather than simply decrying identity politics writ large, we can to formulate critical questions that highlight both the delimiting dangers and the social urgency inherent to political positions grounded in narratives of historical (re)memory like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* and Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*. In the next chapter, we will begin the detranslation-retranslation process by examining these films, looking closely for the possibilities they produce and the limitations they impose. For now, however, we will explore how the critical approaches taken up thus far raise questions about African-American practices of historical reconstruction as a form of historical (re)memory and intrapsychic retranslation. More particularly, the power these visual narratives wield in the formation of

identity calls attention to the implications that obtain from the fact that one's narrativized images of self "figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious."

Examining the complex relations between history, identification, historical representation, and identity formation—the development of one's experience of cultural situatedness—entails implementing various modes of theoretical engagement. Investigating, to this point, attempts to understand and enact agency in relation to two powerful social structures, it has become apparent that even though Muslim orthodoxy and American practices of racialized relation can define the subject *vis-à-vis* exterior social structures, they possess the necessary space to fashion and enact agency. Indeed, both James Cone and Ibn Al-ᶜArabi found ways to refigure agency in relation to narratives of self-in-cosmos and self-in-community. Now we turn to narratives of subject formation that describe and delimit the self in relation to ideas of psychic interiority. In "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," Kobena Mercer suggests the usefulness of contextualizing this sort of discussion in relation to psychoanalytic theorizations of memory and the psychical functions it facilitates.[2] Mercer's advice responds to the ways that some representations of African-American nationalist narratives require the selective forgetting of particular historical memories in order to maintain the fantasy of essential sociopolitical identities with fixed positions in what are becoming increasingly overdetermined historical narratives. Examining black nationalist visual representations of counter memory, and the images invoked to represent notions of "authentic" blackness, makes it possible to identify the specific dangers of nationalist stories that replicate narratives already told, with pre-inscribed plots and patterns of repetition that form a "congealed past," itself constituted by History's repressed and foreclosed memory material.

This critical set of concerns hangs in tension with an examination of (and a speculation about) the important political possibilities generated through and around enactments of identity politics within the American scopic regime, because of the real changes in social conditions achieved by marginalized groups who have mobilized activism beneath signs of essentialized racial identity. However, in the American context, where racial logics (de)form social relations, these signs function doubly. On one hand, they provide the points of unification and commonality necessary to the efficacy of political advocacy. On the other hand (and simultaneously) political mobilization under the sign of racialized particularity reinscribes commonly held understandings of racial fixity that derive their power from historically entrenched myths and stereotypes that have been installed in the realm Bhabha defines as between history and the unconscious. Consequently, the great American dilemma gets recast precisely within the tension that exists between race, class, gender, and sexuality as discursive formations, on one side, and the moving, touching, desiring bodies

upon which these discourses write, about which they remark, and through which they represent, on the other. Thus, these discourses constantly inform the socio-cultural performance of dominant/subordinate social relations that result in the production of vindicating and justifying narratives, their exterior or structural imperative, and the interior or psychically supported impulse to vindicate one's human being.[3]

In other words, this chapter will sharpen the blurred image of American identity that stands in the foreground against the sepulchral figure of African-American nationalisms and their service to the American psyche. Because they represent the collision, negotiation, and articuiation of varied discourses themselves, the methodological frameworks we shall invoke (theories of performativity, critical race theory, and critical psychoanalytic theory) should be understood somewhat loosely, as perspectives with which to tentatively figure interactions between often-ambiguous signs and symbols. Allowing these methodologies to trouble each other, to raise one another to points of crisis, challenges us to stand disturbed ourselves. Psychoanalysis proves particularly useful in this regard because of the significant value it places on contingency, contradiction and the elusiveness of "knowability." And because it stands as a primary mode of framing interior experience in the American imaginary, we cannot, make use of psychoanalysis uncritically, for we too "belong irreducibly to [our] time"[4] and must acknowledge the complex and often damaging uses to which psychoanalysis as a set of discourses has been put. Because applied psychoanalysis (especially in the American context) frequently serves to authorize the policing of boundaries between polarized notions of sanity/insanity, pathology/mental health, and perversion/normalcy, we must engage it cautiously. Moreover, it has also become clear that Freud's psychoanalysis was a descriptive model that held few aspirations to prediction and that focused on tracing the development and co-constructing the cure for unpleasurable psychic states. Consequently, it is important to handle psychoanalysis carefully, and our partial readings reflect a profound ambivalence that must accompany our movements within a regime of discursive production that spares no prisoners, and forgets the multitude of subjects it leaves behind.[5]

Fanon's own sense of ambivalence in engaging psychoanalysis both draws this project to his work, and perhaps locates it in relation to *Black Skin, White Masks* as a site of active ambivalence, a space that describes and performs the sense of alienation, the "massive psychoexistential complex" that Fanon himself hoped to "destroy."[6] Ambivalently approaching and retreating from Fanon's pioneering theorization of the usefulness of psychoanalysis as a means to better understand the modes and vicissitudes of interpersonal interaction and identity development in the context of colonial domination wedded to ocular logics, we can begin to imagine a mode of critical psychoanalysis.

Identification: A BlackSkin Predicament

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon implies the scope of the blackskin predicament as quite clearly located in the tension between the all encompassing materiality of colonial relations and the often less concrete negotiations of self-imagining in the colonial setting. Fanon insists that:

> In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation…. The black man among his own in the twentieth century does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other…in the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema…[7]

Rather than asking how we might use Fanon to understand the conditions of subject negotiation in the American context, it is more illumining to interrogate how an analysis of Fanon's theorization can inform a construction of a critical psychoanalysis more relevant to reading the "fact of blackness"[8] in an American cultural setting. While at one moment Fanon's methodology is appealing for the ways in which he centers the black body as something that both exceeds and is integral to discursive processes and inter-psychic relations, it is also apparent that this centering simultaneously privileges identification in ways that make of the body a "short circuited" signifier that actually halts the otherwise useful slide of meaning that makes race so unstable, and racialization always counterfeit.

Because Fanon saw "Negro pathology" as originating in the process of assimilation and acculturation perpetuated through linguistic and educational institutions, the psychical dynamics associated with the conflict between the "fact of blackness" and the semiotic imposition of an "education to whiteness" most concerned him. Indeed, his specific interest revolved around the intrapsychic effects of the "Negro's" interaction with the "white racial phantasm" as orthodoxy or dominant ontology. As Fanon explained in a meditation on Jung's "collective catharsis" and its essential social function "as a release for collective aggression":

> In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there are always identifications with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary…who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes… There is identification…[the child of color] invests the hero, who is white, with all his own aggression…little by little, one can observe…the formation of a way of thinking and seeing that is essentially white.[9]

The Black youth who learned through histories and folktales that the colonial imaginary held a position of absolute negative value for colonial subjects, was simultaneously required to identify with the position of positive value constituted for whites. Only upon actual contact with whites in white society did the meaning of this self-abrogating identification come to the fore. Only then would the blackskin subject Fanon described meet in the white its "nemesis of degree and difference," and experience the trauma with which s/he was faced. Only then, through the process of deferred action, could the weighty "crushing objecthood" of which Fanon spoke, be felt. And once felt, ruptured again as the subject-now-object realized that even its status as object only bore meaning *in relation* to whiteness.

Identification provided Fanon a useful interpretive framework, prompting Diana Fuss, in her essay *Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,* to posit that one of Fanon's most important contributions was the notion that identification itself is a product of (and an apology for) colonial relations of domination and subordination. Fanon's suspicions notwithstanding, we must remain cautious when adopting identification as a conceptual framework and attend to Fuss' suggestion that "if we are to begin to understand both its political usages and its conceptual limitations, the notion of identification must be placed squarely within its other historical genealogies, including colonial imperialism"[10] and the formation of visual technologies.

The fact that it took place in particular colonial social locations, resulted in identification imposing upon Fanon's blackskin subject an alienation from both a self-defined subject position, and the modes of symbolic production that inform the development and transformation of the position of "other" to which the blackskin is assigned. Thus, according to Diana Fuss "Fanon implies that the black man under colonial rule finds himself relegated to a position other than the Other."[11] It was the resulting "neurotic orientation" to which Fanon applied his "psychoanalytic classifications," not the least of which was the Ego.

Fanon saw the development of the blackskin ego in the context of a collective unconscious. However, this "collective unconscious [was] not dependent on cerebral heredity; it [was] the result of what [he called] the unreflected imposition of a culture."[12] The reality that libidinal interests encountered in the colonial setting was a social construction. It was a structure of domination or cultural imposition justified by scientific notions of phenotypic determinism and ocular verification. With the kind of ambivalence evident throughout *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon's notion of ego development depended upon *and* undermined basic tenets of the Freudian psychoanalytic narrative of the normal ego, a narrative that typically elided cultural differences, and the only developmentally scopic aspect of which was tangled up in the encounter with the visual sign of castration. Fanon described the normal process of the Antillean's ego development as resulting in "an ambiguity that is

extraordinarily neurotic"[13] (of course, we can understand the normalcy of this ambiguity, given that in the colonial context of vast power differentials, libidinal interests encounter a reality in which one is already represented as constituting through representation the outer boundary to being, ascribed to the putative self). Moreover, the recognition of the blackskin subject position that is the fate of Antilleans encountering western culture, is facilitated in relation to whiteness as a self contained (and defined) category. It is indeed the psychical mechanism of identification that binds the tension between the "fact of blackness" and the "education to whiteness" that defines the ground for the emergent figure of neurosis in settings of dominant/subordinate social relations. This poses a particular set of problems, for even while the space of identification marks the blackskin subject's situatedness within colonial discourse, it is also the location wherein resistant forms of signification (like the performance of mimicry)[14] can take place. Put another way, the blackskin subject is presented with the choice that is no choice. Given the Freudian notion of the process of identification, the colonial subject can only ever be an object, incapable of enacting resistance without reinscribing and supporting the psychic relations that determine its "objecthood."

Unfortunately, the field of identification (which both reflects and reinscribes dominant social relations) is a founding trope in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Again, as Fuss describes it:

> The colonial-imperial register of self-other relations is particularly striking in Freud's work, where the psychoanalytic formulation of identification can be seen to locate at the very level of the unconscious the imperialist act of assimilation that drives Europe's voracious colonialist appetite. Identification, in other words, is itself an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self.[15]

Fuss's warning suggests that the process of identification appears as a product of colonial imposition installed at the level of the colonial subject's unconscious. This is especially important when we take the unconscious to represent the repository of libidinal components—some sadistic and some narcissistic—that exceed the possibilities of identification with external objects. Rather than simply indicating the colonial subject's status as an object, Fuss's text articulates how the colonial subject *within a psychoanalytic discourse that centers identification* is trapped in discursive position reserved for objects.

Taking this reading as a point of departure, it is particularly significant when in his collection of essays, *the location of culture,* Homi Bhabha reflects on the blackskin predicament as:

…the experience of dispossession and dislocation—psychic and social—which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference. In shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism, Fanon opens up a margin of interrogation that causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority.[16]

Fanon figured colonization as a process that while having its sources and structures in the material conditions of the colonial setting, produced effects that extended beyond material conditions to the modes of consciousness they inflect. Consequently Fanon's "sociodiagnostic" emphasized the importance of psychical incorporation as it occurs in the context of social relations. For even while his analysis was psychological, Fanon maintained that "the effective disalienation of the black man [entailed] an immediate recognition of social and economic realities."[17] Fanon felt that somewhere between the expanse of phylogeny and the specificity of ontogeny resided the cultural particularity of "sociogeny." In this space, incorporation amounted to the "attempt to acquire—by internalizing them—assets that were originally [and culturally] prohibited."[18] For Fanon's blackskin, alienation in the colonial setting was not merely from the product of her/his labor, or even from the modes of production themselves (though, in many cases this too was true). Rather it was also an alienation from a subject position (even as that subject position was defined as "other" to the colonialist "self"). Fanon sought to understand the formation of this alienation through the lens of psychoanalysis. Fanon writes:

> The Negro's behavior makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis… In the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence…we shall see…that the Negro, having been made inferior, proceeds from humiliating insecurity through strongly voiced self-accusation to despair. The attitude of the black man towards the white, or toward his own race, often duplicates almost completely a constellation of delirium frequently bordering on the region of the pathological.[19]

One must remember that this "region of the pathological" is, moreover, the space of uneven relations of power that characterize colonial (and so-called post-colonial) settings. Indeed, as Diana Fuss frames the dilemma, the predicament of the "other" originates in her/his being "forced to occupy, in a white racial phantasm, the static ontological space of the timeless 'primitive,'" where "the black man is disenfranchised of his very subjectivity." Fanon's

intervention sought to undermine this foreclosure and its ontological inexplicability.

In her essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,*[20] Hortense Spillers discusses the origins, effects and ramifications associated with the sense of displacement concomitant with the process of "ungendering" common in the political economy of enslavement. This sense of displacement is similar to the "situational neurosis" that plagues Fanon's blackskin subject. In fact, where Spillers tells the story of the captive African female body turned fleshy transcript of historically overdetermined domination, Fanon described the black body bludgeoned flat into the two-dimensional space of the epidermal schema: the blackskin (one word for "I am given no chance, I am overdetermined from without. I am a slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance,"[21]). Spillers calls "US slavery as one of the richest displays of the psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis [took] hold."[22] Fanon, in asking "what does a black man want"[23] began with an assumption that psychoanalysis could be used (after it had been mapped onto and into the political realities of the colonial setting) to understand how "a new family environment capable of reducing, if not eliminating the proportion of waste, in the asocial sense of the word"[24] would look.

Fanon suggested that alienation—the sense of being enslaved by one's own appearance—was particularly damaging insofar as it resulted in a unilateral recognition that disabled desire, and it was the apprehension of this fact that led him to posit that "as soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here and now… I am for somewhere else and for something else."[25] Fanon sought to disrupt the syntax of the "racial epidermal schema" and demanded "that notice be taken of [his] negating activity insofar as [he pursued] something other than life; insofar as [he did] battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions."[26]

Because the mechanisms underpinning Fanon's "world of reciprocal recognitions" centered notions of identification, they required his unevenly critical importation of psychoanalysis. Critical of the psychoanalytic discourse applied in the colonial setting, Fanon questioned the universal applicability of some of its basic contents. In speaking of neurosis and the Oedipal drama, Fanon reminded his readers that" …Freud and Adler and even the cosmic Jung did not think of the Negro in all their investigations," and made the fairly radical assertion that "they were quite right not to have. It is often forgotten that neurosis is not a basic element of the human reality. Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes."[27] As Fanon saw it, the Oedipal family drama was disrupted in the colonial context by the fact that racialized social practice had effectively removed the black father, and replaced it with a white patriarch.

Moreover, Fanon complicated the concepts of clearly bounded interiority and exteriority that support the Freudian model of the ego. He even destabilized, or at least implicated, traditionally held ideas regarding the vicissitudes of instinct gratification and ego development by insisting that reality was first and foremost a social reality and therefore, a social construct. Since, for the black, "… perception [of self] always [occurred] on the level of the imaginary," and that " …it [was] in white terms that one [perceived] one's fellows…"[28]the blackskin ego and indeed being was the white man's "artefact." This critical perspective notwithstanding, Fanon still relied upon a very Freudian conception of the mechanism of identification and the troubling analyses of sexuality and sexual "perversion" it engenders. Indeed, in his effort to outline (however tentatively) and describe the space of sociogeny, where identities could be formed through the humanizing process of "reciprocal recognition," Fanon centered identification in ways that make his psychoanalytic method of limited (but not minor) usefulness in attempts to transform discursive patterns in the field of the American imaginary.[29]

Although it makes little sense for me to expect Fanon to be critical in ways that we might be (especially as we have the benefit of departing from where he and other important theorists have brought us), it is still crucial to the construction of a useful critical psychoanalysis, that we problematize certain structures basic to Freud's theory in ways that Fanon was unable, in order to demonstrate how, at the very moment that he rejected some of the thorny contents of Freud's story of ego formation, Fanon simultaneously made use of aspects of Freud's theory that themselves reinscribed the very patterns of domination and subordination that Fanon sought to overturn. Sexuality, and the role it plays in Freud's theorization of psychical development, is one of those stories.

Sexuality: The Navel of Freud's Great Dream

"From the outset," Steven Marcus asserts in his introduction to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,*[30] "…one of the overt aims of [the *Three Essays…*] was to declare the end of an historical innocence, …and to usher in a realistic and modern vision of the 'horrors of the nursery.'" Freud's *Three Essays…*told a story[31] of sexual behavior in general, and sought to recount the "transformation of the sexual instinct" in particular.

Throughout these essays Freud discussed the normal teleology of sexual development from infantile sexuality through puberty and into "mature" sexuality. This story's particular twists and turns have been outlined often, and frequently debated. The form this story took and the ways in which it quietly spoke a myth (a myth that dominant structures were all too ready to hear) while

simultaneously demythologizing the folktale of "innocent history" is particularly important. It is interesting to note how the nexus between Freud's story and the story of human species evolution rested upon *what* Freud *called the* "weak spot" of human sexual development.

When Freud maintained that "…a disposition to perversions [was] an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct and that normal sexual behavior [was] developed out of it as a result of organic changes and the psychical inhibitions occurring in the course of maturation…" he implied the point at which his emplottment of psycho-sexual development intersected with notions of societal evolution.[32] The "psychical inhibitions" he mentioned were social expectations inscribed and replicated through the punitive judgments of the Super Ego. Moreover, inasmuch as ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, his psychical model easily mapped onto a collective social psychological representation of an even more teleologically bound evolutionary process (Freud's Vicissitudes of the Instinct meets Darwin's Voyage of the Beagle, if you will).[33] As a result of this intellectual encounter, a particularly European notion of civility could be equated with the concept of psychological maturity, and models of primitive civilization could be linked with an immature, infantile position in paradigms of psychical developmental process. Thus, "inferior racial types," emotionally disturbed people, children, and women could be and were identified as driven by primary processes, as powerless before sexual desire and its impulses, and as relatively unpossessed of higher character traits like reason, rationality, and control.

Mary Ann Doane illuminates this signifying slippage in her essay *Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.* Doane traces Freud's metaphorical use of the label "Dark Continent" to denote female sexuality. According to Doane, this signifier served as "the historical trace of Freud's link to the nineteenth century colonialist imagination." "Although Freud did not recapitulate 'an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of savage customs in the name of civilization,'" she argues, "…the binary opposition between the savage and the civilized in their relation to sexuality was a formative element to his thinking." Doane goes on to discuss how Freud's theorization established a metonymic chain of signification that conjoined racial otherness with notions of infantile and female sexuality. According to Doane:

> This is an elaboration of Freud's well-known claim that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In the English translation, "race" might seem to be more accurately replaced by "species" since Freud insists, here as well as elsewhere, on mapping the difference between the primitive and the civilized onto a temporal or historical axis rather than a spatial one. The "primitive" is the remote in time, it is the "childhood" of modern man… Freud delineates how civilization is born at

the expense of sexuality (whose "free reign" is henceforth associated with the "primitive" races, some of whom are undoubtedly located on the dark continent).[34]

Ontogeny/phylogeny recapitulation was not the only melodramatic[35] notion in the psychoanalytic story of sexuality that fit easily into, and may have had derivative roots in, the narratives of social-Darwinism that have come to outstretch the "psycho-Darwinistic" possibilities of Freud's theory, for Fanon also made use of the Freudian Ego as a central psychic structure.

Freud's ego, as an organ of perception and the seat of psychic agency, represented the modification of the Id through interaction with perceptions of the external world, what Freud called "reality tests." According to Freud's sequencing, instinctual impulses were generated within the domain of the Id, and cast into the world seeking objects of their libido, where they encountered reality (specifically the reality of not being satisfied). These impulses then recoiled from this dissatisfaction withdrawing object cathexis, and sought out a new object. The Ego, through a process of identification, introjected an image of the external object and thereby provided an internalized object for the libidinal surges of the Id's instinctual impulse. Although Fanon generally agreed with this view of normative ego development, he made use of it ambivalently. On one hand, Fanon felt that the blackskin ego, as the product of reality tests constructed through uneven power relations, would "burst apart" when faced with the "unattainable" ontology of "colonized and civilized society." And on the other hand, Fanon imagined the fragmented blackskin ego as constantly being "put together again" into a coherent psychic agency. Thus, while Fanon critiqued the postulation of reality as the *a priori* universal experience central in ego development, he did not question the notion of the coherent ego as a credible psychic structure or a desired psychic state.

Fanon's appropriation of the ego and Freud's theory of sexuality resulted in the construction of a chain of reference that ultimately required Fanon to both "know nothing" about the woman of color (except the degree to which lack fueled her drive to the incorporation of whiteness), and to rather easily make use of Freud's positioning of homosexuality as a perversion.[36] While these two subject positions clearly functioned as Fanon's "other" in *Black Skin, White Masks,* a psychoanalytic method sufficient to the task of examining the formation and negotiation of subjectivity with an eye towards the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality, in the United States cannot be supported by their marginalization. Moreover, concluding the woman of color to be driven by lack and the homosexual to be perverse (even in a strictly Freudian sense) readily supports political agenda that perpetuate structures of domination faced by subjects marked by those categories. The degree to which Freud's narrative of psycho-sexual development intersected with other narratives of civilization

and progress at precisely the point of sexuality, made it particularly troubling that, following his discussion of white female sexuality and the projection of masochistic desire onto the blackskin, Fanon was able, perhaps too smoothly or worse, inexorably, to slip into a discussion of anti-Semitism; a movement that dramatically demonstrated exactly how the slippage of signifiers along various narrative trajectories could result in the elision of one form of domination and the privileging of another. Although Fanon's use of psychoanalysis displayed insight and blindness, his prescient and important work suggests how a differently conceptualized psychoanalysis might function.

Incorporation: The Weaving of History, Identity and Psyche

The "abject," as Julia Kristeva describes it in her book *Powers of Horror,*[37] is that which is partially expelled from the unbounded expanse of the proto-subject that subsequently comes to constitute its borders, the limit of its possibility. These borders ultimately define the boundaries of the subject and occasion the subjectivity that comes later. The abject is that inassimilable feature of being that simultaneously demarcates the line between inside and outside; it is, Kristeva tells us, the "deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate."

To speak of the abject is not merely to call attention to what has been excluded or erased through a kind of repression or denial. Rather, it is to remark upon the signs of erasure, the traces of that enunciation whose disavowal constitutes the parameters of one's identity. As Kristeva puts it, neither the self nor the other, the obscured contents of the abject:

> …remain here *excluded* but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clear enough for a defensive *position* to be established—one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration,[38]

Thus it may be prudent to modify James Baldwin's assessment in *The Fire Next Time* that the invention of historic forms, counter-narratives, are insufficient to the multiple and changing needs of contemporary identification, and his cautionary reminder that instead invented pasts *are,* in the first instance, used and usable. For they function to define the parameters of group membership and fix the limits of what meaning can be crafted from historical narratives. However, they do crack and crumble , as he puts it, under the strain exerted by the always present and absent abject, by the pressures of what Baldwin elsewhere terms the "facts of death," which, he insists, are, ultimately, "the only facts we have." As Kristeva says:

…the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being,* that it *is* none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.[39]

Abjection in the context of vindicating historical narratives, then, produces significant effects. At the level of the historical narrative itself, abjection provides a sense of completeness or comprehensibility that lends events of the past the significance of coherent (and motivated) meaning in the present. What has been abjected works to ground or anchor the narrative's sense of continuity by sealing the elimination of destabilizing features of African-American communal histories, thereby setting the stage for what Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit* or the "afterwards effect." Of the various outcomes originating in moments of abjection evident in historical texts of self-in-community, enabling the avoidance of "facts of death" and, thereby, circumventing processes of mourning, shall prove to be abjection's pivotal textual function in African-American reconstructed histories.

As it relates to the formation of identities *vis-à-vis* historical narratives, abjection both predetermines the range of identifications subjects can make and produces a witnessing or testimony to the vindication of subjects constructed as inhuman and/or unclean, improper or themselves abject. That is, abjection also works towards the aim of producing an identity over and against (but necessarily routed through) the "explanatory ontology" supporting racialized dominance. Thus, through what might be termed secondary abjection, subjects who themselves have stood in for the abject in dominant accounts of American History, use the weaving of vindicating narratives to account for themselves as whole and coherent beings, as agents in a history that is both a text in the *Ummwelt* of popular culture, and what Jean Laplanche would term an auto-theorization of self. By suggesting that "the human being creates himself, ceaselessly, only by proposing to himself a self-representation, a 'theory', 'version' or 'translation' which is the best possible (the most comfortable—the most faithful—the only one possible at a certain moment and under certain circumstances)," Laplanche highlights the functions of abjection and the work of "re-memory" in historical translation.[40]

Because Kristeva's notion of abjection rests on the idea that the subject

"wins" subjectivity through an inaugural loss, it is not insignificant that Laplanche identifies mourning as a "situation analogous" to translation detranslation-retranslation. Laplanche says of loss that it:

> …causes me to perform an unraveling, a painful meditation. But each thread, although I indeed separate it off from the whole…is not broken…it is over-invested, contemplated separately, reintegrated into its history…and beyond this history in common…reintegrated into a more inclusive and much longer history.[41]

In the next chapter we shall begin the *retranslation* by examining three films that exemplify efforts to unravel and reintegrate painful facts of African-American history into contemporary visions of self. However, we shall see that it is precisely the abjection of particular threads that inhibits their contribution to the necessary and creative work of mourning.

Rehistoricizing Self: The Promise and Pathos of Vindicating Narratives

"Critical psychoanalysis" engages nationalist desire as it is represented in the popular cultural production of counter-narratives of history. Contextualizing the performance of Black nationalisms in the United States context means considering how the mediation of historical memory has differently produced "black" subjectivities in relation to "whiteness;" and asking what have been the dominating discursive regimes, what have been their templates of social interaction, through what conceptual structures they have been manifest, and what have been the modes of resistance mobilized against them.

Most European immigrants facing west encountered images of the United States historically represented by ruling ideas central to the American social fabric since its struggle for independence. In print, still image, film and, indeed, bodies themselves, American identity as it was transmitted throughout the world championed the essential dignity of the individual and sovereign human being, the fundamental equality of all *people,* and the general right to important cultural icons like liberty, freedom, and democracy. Dominant narratives of political, social, and spiritual possibility provided places into which European immigrants could imagine themselves. Only upon their arrival—their entrance into actually existing American social relations—did many European immigrants discover that their extensive access to social agency would be conditioned by their engaging in the process of defining themselves as different from marginalized populations for whom the picture of American possibility held no fore grounded positions, and very little opportunity.

Additionally, the discursive field within the American imaginary already contained a conceptual framework, a matrix of social differentiation that facilitated their interpellation as "selves" against dark and savage "others." By accepting roles in racialized structures of perception, many European newcomers marked themselves as fully human, and thereby certified their entitlement to the promises of (or the right to co-perform) the freedom, property, democracy, nationhood, and citizen subjectivity that constructed them as "white" and made the United States…*America.*

Without sacrificing private experiences of cultural memory, their public identity as newcomers could be checked at the door and replaced by an American identity that reconfirmed their occupation of human subject positions by providing them with a freshly temporalized and newly spatialized identity. Quite literally being *in America now,* they could gather in social clubs and community groups to reaffirm ethnic affiliation, while at the same time claiming and having conferred upon them (through *de jure* and *de facto* social practice) all the material and psychic privileges consistent with the racial category of whiteness.[42]

African-Americans, however, were not expected to engage in this slow performance of limited forgetting. Their collective memory was wiped away with forced relocation and the disruption of language and family groups deemed a necessary strategy of transition through the Atlantic Slave Trade and enslavement experiences. The process of colonization and the Atlantic Slave Trade did not merely obscure the African-American historical record; it erased it in quite physically brutal ways. Moreover, the complex relationship between the essential role that historic memory plays in the performance of identity, and the pivotal place notions of identity have in the formation of the sense of oneself as human, came to be articulated through and constitutive of the patently dehumanizing effects of racialized structures of domination in the United States, resulting in the discursive inscription of images/positions that coded African-Americans' presumed lack of qualities essential to human being.

In the face of institutionalized oppression and systematized dehumanization, African-Americans have engaged in performative practices that created social systems of mutual aid toward the goals of both survival and liberation. These performances have also worked to produce a sense of cultural unity and Black being that could fend off the onslaught of degrading and debilitating conceptualizations of blackness that dominated the American cultural imaginary.

Whether in the form of filmic representations like *Sankofa,* or even reproduced and represented images of the Black Power movement in films like *Malcolm X* or *Panther,* these performances have contributed to the constitution of bodies of cultural knowledge that have themselves worked in the service of varied functions. Chief among those is the construction of counter-memories[43] and the weaving of vindicating narratives, both of which operate in the service

of constituting an essentially *human* African-American subject position, and both of which require privileging originary moments that function as distant "primal scenes" in the tele-topological space of mediated (re)memory.

Unfortunately, positing essential humanity in the mode of vindication has necessitated the production of visual counter-memories populated by fixed images founded on abjection that, at base, encode ideas of ethno-cultural authenticity. Whether espousing notions of blackness rooted in phenotypically fixed ideas (where one's external appearance signals one's level of connection with Africa), positing idealized visions of black masculinity and femininity, or insinuating ideas of race betrayal through images that pathologize cross-racial sexual interaction and "mixed-race" identification, these images produce two interrelated effects.

On one hand, while also serving as a trope locating the subject in both the text and subtext of dominant historical accounts, these images produce a "figure and ground" effect. That is, they function as points of intersection between resistant counter-memories and the demeaning and dehumanizing representations of African-Americans ubiquitous in dominant historical narratives. As points of inter-textual relation (at times metonymic, and at times not), they function much in the same way that sexuality works to link Frued's theory of psychic development to traditional ideas of human species development. In this way, images that work to abject particular strands of African-American history also remain in the form of enigmatic place keepers, lacunae in discursive strings that, precisely by signifying "no-thing," allow for the displacement of signifiers into and between divergent representations of history. Since these multiply signifying images play such an important role in the formation of African-American identity; the ramifications to identity formation of the specific mode of their production are rather significant. Multiple signification and the ambivalent identification it necessitates, has required no more and no less than the formation of multiply subjective identities. Indeed, multiple subjectivity itself unfolds, utterance by utterance, in the tension between counter-(re)memory and dominant narrations of history, between auto-theorizations themselves and the social structures of oppression that contest the autonomy of their formation. The overdetermination of particular images in vindicating historical narratives, the fixity of their content, form, and function does not derive simply from scenarios of colonial and post-colonial domination.

Critical psychoanalysis also questions the very psychical mechanisms constituting its foundational repertoire. For example, while making use of such concepts as screen memory, primal scenes, mourning, melancholia, and deferred action in examining counter-memory of the nationalist type, critical psychoanalysis remains suspicious of these categories and the contestable content of their forms. In counter imagining memory, its racialization, and relation to the formation of identity, critical psychoanalysis can figure

(re)memory as "…a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal."[44]

Taking up the notion of the tele-topological space as mediating the performance of (re)memory allows one to explore the process of selection involved in the construction of counter-memory from a psychoanalytic point of view. Accommodating images onto which are transferred the affect generated through experiences of privation, punishment and marginalization attendant with uneven power relations, the tele-topology provides the space wherein the weaving and reweaving, the translation detranslation-retranslation can occur. In this space, images encoding authenticity in relation to blackness, can also serve as relational fields that assert self-worth and humanity over and against their absence (and the meaning encoded in that absence) in representational venues of dominant conceptions of American history. The tele-topological space contains culturally produced memory fragments that show us, as Freud posits:

> …our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In their periods of arousal…memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge;* they were formed at the time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.[45]

Psychoanalytic theory further suggests that the accuracy of these histories or memories proves much less important than the function they serve, and thus might argue that these culturally performed memories act as screen memories, splitting off or disavowing anxieties inherent to the pre-oedipal struggle represented in the wish for unbounded connection. In his 1987 essay, Patrick Hutton describes screen memories as:

> …mnemic images that displace deeper, hidden memories. By comparison with the memories they shield, screen memories are of lesser consequence, arouse fewer emotions, and relate to more recent experience. They are projected backward in time to fill the gap created by the repression of the memory of actual experience and thereby to fulfill the conscious mind's need for a coherent sense of life's development…the link between the screen memory and the repressed one is an attachment of place rather than of content. The screen memory fits the pattern of the past envisioned in our present fantasies, yet marks the place where the repressed memory of our actual experience may be retrieved.[46]

Retrievable or not, enigmatic or not, we might ask what is actually being screened off by these mediated images. Freud's theory suggests that it is the loss (real or imagined) generated at the point of origin, or the primal moment. Or for Fanon, perhaps, the destruction of "black zeal," the immanence of black

consciousness, the possibility of experiencing a Negro consciousness (outside of the blackskin subject position) that "does not hold itself out as a lack," the ontological potential inherent in losing oneself "completely in negritude."[47] For Kristeva, the inaugural loss that preconditions subjectivity might be implicated, or Laplanche's notion of the "primal seduction" that installs the enigmatic signifier within the psyche. Or perhaps, the question is not so much *what* is screened off, but rather *why* and *how*. That is, what function do mediated nationalist images perform when formed in the midst of other images that provide both their constitutive outside and extimate soul?

The nature of the tele-topological "image environment" necessitates that rather than being in a strict Freudian (or even Fanonian) psychoanalytic mode, critical psychoanalysis must incorporate semiotics and critical race theory in its application to processes of (re)memory in the American context. This critical and ambivalent *analysis* of *Sankofa, Malcolm X* and *Panther* will allow us to take seriously Laplanche's challenge to "[undo] an existing, spontaneous and perhaps symptomatic translation in order to rediscover, anterior to the translation, what it so ardently wished to translate and possibly to permit a "better" translation; that is to say one that is more complete, more comprehensive and less repressive."[48] Indeed, as long as the wounds that inspire vindicating narratives remain covered over by silence, omission or abjection, and as long as we avoid their closeness because of the discomfort they elicit, the transformative potential they contain shall linger at the periphery of what can be seen yet not faced, felt and not touched; haunting presences at the edges of abjected memory that remain imminent and enigmatic. Focusing on the moments of overdetermination consistent across different images of African-American nationalisms and reading them semiotically as moments of manifest desire in constant deferral, we enter the psychoanalytic semiotic tension between being "both human and historical," as a way to open new spaces for thinking about, imaging, and experiencing African-American subject agency. Indeed this view reveals that in our very specific social context images of desire and the desire in images are closely linked, speaking always, hushed and hurried, one another into meaning.

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1. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 5.
2. Kobena Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," *ICA Documents,* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts 1995)
3. One example of these phenomena might be the virtual explosion of "blacksploitation" films in the 80's and 90's, which could be read as directly related to the specter of the political activism organized around essentialized concepts of Black Nationalism in the 60's and 70's.

4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 13.

5. I desire to invoke a sense of ambivalence here that will suggest the psychoanalytic issues Homi Bhabha raises in his essay "The Other Question" (most recently released in his collection of essays entitled *the location of culture* by Routledge in 1994). While he uses it to discuss the ambivalent nature of identification in post-colonial spaces of hybridity, I seek to convey the sense of danger and urgency that accompanies the 'multiply-subjective' agent facing discursive systems through which they are consistently determined by images and concepts that deny what Judith Butler calls "full recognition." I recognize psychoanalysis as one of those dangerous systems that takes the body, its instincts and their vicissitudes as the halting sign, the final link in the chain of slipping signification.

6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 12.

7. Fanon 109–110.

8. I borrow this notion from Fanon because of the richness of its terms. Indeed, at base, this project will both directly and indirectly question the function of 'blackness' as a kind of "enigmatic signifier" (Laplanche & Pontalis) that operates in relation to the constitution of its "facticity" through symbolic, psychic, and institutional apparatuses.

9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 146.

10. Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics,* 24:2–3 (Summer-Fall 1994) 20–42

11. Fuss 21.

12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 191.

13. Fanon 192.

14. Homi Bhabha, "On Mimicry and Man," from *the location of culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994)

15. Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics,* 24:2–3 (Summer-Fall 1994)

16. Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative," from *the location of culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 63.

17. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 11.

18. Fanon 59.

19. Fanon 60.

20. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics,* 17:.2 (Summer 1987): 65.

21. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 116.

22. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics,* 17:.2 (Summer 1987): 65..

23. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 8

24. Fanon 49.

25. Fanon 60.

26. Fanon 218.

27. Fanon 151–52.

28. Fanon 163.

29. Homi Bhabha, in his essay "The Other Question" from *the location of culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Kobena Mercer in his ICA paper of 1995 "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia" have both taken up the notion of "ambivalent identifications" as a powerful perspective from which to examine the "'danger zone' of psychic and social ambivalence as it is lived in the complexity and contradictions of a multicultural body." Mercer suggests that "if the differentiation of self and other depends on repression that splits ego from unconscious, then the ambivalence of identification can be seen to arise from the effects of unconscious phantasy in which the self oscillates between positions of subject, object or spectator to the scene" (Mercer 11.) For Bhabha, this process can be thought through Freud's theorization of the fetish and moments of "multiple belief' that the fetish facilitates. To Bhabha's mind "the role of the fetishistic identification [one mode of ambivalent identification], in the construction of discriminatory knowledges that depend on the 'presence of difference,' is to provide a process of splitting and multiple/ contradictory belief at the point of enunciation and subjectification" (Bhabha, *the location of culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 80.) While their formulations go a long way toward creating room for imaging the post-colonial subject differently, I argue that rather than an "oscillation between positions" or "a process of splitting and multiple/contradictory belief," the subject in the space of active ambivalence is located in multiple positions simultaneously. *Troubling Beginnings* suggests that moments of being multiply subjective represent the simultaneous occupation of subject positions that both support and undermine the humanizing process of "reciprocal recognition."

30. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* translated and edited by James Strachy (New York: Basic Books, 1994): xx

31. I read Freud's essays on sexuality as describing a "story" in the sense that they represent the displacement of mythic structure into a quasi-literary context. I base my contention on the work of Northrop Frye ("Myth, Fiction, and Displacement" from *Fables of Identity,* and Eric Auerbach's discussion of the function of realism as a mode of representation in literature from *Mimesis*).

32. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* translated and edited by James Strachy (New York: Basic Books, 1994): 67

33. For an excellent discussion of the intellectual links between these theorists see Lucille B. Ritvo's *Darwin's Influence on Freud,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)

34. Mary Ann Doane, "Dark continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema," in *Femmes fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis,* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 210–211.

35. I use the term melodramatic here in the sense that Mary Ann Doane does in her discussion of inscriptions of racialized and gendered relations in the "representational field" of Hollywood cinema. Doane posits that "melodrama has been consistently defined as the cinematic mode in which social anxieties or conflicts are represented as sexual anxieties or conflicts. From this point of view, it…[is]…a particularly appropriate arena for the observation of the intersection of race and gender."

36. While reading Fanon's discussion of anti-black racism and anti-Semitism, I was surprised to find in his description of the psychical states common to these modes of relating to the "other" that he likened it to the "realm of the homosexual." It was particularly surprising because it seemed that given the logics internal to his discussion/explication, that it was precisely the realm of the "homophobic" that he had described. Calvin Warren has cogently discussed this movement in Fanon's text, describing it as a kind of "ontocide" that rules out the very existence of black gay subjectivity.

37. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

38. Kristeva 7.

39. Kristeva 5.

40. Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation and the Drives,* eds. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, with translations by Martin Stanton, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992): 173.

41. Ibid.

42. For further discussion of the complexities involved in the construction of "whiteness," see the following: Ruth Frankenburg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *The Harvard Law Review,* 106:8 (1993): 1709–91; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness,* (New York: Verso, 1991) and Ron Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

43. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 226.

44. Lipsitz 213.

45. Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," *S.E. IV,* (1899): 322.

46. Patrick H.Hutton, "The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. XLVII No. 3, (July-Sept. 1987): 388.

47. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks,* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969): 134–5.

48. Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation, Drives,* eds. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992): 170.

Retranslations

Retranslations

Retranslations

Retranslations

Retranslations

Retranslations

Retranslations

Freeing Films
Reading *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther*

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.

<div align="right">

Frantz Fanon

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The structure of unreality that the black woman must confront originates in the historical moment when language ceases to speak. The historical moment at which hierarchies of power (even the ones to which some women belong) simply run out of terms because the empowered meets in the black female the veritable nemesis of degree and difference. Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as inferior being, but rather, the paradox of non-being.

<div align="right">

Hortense J.Spillers

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Where Frantz Fanon's sociogeny possessed parameters located in psyche, social relations, and language, the psycho-social realm to which we are today "restored," is one of psyche extruded, of the micro-politics of social relation, and one where images are structured like language. Our contemporary imagistic sociogeny reifies death's facticity and embeds its ubiquity in the field of meaning making—the space wherein love and understanding have actually become problems. While contemporary images are not themselves more important now than they have been in the past, today's images play a uniquely significant role in the telling of stories of self, in the defining of the boundaries of the real, in the weaving of discourses of authenticity, and therefore in the arbitration, ultimately, of identity.

Because images are the projected representations of psychical drives, impulses, anxieties and wishes, the external world of socially structured orthodoxy discussed in chapter 1, and the internal world of intrapsychic overdetermination examined in chapter 2, cannot be easily unraveled. In the contemporary image environment the inner and outer spheres of subject formation interact more explicitly than they have in the past. Their co-constitutive features become visible, and reading them gives us an opportunity to see not only how and why we create images, but also how and to what end images produce and develop us with the same aspirations to fixity and fidelity we impose upon them. This chapter begins our *retranslation* by examining Haile Gerima's *Sankofa,* Spike Lee's *Malcolm X,* and Mario Van Peebles' *Panther.* It will become clear that because these films present fixed images of blackness in the context of historical reconstruction, they also function to produce a very specific idea of African-American cultural authenticity. This figure of real blackness problematically demands a kind of fidelity or loyalty to specific modes of raced, classed, gendered and heteronormativized black being that disallow or abject the expression of more complicated and less restrictive performances of black identity and agency.

Departing from Virilio's discussion of the tele-topological space and Victor Burgin's assertion that the contemporary image environment "increasingly resembles our interior space," this chapter demonstrates how images of African-American reconstructed history operate at the intersection between intra-psychic and socio-structural orthodoxies. Bringing trauma theory, film theory, semiotics, critical gender theory, psychoanalysis and critical race theory to bear on these questions illumines how the construction of fixed subjectivities reproduces dominant modes of social relation and common-sense notions of self and agency.

Reading these images for *what* they say as an effect of, and in relation to, a broader cultural imaginary can help reveal the points in discourse that strain under the weight of overdetermination. It will not be too difficult to read the seemingly transparent messages transmitted in these films. Indeed, because of

the vindicating labor they perform, their ideological projects have been made clear quite deliberately. Still, in order to act on the ambivalence that permeates the three films and thereby to retain a sense of discursive possibility, we must also ask *how* these images come to transmit their ideological content to such emotive effect. This can be accomplished by beginning to attend to the films' characters, their framing, the use of voice-overs to anchor or relay the meaning they are intended to convey, and other features like shot matches, subtitles and the diagetic relationship between characters and their environments. It shall become apparent that in *Sankofa* abjection enables the production of an embodied phenotypic authenticity and in *Malcolm X* disavowal makes possible the idealization of racialized gender and sexuality. Both of these films use ideological forms to stabilize fixed images of authentic black being. Moreover, an analysis of *Panther* will show how African-American reconstructed histories working in the service of vindication respond to destabilizing images of blackness, and how *Panther's* negotiation of racial ambiguity supports Virilio's suggestion that in the tele-topological environment, fixed images are preferred over unstable ones. Kristeva's notion of abjection helps account for *Sankofa's* representational power, Freud's concept of disavowal sheds light on the compelling structure of *Malcolm X,* and Jean Laplanche's theories of enigmatic signification and translation, detranslation, retranslation processes are best suited to exploring the representation of mixed-raciality in *Panther.*

The Embodiment of Phenotype in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*

In the discussion following the spring 1996 screening of his twelve-year project *Sankofa* at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Haile Gerima insisted that he wanted his film to show people what the Atlantic slave trade was "really like." After the screening, he told the hushed audience that he sought to create representations with which "black" people could identify and image histories they could claim as their own. Following the resounding applause that came in response to his call for black representational pride, a self-identified black lesbian stood up and between sobs, thanked Gerima and proceeded to tell him (and the silent audience) of her own incest experience and survival. She spoke, tearfully, of her identification with the main female character's experiences of abuse and dehumanization, and of her triumphant recuperation of an agency and sense of belonging to something greater than herself. Although *Sankofa* disavowed modes of desire outside of a strict heteronormativity between black characters, and although the film made no reference to intra-familial violence, this particular individual was able to identify with the images presented in the film while herself disavowing the ways in which the film did not represent her self-proclaimed subject position.

There were others that testified or witnessed that evening, whether in the theater, in its corridors or on their ways home. There were signs of shame, of rage, and indications of guilt; but most significantly, there were decidedly different but uniformly powerful moments of identification that gave the room an intensity that was palpable. It was clear that something important had occurred that night, that the images presented in the film had occasioned the performance of community and common sentiment, and that while there were those who could celebrate their membership in the communal space *Sankofa* incited, there were certainly others whose subjectivities, or aspects thereof, had just as effectively been barred admittance.

While the following analysis does begin and depart from a description of how one group of people interacted with Gerima's film (and the discourse he used to ground its meaning), rather than an excursion into the realm of audience response theory, we are here interested in the kinds of questions that arise in relation to this event. What moments of identification does Gerima's work enable and why are identification and interpellation so powerfully compelled through this film? Ultimately, it will become evident that Gerima's construction of culturally pure subjects through the production of a visually represented authenticity discourse is grounded on the depiction of qualities of phenotypic sameness that encode and thereby embody ideologies of authentic group membership. Moreover, embodied codes of authenticity not only define what counts as black both within and outside the filmic space defined by *Sankofa,* but these codes also determine what black cannot be. Instead of focusing on the modes of social interrelation that have been excluded from Gerima's filmic text, our exploration is based on the assumption that determining what figures of subjectivity function as abject in *Sankofa's* visual argument raises important insights and questions about the desires and fears that inform its production.

These questions are important because they highlight (if obliquely) the messiness of sutures and the arbitrariness of closures, employed in the service of maintaining the discursive illusion of cultural cleanliness and propriety. The clean and proper body of black being has scars, possesses its own flesh hidden in the work of "uplifting the race" to the ontological level of a human species-being heretofore denied black bodies. Racial uplift, however, proves problematic when its projects are enacted without working through the ramifications of being altogether inhuman in the American cultural imaginary. Our reading of embodiment and phenotype in *Sankofa* illustrates how the body is coded differently in relation to the ideology transmitted through the images, the formal structural characteristics deployed within the film to create a sense of spatial and temporal continuity and narrative closure, and the intrapsychic features that determine how *Sankofa's* images function so powerfully.

At the post-screening discussion, Gerima made it clear from the outset that he intended *Sankofa* to intervene in the hegemonic figuring of African-American

history. Relying on private funding for its production and limiting the venues for its distribution, Gerima maintained strict control over the context of the film's dissemination. His was a political strategy aimed directly at the American cultural imaginary, and he wanted *Sankofa,* by his own description, to stand as a representation of African-American history and selfhood that was not prescribed by white representations of blackness nor delegitimated by Eurocentric ideas regarding the representation of history, that its meaning would not be measured in relation to whiteness. His was a war of position on the terrain of ideological struggle within the tele-topological environment: the space of advanced representational technologies.

In her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,"[1] Hortense Spillers opens a discussion of the enslaved body and of enslavement as an experience and location whose "very nature" Evelynn Hammonds suggests, "resists telling."[2] By examining the ontological dilemma facing the production of black female subjectivity, Spillers argues that sexuality (and by extension, other axes constituting the ground for the production of subjectivity) is a category considered within the bounds of "culture." Since the "subject" reduced to blackness can only be conceived of as outside of culture, any sexuality it might possess, and indeed its subjectivity, is a missing word in the grammar of the white racial phantasm, it is an interstice. For Spillers, the predicament facing the black subject is that its subjectivity is routed through a white cultural imaginary that requires the black "flesh" for the constitution of its own embodied subjectivity. Although writing in a very different context, Frantz Fanon had similar concerns about difficulties confronting the possibility of a humanized black "being."

According to Fanon, the Negro's [sic] subjectivity in the context of radical differential relations of power, is limited by a being for and being through whiteness. As a result, Fanon suggests, the Negro who is Other in the cultural imaginary can, via the auspices of its own "subjectivity," only occupy a position that is "other to the Other." Thus, the Negro is "fixed" and flattened by myths, stereotypes and phobic expectations into the two dimensional "epidermal schema." The Negro becomes the blackskin whose corporeal schema is disrupted and who is forced to possess three degrees of consciousness. As the self, other, and Other to the other in this context of racialized phantasmagoria, the blackskin subject reduced to its epidermal schema, or the de-gendered body made "flesh," as Spillers would have it, is itself the production of a phantasm figuring the racialized economy of colonization and slavery. More than merely indentured, this commodified body is also fundamentally altered. Caught in what Spillers calls "nested semiotic readings," it is "symbolically broken in two—ruptured along the fault of a 'double consciousness.'" Whether doubly conscious as Spillers claims, triply conscious as Fanon asserts, or possessed of a

multiply subjective experience of being, the black subject in the American context struggles within a precarious terrain of signification.

In his effort to address this problematic at the level of representation, to enact his own form of historiographic decolonization, Gerima has constructed a visual counter-narrative that depends upon the symbolic relationship between the characters Shango, Nunu, Joe, and the *Sankofa* spirit. Examining how these figures are represented formalistically, especially as related to the changing subjectivity of the female protagonist, draws into relief the authenticity discourse *Sankofa* constructs. First, however, a brief description of the film is in order.

Completed in 1992[3] *Sankofa* tells the story of Mona, a fashion model on a photo shoot at a fort in a Ghanain port town that once served as a major transfer point in the Atlantic Slave Trade. While there, Mona is confronted by Sankofa, the "guardian" of the "sacred ground" on which the fort was built, who tells her (in a camera direct address) to "go back" and rediscover her origins. The viewer is told (through the narration of a tour guide) that Sankofa is a traditional spiritual leader who drums everyday at sunrise to "call back" the "spirits of the dead" enslaved Africans who were taken in the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Mona wanders into the underground corridors of the fort and is trapped. Suddenly finding herself surrounded by shackled enslaved Africans, she tries to escape only to run into Portuguese slavers who strip and brand her even as she exhorts, "I'm not an African…don't you recognize me?… I am an American." After the branding, she is again surrounded by the shackled "slaves" and the scene fades to black with the sound of ocean waves and the creaking of a ship that signals the transportation across time and space and the transformation that turns Mona into Shola. We are then introduced to Shola whose voice over tells of her life as a "house slave" on the Lafayette sugar cane plantation, where most "slaves accepted their situation," except for "folks like Nunu and Shango." From this point on, the story information is predominantly provided through Shola's voice-overs and from her point of view.

The film depicts Shola's life on the plantation, her relations with other enslaved people and her personal transformation from docile "house slave" to rebellious "field hand" who, in connection with Shango, Nunu and a band of maroons living in the hills, participates in a rebellion. During the uprising Shola kills the plantation owner the viewer has seen repeatedly raping her, is herself murdered, and returns to the temporal "present" in Ghana with a new sense of self and connection to her origins. Gerima ends the film with empathy inducing medium close-up shots of Mona-now-Shola participating in Sankofa's daily ritual of calling back the spirits of lost African souls to the land of their roots. Gerima uses a similar shot of Nunu sitting with her, crying with joy as she looks towards the rising sun.

Sakofa, an independent production, makes accommodations to the

conventions of classic Hollywood Cinema in many ways. But, while generally conforming to expectations regarding continuity editing, lighting, sound and cinematography, this film is notable for the ways it goes beyond conventions. The three that stand out as most significant in relation to *Sankofa's* work as purveyor of an authenticity discourse are lighting and its phenotypo-genic effect, the use of nature as frame break, and the production of on-screen space through look relations.

Although most of the story action in Sankofa takes place out doors and therefore calls for a fairly muted use of lighting, there are certain spaces wherein the use of lighting works to more clearly transmit Sankofa's message regarding phenotype as code of racial purity and cultural authenticity. Indeed, it is within the spaces that most represent the structure of colonial domination (the slaving fort, the slave quarters at the Lafayette Plantation, and the plantation church) that lighting cues the viewer as to how characters should be perceived. More than merely setting the mood of the scene, Gerima's selection of backlighting and filler light colors makes phenotype a function of the characters' actions and mental states.

While still at the slaving fort, as she begins to descend into the underground dungeon, Mona is backlit with orange hues, and "filled in" with yellow tones. This makes her skin appear lighter against the blue-white walls of the fort. After being transported to the "past," and for the remainder of the film, Mona/Shola is dressed in light colored clothes and lit with colors that accent the darkness of her skin. The emphasis on color appearance is made more evident in a scene where Mona/Shola has been punished for having attempted to escape and for conspiring with the 'heathen' maroons. We witness her being flogged, while hanging by her arms from the ceiling of her quarters. After the flogging and having been forced to "accept God" as her "father," she is untied and thrown naked across her bed. The scene closes with a medium-shot of her crying, a blue light accenting her body at the center of the frame and the rope that had been used to restrain her swinging slowly at the right. The viewer's gaze is drawn alternately to the blue light on her body and the movement of the swinging rope. In this way, a visual shifting is set up that conveys the ideological contrast between her dark phenotype (she is, in a reduced and absolute sense, a black body, naked and abused, the reduced signifer) and the symbol of those things that visit atrocities upon her (the three figures that are present for the flogging and "confirmation" of her loyalty are the master, the priest, and Joe whose complicity the viewer is meant to infer from his passive presence). Later, after having won Shango's trust (while tending to her wounds, he tells her of how he lost people he loved to the violence of slavery), we see the two of them beside a river, dressed in white, Shango cleansing her with leaves and water. Mona/Shola's authenticity having been confirmed and her authentic self-hood brutally reconstituted, the plot can move to its climax with the slave rebellion. Although

no diagetically enacted transformation is required to establish their authenticity, Shango and Nunu's "blackness" is highlighted throughout the film.

Dressed in white, save for the red head covering that comes to mark their connection to the maroon community, Shango and Nunu are made to appear darker skinned relative to the other characters in the film. Indeed, it is their being contraposed to the mixed-race character Joe in plot, story, and phenotype that allows their authenticity to be a given, a simple fact of history, situation, and genetic reality. In one series of scenes, Lucy asks Shango for a "love potion" that will make Joe come to want her as she wants him. Because Lucy has already been identified within the story as being misguided in loving Joe (we see her repeatedly suffer humiliation at his hands), there is no surprise, and certainly no outrage produced in the viewer when Shango deceives her. As if punctuating the point that it is wrong for an authentic African woman to have romantic feelings for a mixed-race man (although the dubious nature of Joe's manhood is also crucial to the gendered racialization of Black authenticity in the film), Shango poisons Joe and sends him into a psychological frenzy that results in Joe's murdering Nunu at the river. Indeed, Shango is all that Joe is not. He is courageous, rebellious, certain, uncompromising, and most importantly, (as signaled through shades of skin and ideology) authentic through and through. Nunu is similarly contrasted with Joe.

The use of lighting techniques to enhance the darkness of Nunu's skin, organizing camera movement around Nunu's action and thereby setting up her subjective point of view, and having Joe and Nunu engage in discussions that emphasize their ideological differences, allows Gerima to both define Joe as inauthentic and to inadvertently display the degree to which the authentic subject is constituted by the construction of an inauthentic one. By having the camera move when Nunu moves, turn when her head turns, and "look at" those views located in the off-screen space defined by her gaze (especially at moments of significant plot development), *Sankofa* suggests that the culturally authentic viewpoint is literally the right way to "see" the world, that it visualizes real social change, and that it offers a clear perspective on social agency. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Shango and Nunu are the only main characters whose language requires subtitled translation. They are, most decidedly, *not American,* and in that sense, fully recognizable as agents in their own accidentally-in-America history.

Gerima also uses natural environments in a way that contributes to common sense ideas about black cultural authenticity. Throughout the film, Shango and Nunu are portrayed as culturally and physically linked to Africa and "natural" Africanisms and folkways. Shango, whether working in the fields, concocting herbal poisons, or slipping away at night to organize rebellions with maroon groups hiding out in mountain caves, is always imaged in relation to nature. In all of the scenes that feature him (with the notable

exception of his being locked up in "collar" stocks, and tending to Mona/ Shola's wounds after her flogging), Shango's image is framed by the natural environment. Peeking out from among the reeds, running through the woods, sitting atop a hill under a tree, or crouching beside a fire in a cave, Shango is naturally connected to the earth, water, sky, and spirits that are "Africa." With dreadlocks flowing (which Kobena Mercer has suggested once "spoke of pride and empowerment through their association with the radical discourse of Rastafari which, like Black Power in the United States, inaugurated a redirection of black consciousness in the Caribbean."[4]) and refusing to nourish himself with the "master's food," Shango is the embodiment of active black masculinity. He epitomizes, indeed embodies, an authentic and masculinized black rebellion.

Similarly, the character Nunu represents the embodiment of an idealized African matriarchal order. Shrouded in mystery and ritual, the narrative tells us that Nunu once killed an overseer "juss by lookin' at em!" Advisor, community mother, healer, and soothsayer, Nunu acts as the repository of a valorized African past projected into a hopeful African-in-America present. As the bearer of the past, Nunu functions to bring about the transformation necessary to envisioning a libratory black future.

Nunu's influence allows black "head man" (Noble Ali) to repudiate his complicitous relationship with the white plantation power structure. Nunu's nurturance brings Shola to reconnect with her authentic blackness, to become the embodiment of the Sankofa spirit who moves forward only while looking backward. Indeed, the very defilement of Nunu's body through a fabled but unrepresented rape aboard a slave ship, results in the birth of Joe, that "rotten fruit," and ultimately her own death at his hands. In fact, even Joe is marginally vindicated when, after strangling Nunu and experiencing a kind of spiritual/ political awakening, he murders the plantation priest Father Raphael. In this scene, Gerima uses backlighting to make Joe appear darker and to emphasize the partial vindication of his political and ontological being. Although Joe's death here suggests the partiality of his vindication, his limited transformation is certified when—just before killing Father Raphael for telling him to "remove that heathen corpse" from the church alter on which he had placed Nunu's body—he recites a reworking of Harriet Tubman's famous query: "And ain't *she* a woman?"

Gerima also uses nature, shots of the sky, sweeping pans of the hills and fields, and images of rivers, forests and caves to transition from scene to scene. In this way, Gerima makes of nature and the Sankofa spirit it represents, the transcendent and continuous foundation for the moments of suffering, resistance, and personal transformation the film depicts. Boundless images of nature are the establishing shots that define the expanse in which human affairs take place. Every man-made structure is one of domination and exploitation,

only nature and the spiritual roots it symbolizes, offers true freedom and full humanity. At the level of ideological construction, this choice causes little concern. More importantly, the way in which diagetic look relations, the characters' gazes, construct space within the undifferentiated and unbounded space established by the function of images of nature, enhances the affective power of *Sankofa's* authenticity discourse at the level of identification and subject formation.

In classic Hollywood cinema it is common for the viewer's sense of on-screen space to be constructed by characters' "looks." In one shot a character will look in a certain direction (either at another character or towards a particular space). In the next shot, the viewer will be shown the space to which the character looked and will thereby have the sense of a spatial continuity between the character's gaze and the space represented in the next shot. Not only does this type of visual construction give the viewer a sense of connectedness between character and space, but it also enhances the viewer's identification with the character. The viewer "sees" what the character sees and is encouraged to feel what the character feels. Thus, the classical filming convention is to avoid the camera direct address, because it jolts the viewer, disrupts the seamless continuity of the narrative, and makes the spectator more aware of their position as viewer instead of participant.

In *Sankofa,* Gerima makes frequent use of the camera direct address and the camera direct gaze. From the beginning of the film, shots of Sankofa drumming are cut with images of Mona being photographed on the beach dressed in leopard print bathing suit, blond wig, and long orange fingernails. Sankofa looks directly into the camera, just as Mona looks directly towards the viewer. We also see the photographer's lens pointing towards the audience as he says "…more sex Mona…come on, more sex. Yeah, that's right." Throughout the film, camera direct looks are divided into the passive onlooking of enslaved people, the active gazes of characters in moments of resistance, or the frightened, contemptuous, or belittling looks of non-black others (which for almost all of the film includes Joe). The usually passive and un-self-critical watching of the spectator is reversed by these gazes, and the viewer is forced to consider their own position, via implication or accusation, in the field of ethics and authenticity Gerima has constructed. Are you friend or are you foe? Are you passive or will you act? Are you master or are you slave? These look relations between characters, between characters and audience, and between audience members (as demonstrated in the screening I attended), dissolve the affective boundaries between the film and its spectators. Not only was this film, like most, an example of the externalized projection of interior spaces, but the complex space of identificatory relations it created became a screen upon which could be projected the authenticity discourse shaped by the film's images.

As well as being shaped by what was projected, *Sankofa,* and the space it

creates, is also significantly figured by what it abjects, what comes to signal its constitutive outside. Perhaps most important is the way in which Gerima refuses to mark the various spatial locations represented in *Sankofa*. The geographically nonspecific nature of the terrain that provides the context for the story *Sankofa* allows for the formation of an imagined coherence, a performed wholeness that disavows the fragmented character of very specific enslavement experiences.

Gerima maintains that the universalizing effect of *Sankofa's* lack of spatial specificity does produce a kind of common understanding that confuses a particularized localization, and argues that this approach allows him to intervene in the "ideology of 'specialness,' of human exceptionalism in regard to the plantation owner," that it prevents the protest "'[i]t didn't happen here, not that much here…[i]t didn't happen.'"[5] Indeed, we can see *Sankofa's* abject emerge within the tension between Gerima's refusal to specifically locate the experience he represents and his simultaneous insistence that this film represents what "really" happened during the Atlantic Slave Trade. The constructed silence around spatial and temporal location in *Sankofa* haunts the viewer's experience of the film, for it is precisely the movement through time and the shifting occupation of space that motivates the flow of both the plot that shapes *Sankofa* and the articulation of the story it tells.

Filling *Sankofa* with location shots from multiple sites implicated in the Atlantic Slave Trade, blending languages and regional accents, and depicting "slave" activities that could only have transpired in different places as occurring in the same location, makes *Sankofa* a film that both refuses to suggest where the events it represents occurred, and forces the viewer to occupy the ambiguous space it produces (while also crucially indicating that these events must not be thought less important for having occurred "there and then" as opposed to "here and now"). The subject thus produced enjoys membership in an imagined community of survival and rebellion. Gerima has envisioned the factors necessary to conceiving a more humanized notion of blackness in relation to a natural connection with Africa. Still, the contradistinction made between Joe's characterization and these figures of cultural authenticity raises questions that trouble the stable subjectivity Gerima's representation of blackness invokes.

While we will engage the representation of mixed-race bodies at length later, it is important to note here one of the effects produced by Gerima's contrasting of Joe with Nunu, his biological mother. We are told through the narrative that Joe is the result of his mother's having been raped by "two white men on a slave ship." Throughout the film, Joe is represented as a confused and suffering "mulatto" figure who contains, to the point of self-destruction, psychoses resulting from an admixture of incommensurable cultural and racial difference. "Which one is your father, Joe?!?" Shola asks after Joe has murdered Nunu. Joe's phenotypic "impurity" is made obvious, and the contraposed racial authenticity of Nunu is made clear through visual logics. The past, present, and

future are connected through and ensured by the phenotypic purity Nunu represents, and as Shola insists, Joe and all he represents have "got no future" because the probity of his past is not sufficient to sustain his link (biological relation to Nunu notwithstanding) to the cultural purity Nunu embodies. These images encode cultural authenticity in phenotypic representation, and the fragmented body of the African Diaspora is made whole and coherent through very specific forms of phenotypic embodiment. The predication of this wholeness rests precisely on the abjection of Joe as the mixed-race subject whose enigmatic signification threatens to disrupt black human being in the diaspora.

In a recent interview,[6] Gerima was asked to respond to accusations of stereotyping in his casting. By way of response, Gerima stated:

> For example, Joe to me is light-skinned not because he was working with the master. Nunu [Joe's mother] was raped by two white men on a slave ship. It's logical for me to have him light-skinned. And I also wasn't thinking about his white skin; more I was looking at his bone structure. I don't know if you remember the river scene between them. That's her son; I wanted people to look at their bones, the mother and him, their faces. That was the map I was working from, family: would he come out of her?

It is telling that Gerima chose to discuss the character Joe instead of the other unmentioned, and somehow not "stereotypical," characters. That his comments came in response to accusations and to that degree represents a kind of defensive formation, suggests how the mixed-race body has the power of its signification conferred upon it precisely because of its relationship to authentic and pure bodies. Thus we might re-read his statement in the following way:

> "I hired light-skinned actor X, not because he looked like someone who would work for the master (read: a traitor), but because phenotypic logic demanded that only his body could provide the ocular proof necessary to the narrative's claim that his mother had been raped by two white men on a slave ship. That is, his bodily appearance was required to suture credibility into the narrative. Moreover, it was the comparative fixity of his bone structure (the timeless and unchanging proof positive) that matched him to his mother, that would allow for the suspension of obvious disbelief the he was 'family,' and answer the question; how could he have come out of her?"

Indeed, Gerima was quite justified in denying his detractors' claims of stereotyping, for the character Joe did not represent some reduced form of phenotypic sameness. In fact, the bodily presence in *Sankofa* called Joe primarily functioned to prove the reconstructed historical case that the only way

the inauthentic could emerge from the womb of authenticity was through violent colonial intervention. While this topic will be discussed further in relation to Mario Van Peebles' *Panther,* it's worth remarking here that as an *ambiguous* signifier the mixed-race body called "Joe," indicate the trauma of colonial contact in *Sankofa.* Although this semiotic function too shall come up in our analysis of *Panther,* in its *enigmatic* signification the mixed-race body here works to both mark and effectively obscure story possibilities that might otherwise disrupt the narrative of authenticity *Sankofa* weaves.

Given the ideological content of Gerima's film and its embodied representation of authentic blackness, we must still ask why or how this film functions to such powerful effect. It is here that Judith Butler's notion of citational authority and Jane Gallop's reading of the difference between Barthes' *plaisir* and *jouissance* prove useful points of departure. As Butler describes it, the subject comes into subjectivity through its inauguration into a position always already prescribed for it within discourse. Moreover, these positions derive their power and relative fixity through the citation of pre-existing authority. Thus one is interpellated into the arena of gender normativity precisely because of the power with which performatives in relation to "sex" have been invoked.

In this context then, it could be argued that Gerima is working to produce new and better images with which African-Americans can identify, positions that do not necessarily issue forth from performative utterances like "Look, a Negro!," or "Sold! To the gentleman…" However, because of its reliance on notions of authenticity, the purity of origins, and the drive to vindication, the power acquired through the symbolic citation of Black Power and Pan-African diasporic solidarity, rather than investing the putative African-American subject with agency, merely serves to reduce the fairly uncreative boundaries of authentic blackness to biologistic models of black being. This feature precludes the possibility of *Sankofa* producing moments of *jouissance* for the viewer.

In her reading of Roland Barthes, Jane Gallop speaks of *jouissance* as an unstable sensing of self that works to unsettle hegemonic norms. As Gallop reminds us, "Barthes distinguishes between *plaisir,* which is comfortable, ego-assuring, recognized, and legitimated as culture, and *jouissance,* which is shocking, ego-disruptive, and in conflict with the canons of culture…[the] text of *jouissance*…causes the historical, cultural, psychological foundations of the reader to vacillate."[7] Surely a biologistically embodied authenticity discourse, although it functions as one mode of counter-history, cannot be understood as "ego-disruptive." Indeed, quite the opposite is true. This visual narrative is specifically interested in shoring up the frayed edges and smoothing over the cracks and fissures that are part and parcel of the performance of African-American subjectivity. While a film like *Sankofa* does produce possibilities through its citation of an extant political authority, and by ensuring a "clean and

proper" authentic black cultural body, we must ask at what price? What must be the constitutive abject that smoothes the seams of this "clean and proper *yet* black" body?

That which is other to the authentic in *Sankofa's* frames becomes what Spillers might term the "flesh" to the "body" of black communality. Black subjectivity as strictly embodied in the phenotypic code requires the abjection of difference, the "deportation" of internal aliens, and the refusal of anything that might disturb the already precarious black clean and proper being. In attempting to produce a specifically counter narrative of black history, Gerima has imported the same troubling logics of inclusion and exclusion that while producing the *plaisir* of coherent self-hood, necessarily excise the disturbing but productive results of blackness as an abject and objectified signifier because of their being routed through the very ocular logics that legitimate and support racialized relations.

Thus, for example, *Sankofa* might have represented a set of social relations wherein Joe's presence could have been taken up within the text of the film as an objection to the justifying narrative that equated African phenotype with a predilection to slave status. Outside the confines of an authenticity discourse grounded in phenotypic fixity, this form of socio-discursive resistance could easily be imagined. It was, in fact, the problem of the presence of enslaved African-Americans who "looked white" (along with the increasing presence of free blacks), that supported the emergence of very strong anti-miscegenation sentiment in the later half of the 19th century in the United States. By portraying Joe as something other than the site of suspicion, past crimes, and finally, failed redemption, *Sankofa* might have suggested another mode of agency taken up during the period of enslavement that could work against the very strong biologistic arguments for racial categories and their centrality to social structures of domination. In this imagining, Joe's character, rather than the sign of duplicity and inauthenticity, could have marked the possibility of transformation and less fixed modes of social relation among enslaved peoples.

On another level, it is possible and important to conceive of and represent the black body as the subject-abject-object body-as-signifer in and through discourse. Not only would this body be an entirely inauthentic biologistically ambiguous body at an organismic level, not only would it be a discursively inaugurated and multiply subjective body of shifting codification, but it would also, and simultaneously, be a massively overdetermined site of sociogenic condensation. Understanding the "black" body in this complex way, as both biological reality, psychical signifier and final term in the slippage of meaning along semiotic chains, highlights the "facticity" of Fanon's infamous "Fact of Blackness."

The "black" body as site of condensation and terrain of signifying struggle

is not merely an unseen and interstitial presence that can only be known through its effects, but is also a discursive location where ontological being is born of a collapse of meaning, that rather than implying a lack of meaning or inability to understand, suggests a suffering under the weight of having too much meaning. Had Joe and Shango not occupied positions of such drastic difference, had Gerima represented their relationship in a more complicated and nuanced way, their phenotype might not have been able or required to carry the weight of ideological and social significance to the degree that it did. From this perspective then, the black body does not merely shift from meaning to meaning, from subjectivity to abjection to objectivity depending on the terrain of its invocation (or representation), but it also has condensed upon it a multitude of meanings that make of it an ambiguous and even enigmatic signifier; that make of it a figure that incessantly provokes questions about the vicissitudes of subject formation. Spike Lee's visual representation of Malcolm X's life and work, also shows the strain of the "having too much meaning," but does so in an entirely different way. Rather than being marked by abjection in its vindicating project, *Malcolm X* displays how disavowal, a distinctly different mode of psychic defense and formation, can inflect the contours of a visual narrative. Responding to the status of Malcolm X as a forgotten figure of black political agency, Spike Lee's film restores Malcolm X to the position of cultural icon carrying the weight of black possibility and black agency. Unfortunately, in doing so Lee fixes very specific meanings to racialized concepts of agency at the level of racialized gender.

Black Manhood and the Black Feminine Ideal in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

Early in the production of *Malcolm X,* Spike Lee insisted that it be understood as a realistic representation of—if not black people—certain aspects of black experience. He said that he wanted "…our people to be all fired up for this. To get inspired by it" and that *Malcolm X* was "…not just some regular bullshit Hollywood movie," that the subject dealt with in the film was "life and death…a mindset," because it faithfully depicted "…what Black people in America have come through."[8] Rather than attempting to divine the "mindset" represented in Lee's film, this section will explore the features of mind that work powerfully within *Malcolm X* to set the boundaries around conceptions of authentic African-American masculinity and femininity. Exactly what does the film suggest "black people" have to go through in order to *be* black *and* people in America? Rather than linking phenotype to authenticity, as Gerima does in *Sankofa,* Lee connects authentic black being in America with the vindication of idealized visions of black manhood and black femininity. To do so, however, Lee's telling of

Malcolm X's life disavows complexity in relation to racialized gender, and calls forth, instead, restricted notions of black masculinity and womanhood. In defining the gendered criteria for being a "black" person in America, *Malcolm X* displays moments of disavowal, and also reflects this psychical mechanism's structure. Psychoanalytic literature suggests the specificity of this structure and gives one an idea of its effects when emplotted in reconstructed histories like *Malcolm X.*

Inasmuch as Spike Lee cites the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* as the primary source for the screenplay *Malcolm X,* the film's discursive effects can be read in relation to the *Autobiography*—as a fable of revelation, ascension and through the movie, resurrection. Collaboratively produced in 1964–5 by Alex Haley and Malcolm X, the *Autobiography* sought to frame Malcolm's life and work within the caste of traditional epic heroism and American exceptionalism. A primer of sorts, the *Autobiography* demonstrated that Malcolm's form of black militancy could indeed fit within classic American moral mythologies of hard work, inflexible integrity, and hard won victories. Moreover, the *Autobiography* reflected the pattern of the religious text of revelation and salvation. In it, for example, Malcolm describes his coming to literacy while in prison. He learns to read, the reader learns, by taking the dictionary and starting with 'A.' Only later does Malcolm come across the definition for "black" and still later that for "white." In the *Autobiography,* and through a kind of deferred action, Malcolm becomes literate, encounters the teachings of the Nation of Islam (through his brother's communications with him), and turns his life to black uplift. The *Autobiography* is the translation of Malcolm's narrative of self-in-community. While the *Autobiography* renders Malcolm's narrative of revelation, its adaptation in Lee's film *Malcolm X* extends that narrative to include resurrection as well. What exactly Lee resurrects, however, is not simply Malcolm X's individualized being.

Malcolm X tells the story of Malcolm Little's transformation from troubled youth, to street-wise "hustler" (Detroit Red), to proponent of African-American cultural nationalism (Malcolm X), and finally orthodox political nationalist (El Hadj Malik Al-Shabazz).[9] Flowing remembrances of Malcolm's early life are depicted through flashback sequences and anchoring voice-overs of Danzel Washington reading from the *Autobiography* and immerse the viewer in what are to be understood as important details of Malcolm's development.

Within the first twenty scenes (of the film's one hundred or so) we learn of Malcolm's early traumas, through four flashback sequences. We see the Ku Klux Klan attack his home and ride off into the moonlit night, an episode reminiscent of D.W.Griffith's *Birth of a Nation;* and we hear of his "light skinned" mother having chosen his dark Garvyite father so that she could have dark children. We see Malcolm's father killed, and hear of the death being ruled a suicide. We see Malcolm's mother determined unfit, and having her children

"taken away and parceled out." Finally, we hear Malcolm say tellingly: "It was the beginning of the end for my mother." With the exception of two other short flashbacks that enact the intrusive return of traumatic memories, the film here turns away from the use of flashback and voice-over text from the *Autobiography,* and relies primarily on diagetic modes of telling what has become, with the beginning of his mother's end, Malcolm's story. While the content of the *Autobiography* still constitutes the pallet from which Lee draws the interesting colors he uses to depict Malcolm's life and authorize his representation of Malcolm's importance, the final four-fifths of the film rely on Lee's racialization of gender and sexuality to define cultural and political authenticity. This powerful racialization works to protect against particular threats to the vindicating function of cultural nationalism that Spike Lee has created with his representation of Malcolm X's life.

Through his uses of continuity editing to create a smooth narrative, Lee also presents a seamless picture of black power and pride (denuded of its militancy) that congeals into very precise images of what it means to be a black man or black woman in the United States. According to Lee's visual narrative, to "be" black in America, one has to be gendered and, as Lee's *Malcolm X* would suggest, gendered in very particular ways. Lee's depiction of Malcolm's masculinity, his wife Betty Shabazz's femininity, and the picture of "black family" they create, highlights the threats homo-sociality, feminine agency, and interracial ambiguity pose to a racialized and gendered black nationalism. These sites also generate threats to Lee's strict conception of a gendered (male) black cultural nationalism and make disavowal a mechanism essential to Lee's representation of black political agency. The specificity and effects of disavowal are displayed through its centrality in Lee's definition of the gendered criteria for being a "black" person in the United States. Psychoanalytic literature outlines how disavowal operates and suggests how we might understand its function(ing) as it is emplotted in reconstructed histories like *Malcolm X.*

In *The Language of Psychoanalysis,* Jean Laplanche and J.B.Pontalis trace the development of Freud's theorization of disavowal as "a mode of defense which consists in the subject's refusing to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception."[10] Freud, they suggest, found the notion of disavowal to be particularly useful in describing a "primal defense mechanism" against troubling realities, because it could account for the formation of the castration complex and certain features of fetishism. Elaborating on the process by which the castration complex comes to function as an explanatory narrative illumines the work performed by vindicating reconstructed histories in general and *Malcolm X* in particular.

According to Freud's formulation, children both disavow their perception of the absence of a penis in the girl and recognize this absence as a fact and

experience the anxiety (predicated on the threat of castration) it elicits. This encounter with the perception of unexplained and apparently biologistic lack produces two possibilities: the fetishistic fixation on an image that then functions as a defense, or the creation of an explanatory narrative that can account for the lack. The castration complex, then, is a sexual theory of childhood that seeks to bind the anxiety provoked by the threat of castration and the fundamental (anatomical) difference between 'the sexes.' In a similar fashion, though not analogously, a vindicating reconstructed historical narrative works to contain the psychic discomfort that arises from the tension between the material instances of black dehumanization (which has included both physical and social castration) and the ontological incommensurability encoded in racialized difference.[11] Although racial categories are constructed socially, their material and psychic imprints or traces possess an anxiety-producing facticity that must be explained. The white racial phantasm has extruded various justifying narratives that themselves provide the context for the production of African-American explanatory narratives in the form of counter-memories. Recasting the 'castration complex' (read: phantasmatic theory that seeks to bind anxiety) through the optic of critical race theory reveals that the existence of inhuman subjects within the social economy of domination necessitates explanatory narratives capable of guaranteeing that not just any(body) can be stripped of its humanity. In a naturalizing gesture, such explanatory narratives ensure that the ontological meaning signified in racial difference permanently and justifiably subordinates black non-being to white human-being. If the white racial phantasm, as the discursive basis for the social reality of racialized oppression of African-Americans, has produced the need for explanatory narratives that seek to replace "traumatic realities" with acceptable stories of African-American agency and black humanity, what, then, is the object of disavowal in African-American counter-memories?

The statement "I know very well, but nevertheless…" best describes the structure of disavowal. As one mode of psychical defense, disavowal's resistant power lies somewhere between repression to the unconscious system of the psyche and the simple suspension of disbelief. In relation to discursive objects like stereotypes, controlling images, and racialized or gendered codes, it can be understood as "I know very well that this idea does not apply to all people in group X, but nevertheless I will accept it as true for this person I see before me."

The disavowal prevalent in vindicating narratives, as a genre, does not take as its object a kind of facticity about African-American's actual lack of humanity. Rather, it works through dominant discursive regimes that explain the justification for perceiving a lack of humanity in "blackness," through scientific and rationalist narratives of species development, cultural progress, civilization, and national citizenship. Cast upon the screen of dominant explanatory and justifying narratives, these films say: "I know very well that notions defining the

perimeters of being American, human, and valued in the United States, have never included African-Americans as anything but the inhuman, valueless backdrop to the unfolding performance of 'whiteness,' nevertheless I shall use fixed concepts of blackness to cement pieces of rememory into the mosaic of my auto-theorization."

Still, even as a necessary response to the paucity of identificatory possibilities within the American representational terrain, African-American reconstructed historical narratives working in the mode of vindication fail to destabilize absolute notions of racial difference precisely because they are propped up by and emerge from a white ontological complex of explanatory narratives. Relying on fixed notions of racial difference reinscribes ideas of the cultural incommensurability of African-American humanity and its refutation within the white racial phantasm. By this calculus, then, racial difference encodes absolute cultural difference, which explains and justifies black suffering and death while simultaneously producing the need to recuperate a sense of black human being through cultural auto-theorization. In the particular case of Lee's *Malcolm X,* ideas of racialized difference are mapped onto categories of gender and sexuality, resulting in even more powerful ideas of incommensurability. Not only are masculinity and femininity "different" in an absolute sense, but also *black* masculinity and *black* femininity (two co-constitutive and unevenly empowered signs) are fundamentally distinct precisely because of their being situated within a naturalized conception of black culture. In addition to the particular moments of its application within the film's diagetic space, the overall structure of disavowal as a rubric of analysis and as a psychic mechanism naturalizes the gendered and racialized figure of racialized agency and political possibility that *Malcolm X* conjures.

Lee opens the film with an important montage that signals the foundation upon which Lee builds his monument to Malcolm. Beginning with an American flag burning away to a red, white, and blue flaming "X," cut with found footage from the Rodney King beating, Lee introduces themes of state control, protest, and nationalism. He then combines this montage with a rapid crane to dolly shot into a close up frontal view of Shorty (played by Lee) "struttin" in 1950's zoot suit fashion to the male space of the barber shop for the first of Malcolm's pivotal hair conking scenes. In one smooth gesture, Lee cues the viewer to the fact that they are about to witness an American story, a story of what James Baldwin would later call growing up "a black child in a white country." That Lee ends the film in a kind of reverse zoom, moving from Ossie Davis' eulogy of Malcolm as "our shining black manhood" to more found footage, and finally to a simple black X against a black background, highlights his insistence that the narrative of black political possibility and social agency is a story of masculinity told against the backdrop of racialized oppression and violence. It comes as no surprise then that Lee's *Malcolm X* works relentlessly to defend against threats

to heteronormative black masculinity. What is more troubling, and what we must ask of the film, is why its recuperation of black masculinity rests on creating a very circumscribed vision of black male and female gender performance and sexuality. Before approaching this question, it is important to look at just how Lee's film does this.

Because Lee valorizes a very particular form of black masculinity in the film, moments of implicit homo-sociality, feminine agency, and interracial ambiguity threaten both Malcolm's black manhood, and the film's narrative structure as well. Indeed, Lee's film determinedly defends against the ways these features of human relation disturb the picture of racialized gender (and gendered racial consciousness) that he creates. Tracing these threats and how the film strips them of their power highlights where and how the film most effectively enacts disavowal and, moreover, the dependence of African-American countermemory on heteronormativity.

From its opening with found footage of the King beating to its closing with Ossie Davis' reference to Malcolm X as "our manhood, our shining black manhood," *Malcolm X* is a film dominated by all-male spaces and predominantly male relations. Indeed, interactions between men actually structure the plot and motivate story development. Although numerous critiques have been made of the hyper-masculinity that buttresses much black-nationalist discourse, we can productively examine effects produced through the maintenance of the picture of manhood developed in this film. Three key hair-conking scenes—depicting the barber shop, Malcolm and Shorty's apartment in Boston, and the prison—illumine how the process of hair conking functions to anchor these scene's potential meanings to the politics of racialized identity and disavows the homo-sociality implicit in the mise-en-scène of the frame.

The first of these important moments where homo-sociality is disavowed comes in the second scene of the movie. Prior to this scene, the point of view has been motivated by Shorty's actions. We look over his shoulder as he walks toward the barbershop and are next ourselves entering its interior; we are then greeted by a medium close-up of one of the barbers saying hello and continuing the in-progress conversation among the men seated in the shop. In Lee's non-parodic caricature of the black barbershop, the men momentarily interrupt their talk about the dangers of women to tell Shorty that "his boy" is waiting in the back for Shorty to conk his hair. Malcolm then enters the scene and is seated in the barber chair to have chemicals applied to straighten his hair. In a medium shot we see Shorty standing behind Malcolm begin to comb in the white conking cream as he warns that "it's gonna get hot, can you handle it?" The point of view tightens to a medium-close-up framing Shorty's bare arms and centering Malcolm's head. This view is cut with occasional overhead shots that again center his head and Shorty's thin arms and the comb he pulls through Malcolm's straightening hair. The previously lively setting has now grown quiet as (the

viewer assumes) everyone focuses on the transformation happening before them. The men in the shop, instead of bonding through their discussion of women, now direct their attention and gaze—as the full frontal camera view suggests—on Malcolm's growing physical discomfort and Shorty's ministering hands. Shorty explains that Malcolm must endure the scalp-burning pain as long as possible because "you gotta make it straight." Once the conking is finished and Malcolm looks into a mirror to see his straightened hair, the men begin congratulating him and affirming his assessment that it "looks white, don't it?"

By predominantly centering Malcolm's head and hair in the frame throughout this early scene, Lee communicates that the transformation Malcolm undertakes is both significant and carries ideological weight. Not only does Malcolm want his hair to "look white," but also these shots metonymically connect it, and Malcolm and anyone else we may see with conked hair, to ideologies of acculturation and collaboration. Change complete, Malcolm Little, now Detroit Red can join Shorty on their foray into petty larceny and survival by any means available.

Still, visually centering Malcolm's conk-covered head for much of the scene also functions in another way. The all-male space, the focus of the men's gazes, and the framing of Shorty as little more than a pair of delicate arms, all underline the homosociality of the scene. Indeed, the political importance of Malcolm's conking (as opposed to the aesthetic values) must be emphasized in order to defend against the emergence of the scene's homo-erotic undertones. If, for example, Shorty insisted that Malcolm's hair be "straight" because it would look more attractive, or if Malcolm had been scripted to say "looks [good] don't it," the scene could openly take on another valence. Visually centering Malcolm's head (the light area at the center of the frame draws the viewer's attention to Malcolm's head and the action it receives) highlights the importance of the scene's action, which anchors the meaning of the scene to the field of identity politics. In this way, the film raises the issue of black manhood without facing difficult questions of sexuality, precisely by screening them with a safely heteronormativized blackness. Moreover, this screening process allows for the necessary disavowal (enacted within the *Autobiography*…as well) of the homosexual encounters Malcolm may have had during his Detroit Red "hustling" period.

Another important hair-conking scene comes about one-fourth of the way into the film shortly after a highly sexualized scene of homo-erotic tension between Malcolm and Rudy, one of his accomplices in the robbery that would ultimately land him in jail. In the break-in scene following Malcolm's interaction with Rudy, we watch as Malcolm and Shorty creep through the house of an "old pansy" taking valuable items while he sleeps unwittingly in an upstairs bedroom. The scene closes with Malcolm and Shorty sneaking into the victim's bedroom and actually attempting to remove a ring from his finger as he

sleeps. Nearly waking him, Malcolm and Shorty crouch motionless, gazing upon him while they wait to be certain he is asleep before making their escape. In the following scene (matched thematically by Malcolm and Shorty's intimacy in interior spaces), Malcolm sits in a chair in the center of their apartment while Shorty begins to conk his hair. Lee emphasizes the intimacy of this scene with a signature piece of camera work. With Malcolm, Shorty, and the camera positioned motionless in the center of the space, Lee rotates the entire set 360 degrees around them. In this way, the viewer "sees" the complete interior space without having the composition of the frame or the centrality of Malcolm and Shorty's (visual) relationship disturbed. While the background rotates and Shorty combs Malcolm's hair, the two talk about the robbery and about Malcolm having put Rudy, that "powder-puff," in his place.

Once again, the homoerotic undertones of this scene—Malcolm and Shorty's intimacy in this interior space in connection with Rudy's suggested homosexuality—are screened by the scene's reference to the film's racial ideology. This scene reminds the viewer that Detroit Red, rather than possessing the flaw of ambiguous sexuality, merely lacks a clear self concept, something he will need to attain. He has no sense of belonging to what Baines, the inmate who introduces Malcolm to the teachings of the Nation of Islam, later calls the "tribe of Shabazz." Indeed, Lee's Malcolm has not yet realized either that his manhood is indeed "shinning" and "black," or, above all, that it rests upon policed notions of what a sexuality attached to authentic black manhood must not include. Indeed, the film tells us that Malcolm cannot obtain this knowledge until he reaches the proverbial bottom. Only after Malcolm is arrested and sentenced to prison, where we see his final conking scene, do we see the film's ultimate effacement of homosocial threat. Because homosociality and the dangers it insinuates cannot be disengaged from masculinized nationalist narratives, this concealment ensures the coherence of Lee's black masculine ideal.

Just before Malcolm meets Baines in the prison shower room, Lee depicts Malcolm being sentenced to serve time in Charlestown State Prison for breaking and entering and armed robbery. We see the rebellious Malcolm refusing to recite his inmate number and being carried to solitary confinement. Diagetic time passes and Malcolm ultimately breaks down, recites his number, and is released. The next scene opens with Malcolm wrapped in a towel and conking his hair in the prison shower room. Baines enters, offers Malcolm nutmeg to aid in his detoxification and tells him "That's the last fix I'm gonna give you." As Malcolm moves to rinse the conk from his hair, Baines asks him why he wants his hair to look "white." Malcolm tells him it is the "hip style" and Baines asks "what makes you ashamed of being black?" Malcolm looks at him somewhat confusedly and proceeds to rinse as Baines walks out of frame and the scene ends.

In terms of intercinematic reference, the staging of this scene carries much importance. Prison shower scenes have been so overdetermined in their filmic representation that they have become almost a trope in their own right, conjuring stereotyped images of sexualized violence, a simultaneously exaggerated and destabilized masculinity, and a self-justifying punishment industry. That this scene includes Baines as the bearer of a masculinized black nationalism and a broken and vulnerable Malcolm makes it even more suggestive of caricatured and repudiated homoeroticism. It comes as no surprise that the scene's explicit ideological content bears the burden of sealing out the implicit threat of homoeroticism. Thus Baines' motivation for being in the shower room is made clear at the outset of the scene; he is there to give Malcolm his "last fix," as opposed to gratifying some need Baines might have to visit Malcolm in the shower or some other desire that Malcolm himself might possess. Moreover, Malcolm's white conking cream draws Baines' attention and not the white towel he has wrapped around his midriff. While the scene's opening shot centers Malcolm in the frame at mid-range, and the white of both his head and towel call the viewer's attention, subsequent shots in shot-reverse-shot format frame only the head and shoulders of the two men. By literally removing homoerotic possibility from the frame, this shot sequence assures the viewer, as does Baines, that the hair conk covers Malcolm's shame, not the towel. From this point on and through his interactions with Baines, the work performed by conking and the ideological meaning it carries is taken up under the sign of Malcolm's relationship with Black Muslim teachings and Black cultural nationalism.

The film's effacement of the threat that interracial ambiguity and sexualized contact present to black masculinity also contributes to this transition. From its early scenes, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* introduces cross-racial sexual contact and interracial ambiguity as significant issues in the formation of black identity. In Malcolm's first flashback sequence, the viewer learns that his mother, Louise Little, possesses white ancestry following the rape of her mother by a white man. Using excerpts from the *Autobiography*…the narrative informs the viewer that the light-skinned Louise chose Malcolm's father (Earl Little) because of his dark skin and her wish to bear dark children in a gendered (and maternal) reclamation of her authentic blackness. In the continuing voice-over we hear Malcolm suggest that the black man's attraction to white women originates in his desire to "take something owned by white men" in a racialized recuperation of his masculinity. More than merely foreshadowing Malcolm's later relationship with Sophia, a white woman he meets at the Roseland Ballroom, this early moment establishes important ideological positions that anchor potential readings of Malcolm's actions through the rest of the film.

The first of these positions revolves around the question of the agency enacted in one's choice of sexual partners. Lee contra poses Louise Little's

choice of the dark skinned Garveyite Earl Little against the lack of choice available to her mother by emphasizing that the latter was raped. Moreover, by placing Malcolm's analysis of the social-psychological forces motivating the black man's desire for white women between a scene in which Malcolm valorizes his white looking hair, and the scene depicting his choosing Sophia over his black girlfriend, Lee circumscribes the viewer's understanding of Malcolm's attraction to Sophia. Like Louise Little's mother, the unradicalized Malcolm does not yet possess his own agency; like his grandmother, Malcolm is a victim of social relations; and, like his grandmother, Malcolm has been forever changed by *his grandmother's* rape. The young Malcolm has no "knowledge of self," and has no choice but to desire Sophia who signifies the possibility of taking something "owned" by the white man. In this sense, the narrative suggests that rape and miscegenation circumscribe Malcolm's desire.

The second ideological position that anchors potential readings of Malcolm's actions also pivots around the question of agency. In relation to one's racial heritage, however, the choice involves identification and not one's sexual partners, and to that degree entails the writing of one's past in the shaping of one's future. Just as homoeroticism threatens the coherence of a masculinized black cultural nationalism, so too does multiraciality disturb notions of phenotypic purity that support ideas of an essentialized blackness. Malcolm's interaction with Rudy, the self-identified mixed-race character, works to confirm the narrative's repudiation of multiraciality, much in the same way that Malcolm's relations with Sophia insist that the desire attributable to authentic black masculinity cannot cross lines of race. An examination of two important scenes depicting Malcolm's interactions with Sophia and Rudy respectively reveals that only through the abrogation of cross-racial sexual attraction and the renunciation of multiraciality can Malcolm obtain or regain black masculine agency and become an indisputable sign of "our manhood, our shining black manhood."

The first of these scenes, which comes early in the film, opens with nightgown clad Sophia preparing breakfast for Malcolm in her small apartment. Malcolm reclines on the bed wearing shorts, white tank-top, and a black "gangsta" style "do-rag." We see Sophia from his point of view in the cinematic space and are thus encouraged to coldly assess her from his perspective. Malcolm calls Sophia to the bed with the simple command: "come here." Sophia replies "You're the man" from out of frame as she sits on the bed in front of Malcolm who begins to question her motivations and her "story" while he tells her to "kiss [his] feet." "You're one of those white chicks can't get enough colored stud…that's your story girl." "So when you gonna holler rape, sister?" From orders to assertions to accusations, cut in shot-reverse-shot format with images of Sophia looking injured and asking Malcolm to "just let [her] feed

[him]," this sequence emphasizes the rage, suspicion and issues of control that belie the intimacy suggested by the soft pillows and muted lighting of this scene.

Indeed, the narrative suggests the problematic nature of Malcolm's object choice on two counts. First Lee's direction conveys the notion that Malcolm's desire originates in the pathological space of wanting to take something the white man owns. Malcolm expresses this when he tells Sophia that he "sure [wishes her] mother and father could see [her] now." Second, Lee suggests the suspiciousness of Sophia's own motivation when she tells Malcolm of her wish that "Laura could see [them.]" By invoking the name of Malcolm's old sweetheart, Lee frames Sophia's desire for Malcolm as merely instrumental in the degradation of black women through the "theft" of black men. Thus, this scene seals the narrative's insistence that cross-racial sexual contact and desire can only occur problematically in the context of racialized relations. Although addressed more centrally and complexly in Lee's *Jungle Fever,* this question's treatment in *Malcolm X* suffers under its having been dramatically reduced and pathologized. Malcolm's authentic black identity cannot be found until after he rejects cross-racial sexualized intimacy, and once found it cannot contain a desire that crosses strict racial boundaries. Looking at Malcolm's interaction with Rudy suggests that more than being unable to possess a desire that can seek objects across lines of race, the black identity constructed in *Malcolm X* must also abjure the ambiguity signaled by multiraciality.

The spoken words "who's Rudy?" create a voice-over sound bridge from one scene to the next and set the stage for the drama of masculinity and authenticity played out in the extended scene depicting the one and only interaction between Malcolm and Rudy. Immediately prior to this scene we see Malcolm telling Shorty, Shorty's girlfriend, and Sophia that they are going to "rob Boston blind." Malcolm says that they need a driver and they suggest Rudy. Using a blurringly rapid pan, Lee moves into the next scene that begins with a close up shot of Rudy, who declares "I'm half wop and half nigger, and I ain't afraid of nobody!" When Malcolm asks him what he does, Rudy replies, "You name it fella, and I claim it." Rudy tells them that he has been working for a"rich old fag mother-fucker" who he bathes "every Friday night," toweling "him off, [putting] talcum powder on him, and [putting] him to bed." Finally, Rudy declares that he is the "Head nigga in charge." While in terms of the scene's manifest content, Rudy's assertions contest Malcolm's authority, his explicit characterization as biracial and possibly bisexual offers a challenge to the narrative formation of a black masculine ideal that must not go unanswered. Thus, while the scene presents the overt reassertion of Malcolm's position as leader, as "head nigga in charge," its intensely homoerotic undertones and their violent policing stages the narrative's own reassertion of the unambiguous nature of authentic blackness.

Following Rudy's suggestion that he be the "head nigga in charge,"

Malcolm tells him that he is the "big-head nigga in charge," and that because Malcolm "[likes] big head niggaz like [Rudy]" he will give him a chance to "flip" for it. "We'll flip this" Malcolm says reaching beneath the table and behind his back. Malcolm pulls out a hand gun and five bullets, placing the bullets on the table in front of him saying with one and then the next, "she loves me…she loves me not." Taking the final bullet and placing it in his mouth, Malcolm removes it and loads it in a chamber with a final "she loves me." In a scene of increasing tension, Malcolm then places the gun to his head and pulls the trigger. He passes the gun to a very reluctant but silent Rudy. Saying that perhaps Rudy did not "know how to do it," Malcolm picks up the gun, puts it to his own head and again pulls the trigger. After Rudy again hesitates to pick up the gun and join in the "Russian Roulette," Malcolm walks over to him with the gun, caresses his nose, and says "I'll help you, here." With one hand tightly cupping Rudy's chin and the other pushing the barrel of the gun against the side of his nose, Malcolm says "Maybe I should shoot that little wop nose off; or is that the nigga side? What is that, is that the wop side or the nigga side? Is that the wop or the nigga? I guess that's the wop side?" He then pulls the trigger for a final time.

"You got it." Rudy whispers, tightly framed in close up. "Rudy says I got it" Malcolm says as he puts his arm around him. "Rudy," Malcolm says "don't you ever try to cross someone who ain't afraid to die." With his arm still around Rudy, Malcolm tells everyone what the burglary plan will be, kisses Rudy on the head and whispers "Merry Christmas, Rudy." From out of frame we hear Shorty (the character Lee plays) declare that they are "one big happy family!" While the direction of this scene might suggest that Malcolm's actions are intended to call Rudy's sexuality into question and to impugn his blackness, the degree to which the homoeroticism of the scene takes over suggests something more as well.

Because the first half of the film makes frequent reference to Malcolm's head to communicate ideological content and, as I have shown, to contain implicit threats to the narrative's development, it bears comment that in both of these scenes Malcolm wears a black "gansta style" head wrap. By using this current style, Lee draws a connection between Malcolm's attitudes and behaviors in these scenes and contemporary stereotypes regarding "gang members." In this way, Lee's visual narrative uses visual codes to tap into popular and contemporary notions of the nihilism seen to be inherent in gangsterism, and direct them back onto the content of the *Autobiography*…. Thus, not only can "Detroit Red" be understood as suffering under the burden of misdirected rage, nihilistic depression, and self-destructive bravado, but the very discourse that "turned him around" can be cast as possessing liberative potential for today's "at risk" youth. Beyond contributing to the manifest ideological content of these scenes, Malcolm's headwear also takes on meaning in

comparison to the conk that plays such an important role in defending against homoerotic threat. Just as the conk drew attention to ideological content and away from narratives disavowed by the film, so too does Malcolm's "gangsta style" support disavowal.

In relation to Malcolm's interaction with Sophia, the viewer is directed to Malcolm's seething anger and self-loathing. With Rudy, Malcolm's suppressed death wish and trembling self-esteem come to the fore. The first case overlooks any possibility that Malcolm could himself possess amorous feelings for Sophia, and the second "forgets" Malcolm's own multiracial heritage. In both instances the possibility of cross-racial love and the presence of homoerotic undertones are violently policed, resulting in the narrative's reassertion of the unambiguous nature of authentic black masculinity. Lee also dangerously fuses notions of "blackness" with his picture of "manhood" by constructing an idealized femininity that functions most significantly as a prop for masculinity.

Cinematic exaggeration marks Spike Lee's film style. With dramatic crane and dolly shots Lee gives the space captured within his camera's frame a sense of fluidity and suggests the tension of unpredictability. He manipulates the depth of field and precisely controls visual elements within the mise-en-scène to virtually externalize his character's internal emotional states. Moreover, Lee's meticulous continuity editing, usually achieved through the simultaneous use of sound bridges and matches on theme, creates a cinematic environment that almost demands that the characters his actors play take on the quality of caricature. Indeed, the carefully choreographed visual space he creates undermines the reality he purports to represent, making his characters dancers whose steps are rehearsed and predictable. While the combination of these stylistic features might appear to refuse cinematic realist conventions, they still function in the service of producing what Lee considers "real" and essential features of racialized social relations. Thus, rather than producing a kind of cinematic discontinuity that moves away from classic Hollywood realism, Lee's is a spectacularization meant to codify the "real" in his populist approach to "keepin' it real" and thereby making his own bid for raciopolitical authenticity.

To powerful dramatic effect, then, Lee gives "life" to tropes and stereotypes thereby enlisting the surreal in the evocation of concrete emotional responses. In *Malcolm X,* we see Lee achieving this through the repeated citation of popular culture's reserve of Malcolm X iconography. Restaging and then animating popular images, recreating moments available (and widely disseminated) in "found footage," and replaying audio referents (speeches and music)—all these elements give Lee's work a feeling of an unreal reality, and makes a world of familiar people, spaces, and objects, unfamiliar. However, the very techniques that make Lee's work so forceful and capable of eliciting powerful responses from viewers, also give his characters a pre-scripted quality that, while drawing upon extant social narratives, also reproduces and reinscribes their restrictive

boundaries. Moreover, working through caricatured tropes virtually predetermines the prevalence of polarized signifying relations between characters. This dynamic and its effects can most clearly be seen in Lee's representation of women in *Malcolm X*.

In her article "Consumed by images" bell hooks criticizes Lee's representation of Betty Shabazz and other women in Malcolm X for its compliance with accepted conventions in classic Hollywood Cinema. She notes that:

> …although Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, told Lee that she and Malcolm did not argue (the Nation of Islam deemed obedience paramount in a wife), the film shows her "reading" him in the same bitchified way that Lee's previous black women characters talk to their mates. Certain stock, stereotypical, sexist images of both black and white women emerge in the movie—they are either virgins or whores, madonnas or prostitutes. But that, after all, is Hollywood. Perhaps Lee could not portray Malcolm's sister Ella because Hollywood has not yet created a visual space in which a politically progressive black woman can be imagined.[12]

While Lee's depiction of women as occupying the position of either "Madonna" or "prostitute" could not be more pronounced than it is in *Malcolm X,* the issue of "good" or "bad" images is less generative of useful questions than an exploration into their fixity. The "stock, stereotypical, sexist images" to which hooks alludes do not "emerge" so much as they are used in the film in the same way as props, lighting, or sound cues might be used to signal or even prompt plot development and character transformation. To this extent, female characters must necessarily remain fixed in this narrative of masculine transformation, and their fixity is achieved through their relationship to one another. While hooks astutely points to classic Hollywood cinema's lack of "visual space" as enabling Lee's use of stereotype, the demands of Lee's visual narrative, and the narrative economy produced by and through disavowal work most powerfully to delimit the function of female characters in *Malcolm X*.

For example, throughout the film, Sophia (Kate Vernon) functions as the yardstick by which Malcolm's developing consciousness can be measured. Through the first half of the film she appears in binary relation to Laura (Theresa Randle) who we see occasionally in flashback sequences. Sophia becomes the location of temptation, greed, hustling, and a lack of consciousness. This is not to say that Sophia represents these characteristics, rather, in the narrative space of the film these traits cohere around her and serve to describe Malcolm as a function of his proximity to her. As long as Sophia remains visually present in the narrative space, her function in this regard can only be maintained through her binary opposition to Laura.

That "good girl" who Sophia tells Malcolm to take home before returning to her becomes the location of all the things Sophia (as a point referencing Malcolm's movement) cannot hold. "I know what you are doing" Laura tells Malcolm early in the film as he lies to her about returning to the Roseland Ballroom to meet Sophia. Laura can see Malcolm as he cannot see himself. Laura can hear Malcolm relate his hurts (in fact, Laura is the only character we see Malcolm telling about his painful childhood experiences). Although present almost solely in flashback or indirect reference, Laura becomes the location of satisfaction, a settled life, and a utopic knowledge of self. Prior to his revelation in prison, Malcolm's movement can be measured against the backdrop stretched between the poles of these women's spatialized racial and cultural difference; a difference, of course, that is not so much their own as it is a projection of Malcolm's own struggles as Lee represents them.

Though visually absent through most of the second half of the film, Sophia's character works in polar relation to Betty (Angela Bassett). Here, however, the register shifts from relationships between individuals to relations between Malcolm and the bourgeois figure of domesticity and family figured in relation to Betty. Malcolm's closeness with Betty (and his distance from everything represented by Sophia) grows in proportion to his developing political consciousness. Betty teaches the "home arts" and nutrition within the Nation of Islam. Whereas Sophia exhorted Malcolm to "let [her] feed [him his] eggs," Betty reminds Malcolm that "even the Prophet had to take nourishment." With the exception of the few scenes depicting Malcolm's assassination and their brief courtship—some of which are cut with shots of Elijah Muhammad telling Malcolm of the dangers and virtues possessed by black women-Betty is almost always placed in the interior space of their home. Depicted as tending to the children, cooking, or supporting Malcolm, Betty is the figure of a femininity that is equated with a racialized domesticity. Although she does not always display the deference expected of Nation Of Islam wives, Betty's idealized performance of an authentically black femininity functions as the ever-present prop that supports and makes possible Malcolm's equally idealized masculinity. Lee visually reinforces the interdependence of these idealized performances of racialized gender through strict framing techniques.

In most scenes where Malcolm and Betty appear together, especially those in which they speak of their relationship or their family, Lee abandons the traditional shot-reverse-shot pattern used to suggest the intimacy between two speakers. Instead of using one shot to establish the proximity of two speakers and then alternating between shots over their shoulders to suggest conversation, Lee arranges the camera's point of view perpendicular to the line of sight between Malcolm and Betty. From this profiled perspective, both speakers are kept in frame as the shot slowly tightens through the duration of their interaction. Whether in the booth of a storefront mosque or sitting on the edge of

their own bed, this framing technique conveys the intimacy of their encounter by limiting the in-frame space. Indeed, everything besides Betty and Malcolm's emotional closeness is pushed out of frame with the ever-tightening shot and its diminishing depth of field. Again and again, the viewer (or voyeur) witnesses the authenticity of their union. Tightly framed, this idealized black family, like the shot that depicts it, depends on the flattening of subjectivity and the forgetting of back ground annoyances. Like the narrative of revelation and resurrection Lee has woven, this is a vision of the "Black Family" constituted through forgetting and depending on disavowal. Heteronormativized, racialized, authenticated, and dominating the mise-en-scène of the frame, the fidelity and coherence of this vision of black family is generated through the disavowal of troubling facts like Betty's difficulties with Malcolm's absences, the emotional stress suffered by their children and Malcolm's estrangement from the rest of his family. The story of the Black Nationalist family that Lee's visual narrative weaves hinges on the structure of disavowal: "I know very well, but nevertheless."

Returning to our initial concern that Lee's *Malcolm X* relies on the structure of disavowal to make ideological claims about the state of African-American political affairs, we must explore the ramifications of Lee's desire to produce political possibility in the present by piecing together an image of black identity from the wreckage of the past. That Lee saw the period in which he produced the film as one of incipient social change is made clear by the material that he uses to bookend the narrative. From King's voiceless beating to Nelson Mandela's pronouncement "I am Malcolm X!" Lee's film relies on disavowal to make ideological claims about the state of African-American political affairs and to convey "what black people in American have come through." While the *Autobiography* presented Malcolm's life in the frame of American exceptionalism and epic heroism because of the cultural barriers that barred black admittance to those categories, Lee's *Malcolm X* reinscribes the figure of a "shinning" black masculinity in response to the institutionalized and systematic targeting of black men constituted as the embodiment of criminality and threat. Unfortunately, in this instance, disavowal plays a central role in constituting the structure of countermemory and limits the transformative potential of Lee's *Malcolm X*.

By disavowing the fact that Malcolm spent over a year living with his sister Ella in New York before moving to Boston, or that Betty threatened, on more than one occasion, to leave Malcolm because of his frequent absence, Spike Lee delimits the image of masculinity, femininity, and family with which viewers might identify. Thus, while perhaps invested in a nationalist mode of social transformation and racial justice, the film cannot encourage the trans(per)formance that brings about changes in African-American subjectivity. *Malcolm X* cannot operate in this way precisely because of the essentialist political position it relies on and because of the fixed and racialized modes of

remembering it invokes. While strategic essentialism has proven useful to social movement and activist efforts to achieve specific gains in limited contexts, and while it can be deployed in the service of trans(per)formance, the fact that Lee's films uniformly marginalize, pathologize, or make suspicious characters located outside of the racialized gender normativity that he represents makes his essentialism strategic in a different way. While counter-memories invoked in the service of racial pride and social uplift served to mobilize broad-based social movements in the period depicted in Lee's film, those same counter-memories reproduced and presented in the early 1990s cannot produce the same effect. Indeed, even the film's references to the antiapartheid movement ring nostalgic in a moment when South Africa faces the more daunting task of addressing the trauma of apartheid and the possibility of cultural reconciliation. It is telling that it is not the South Africa seeking "truth and reconciliation" with which Lee attempts to connect. What Lee presents is a nostalgic and limited vision of South African promise. His narrative suggests that everyone who fits the vindicatory image of blackness and who struggles for racial equality can be Lee's Malcolm X and can reestablish the unbroken link to an African past and future. They cannot, however, enter into the process of working through traumatic history because disavowal ensures that reconciliation through exposure to the truth of racial terror is held always in abeyance. There remains nostalgic excess to lee's Malcolm that can only contribute to a hobbled and ineffective African-American national culture, especially inasmuch as that culture relies on the writing of a so tragically restricted historical narrative. This excess attains enigmatic signification in what Lee's film cannot say about Malcolm, but more important, it is evident in what the film *must* say about an authentic blackness whose gendered and sexualized requirements curtail the fullness of humanity promised by less restrictive counternarratives of African-American history.

Whereas *Sankofa* outlined the limits and possibilities for black human being in relation to ideas of phenotyped authenticity, and *Malcolm X* articulated visions of racio-idealized gender performance as a way to define the boundaries of what it means to be black in America, Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* tells the story of black human being from another cultural and psychically powerful perspective. Moreover, unlike *Sankofa* which refused to identify the space it depicted, and as opposed to *Malcolm X's* biographical format, *Panther* identifies itself as a story, as an auto-theorization about one particular moment of African-American agency, its denouement and the call for its reappearance. While the representations of mixed-race bodies in *Sankofa* and *Malcolm X* provide useful insight into the important way mixed-race bodies signal actions, ideologies or orientations deemed threatening to the coherence of black unity, neither of them demonstrate how black cultural propriety, authenticity, and agency are constituted through their representation as clearly as does *Panther*.

The Mixed-Race Body as Enigmatic Signifier in Mario Van Peebles' *Panther*

The representation of mixed-race bodies in Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* reveals how, in reconstructed histories, the mixed-race body both inhibits the working through of historical trauma associated with moments of cultural contact, and acts as a screen upon which anxieties produced in the face of racial ambiguity are projected. Jean Laplanche's theories of seduction and translation, detranslation, retranslation, help illumine how the representation of mixed-race bodies in *Panther* signifies an attempt to respond to the cultural dilemmas that actual multiracial bodies encode in visual works of historical reconstruction.

Our discussion of *Malcolm X* and *Sankofa* highlighted their reliance on the promise of telling what "really happened" by providing realistic images with which African-Americans might identify, or by giving a plausible account of what African-Americans "have come through." While *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther* all work similarly with images of phenotype, masculinity and femininity, and mixed-race bodies, each film is exemplary in its treatment of these contested topics. In *Sankofa,* abjection enables the production of an embodied phenotypic authenticity, and in *Malcolm X* disavowal makes possible the idealization of racialized gender and sexuality. Both of these films use ideological forms to stabilize fixed images of authentic black being. In *Panther* however, African-American reconstructed histories working in the service of vindication respond to destabilizing images of blackness and negotiate racial ambiguity in a way that supports Virilio's suggestion that, in the tele-topological environment, fixed images are preferred over unstable ones. While Kristeva's notion of abjection helps to account for *Sankofa's* representational power, and Freud's concept of disavowal sheds light on the compelling structure of *Malcolm X,* Jean Laplanche's theories of enigmatic signification and translation, detranslation, retranslation processes are best suited to exploring the representation of mixed-raciality in *Panther,* precisely because the body of cultural authenticity it creates does not expel the mixed-race body, but requires it; does not function through disavowal, but rather fetishism.

Produced in 1995 under PolyGram Filmed Productions, *Panther,* set primarily in Oakland California, narrates the development of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense across the first eight months of 1967.[13] In its opening scene, the film uses techniques similar to those employed in *Malcolm X* to invoke a sense of realism. Van Peebles incorporates found footage, black and white reenactments, recreations of popularized iconography, and black and

white "hand-held" shots made to look like found footage but utilizing actors in place of historical figures. In this way he both suggests that the viewer is watching history simply re-collected, and places the film in space and time, even before we hear the primary narrator, Judge, tell us that "like a lot of questions about the Panthers, there are different answers, different beginnings."

"Story has it" Judge tells the viewer, "that the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was started by a couple of brothers." For Judge, however, the "Black Panther Party started in [his] mom's front yard" on the day a young boy is hit and killed by a car speeding through an intersection whose need for a stoplight has long been argued by neighborhood activists. Now consigned primarily to his point of view, and receiving all synthesizing or contextualizing information from Judge, our view is stable, realistic (we are cued by music from the era, set design, costuming, and vernacular), and above all clear.

Judge, a young Vietnam veteran attending Berkeley on the GI Bill and drawing disability for having "caught a little shrapnel," cautiously watches the Panthers' activities over the first third of the narrative before deciding that he too should join. Because he believes Judge to have "just the kind of profile the pigs will look for," Huey Newton (played by Marcus Chong) quickly approaches Judge and convinces him to act as a mis-informant for the police. Judge is soon picked up by Inspector Brimmer, the local officer assigned to "keep an eye" on the developing BPP and is told that he must help with the investigation. As community support for the Panthers grows, especially after the FBI take a more active role in controlling them, Judge's forceful coercion into cooperating with the police increases, even while there is growing suspicion among Panther leadership about his loyalty.

Several months pass, Newton is arrested, BPP chapters open across the country and the FBI initiates COINTELPRO, sending Agent Pruitt to head their Oakland based efforts. Full color recreations of police attacks on BPP offices around the country are cut with black and white, hand-held, and scratchy images of Panther training connected with sound bridges of Panther ideological indoctrination. Shortly after Newton's arrest, Martin Luther King is assassinated, Bobby Hutton is killed in a shoot-out with the police, and the FBI advances its "ultimate contingency" plan to "neutralize the Black Panther powerbase." Judge learns of the FBI's intention to introduce heroine into the Oakland community from Inspector Brimmer, discusses it with Huey Newton, and returns to the BPP headquarters to enlist help in preventing its distribution. Once there, Judge is confronted by Tyrone and Alma, two other Black Panther members who have grown increasingly suspicious of his loyalties and who have been told by the FBI that Judge is an informant. The three of them fight and Judge ultimately convinces Tyrone and Alma to go to the warehouse where the drugs are being processed, in hopes that his loyalty will be confirmed and that they will successfully prevent its distribution. Once there, Judge, Tyrone and

Alma engage in a firefight with the drug dealers at the warehouse and ultimately destroy it only after Tyrone is fatally shot by police.

With a voice bridge between scenes, the narrative takes the viewer to the same street corner that began Judge's story (now, in 1995, with a stoplight), and informs us through Judge's voice over of the fate of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. With more found footage and still images the viewer is informed that the Panthers were killed and imprisoned by the "government of the United States." Now ourselves in judgment, the point of view rises up and away from the street corner as we are told that the drugs introduced into Oakland quickly flowed over its borders and spread to other communities. In text laid over the scene and Judge's voice, we hear that "in 1970 there were 300,000 addicts in the United States. Yesterday, there were three million. The way I see it, the struggle continues." Because of its claim to be a story, just one of the "different answers" to the question of "how it all started," an analysis of *Panther* through the lens of Laplanche's psychoanalytic theories reveals that the continuing struggle *Panther* represents is one of signification and translation. Van Peebles' film takes as its point of departure, a particularly mythologized moment of social mobilization, political hope, and extreme state repression. It responds to popular accounts of the Black Panther Party by weaving a counter-narrative or translation that is, in important ways, more tolerable for its promises and more frightening for its costs. The cost in this case comes in the form of enlisting racial ambiguity in the service of constituting the cultural limits to progressive, ideologically radical and therefore authentic or real blackness. Before examining shot sequences that demonstrate how the relationship between *Panther's* racially ambiguous characters (Huey Newton, Agent Pruitt, and an unnamed "mixed" woman who remains speechless throughout the film) produces the effect of cultural prescription, it is helpful to review Laplanche's theories of enigmatic signification and translation, detranslation, retranslation processes.

Laplanche's notion of the enigmatic signifier has it roots in his effort to describe the relationship between conscious and unconscious representations of given ideas or mental representations, an issue that had concerned Freud and later Lacan. To recognize and respond to the formation of trauma and subjectivity required deciding whether the Unconscious preconditions language as posited by Freud's theory of phylogenetically inherited memory *(Totem and Taboo),* or whether Lacan was right to assert that "…language is the condition for the unconscious…the unconscious [is] the logical implication of language: in effect, no unconscious without language."[14] In his article "The Letter in the Unconscious: the enigmatic signifier in the work of Jean Laplanche," John Fletcher traces Laplanche's elaboration of the relationship between conscious and unconscious psychical presentations. Laplanche posits that "they are not just different registrations of the same content in different sites, nor different functional states of cathexis, but rather the conscious presentation consists of the

presentation of the thing (sensory traces, primarily visual) together with the word presentation (acoustic traces of the word), while the unconscious presentation consists only of the thing presentation."[15] Moreover, the action of primary repression assigns certain of these "thing presentations" value as "key-signifiers" by placing them "in a metaphorizing position" that gives them the "property of ordering" the entire system of signification. By locating enigmatic signifiers within the primary narratives of self and community (neither universal structures of the "pre-history of the human race," nor mere effects of the sliding of signifiers and signifieds in discourse), Laplanche creates the space to imagine social relations and the psycho-symbolic ordering of self understanding as irreducible to specific events or imaginary scenes.

For the purpose of our analysis of *Panther* as a reconstructed traumatic history, the space thus opened provides two important benefits. Not only does it allows us to negotiate the problems presented by a strict historical empiricism that demands to know what actually happened, thereby displacing the anxiety elicited by the possibility of their occurrence onto their verifiability; but Laplanche's proposition also highlights the role categories of difference like race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion play in shaping enigmatic signifiers themselves, allowing for speculation about what it means to think of various psychic processes as racialized. This posture draws attention to how trauma itself is conceptualized and enables one to see it as an event that is not circumscribed by time or space; that for the space of trauma, like that of the unconscious, there is no time—especially when its racialized, sexualized or classed features have been installed at the level of social institution and psyche.

Fletcher's description of the theory of primary seduction (and its afterwardness) sheds light on Laplanche's notion of translation and its relation to the "key signifiers" that Laplanche later came to call "enigmatic signifiers." According to Fletcher:

> Here the trauma…takes place, not as the breaking in or flooding of the ego's defenses by painful and unmasterable excitations…, but in the interval between two events…. What Laplanche and Pontalis retrieve from this temporal dialectic of the premature and the belated are two emphases. Firstly, 'sexuality literally breaks in from the outside…reaches the subject from *the other*', where its traces remain unintegrated and 'encysted'; secondly, …the traumatic unpleasure 'is traced to *the recollection of the first event, an external event which has become an inner event, an inner 'foreign body', which now breaks out from within the subject*'…. In the interplay between two scenes, a moment of inscription and a moment of re-inscription or translation…there arises a…traumatic representation of a scene that was [not] traumatic in its happening as an event.[16] (emphasis mine)

As a re-collection of the black cultural body, *Panther* tells the story of events that have become traumatic in their recollection and, in the process, makes of the destabilizing multiracial body an internal alien, an "inner 'foreign body'" composed of historical problems that remain excluded from this particular translation. Although the racially ambiguous body obtains an enigmatic status, obscuring what exactly the mixed-race body transmits, it remains nonetheless, a signifier *to*. Without losing its power to signify, the enigmatic signifier addresses and interpolates the putatively un-mixed or racially (read: culturally) pure subject without it having to know *what* is being signified. In relation to the African-American "clean and proper" cultural body, the "enigmatic signifier is implanted in the periphery of the primitive body image, or skin ego."[17] The presence of ambiguous raciality threatens the coherent cultural ego by its very presence even without necessitating direct confrontation with the repressed possibilities its presence signals. However, because enigmatic signifiers must always mark the location of repression even while they obscure what is actually being repressed, there develops a residual excess that "acts as an internal foreign element attacking the ego as agency from within."[18] Before taking up his theory of translation, detranslation, retranslation, it will prove illuminating to examine shot sequences that display the mixed-race body's enigmatic signification in *Panther* as an instance of cultural auto-theorization.

Throughout the film, the racially ambiguous characters, Huey P.Newton, Agent Pruitt, an unidentified but repeatedly present multiracial woman, never appear in the same frame. On the rare occasions where Newton and the woman occupy the same filmic space (at the occasional BPP meeting, for example), the camera carefully shoots around her, revealing only a glimpse of her distinctively red afro, and only once presenting a full view of her face. That images of this woman are thus omitted from scenes presenting the audience with visual images of Newton, calls attention to their visual relationship. Indeed, the relationship between these characters and the play of difference and similarity they provide one another, creates the screen on which the enigmatic signification of multiraciality takes place. It is significant that this mysterious figure remains without speech throughout the film, because the other ambiguous characters are fixed within the discourse of cultural nationalism (and thereby racially stabilized) precisely by what they and others signify through speech.[19]

Agent Pruitt's questionable membership in the community of authentic blackness is established when he first enters the plot. Mid-way through the narrative, following the Panther's quickly increasing local popularity, the FBI takes an active role in controlling them. Following Inspector Brimmer into the FBI operations room, the point of view (over Brimmer's left shoulder) presents us with a view of Pruitt's back. As he turns around and it becomes clear that he may be African-American, the shot changes to a medium close-up of Inspector Brimmer's face and look of surprise. "But isn't he…" Brimmer begins. "Special

people for special problems." Pruitt tells Brimmer (and the viewer). That Pruitt's "special" characteristic and that of the "problem" he has come to address are the same, is made even less clear when to Brimmer's reply that he "didn't know the FBI had…," Pruitt responds "Obviously, there are many things you don't know."

Now headed by Agent Pruitt, who, we are to assume, has been chosen for the task because of his racial connection to the black community, the investigation targets the Panthers with new vigor. The Panthers having become "enemy number one," as Pruitt informs us, have "quite simply guaranteed their own extinction." In this important establishing scene, Pruitt's racially ambiguous body (we are led to assume that that something special about him is his African-American heritage) has come to carry the weight of signifying racial tokenism, counter-revolutionary sentiment, and cultural extermination (complete with its biologistic connotations). Since much of what Pruitt says is set in opposition to Huey Newton's dialogue and the film's over-all ideological aim, we can read Pruitt as, in a sense, performing for the film the opposite of what he says. Thus, his statement that the Panthers have become "enemy number one" conveys the film's assertion that *he* is an enemy to the black cultural body, and that his betrayal guarantees its extinction. This position is made even clearer in a shot sequence that immediately follows Pruitt's interaction with Brimmer.

Moving into this sequence with a match on action and composition (the back door of the operations room explodes inward and the point of view zooms out to reveal that it is the door of the Black Panther Party office in Seattle), black and white recreations, text overlay, found footage, and voice-overs inform the viewer of the FBI's dramatic efforts to neutralize the BPP. Cut with close-up images of white police officers, we hear Alma telling recruits in training that "Physically [the recruits] look black, but [they] don't know who [they] are. [The recruits] don't know where [they're] from" and that "[They've] been given a slave name and a slave mentality." With Panthers marching in militaristic fashion, Jamal says in voice-over that "…a slave hates himself… A slave hates his skin." As if answering the question implied in the previous scene regarding his specialness, the shot cuts to an extended close-up of Agent Pruitt as we hear Jamal finish with, "A slave hates his natural kinky hair!"

Huey Newton's absence from this shot sequence crucially enhances its power to fix the figure of mixed raciality as it is embodied in Agent Pruitt. Using a voice-over to connect this scene with the subsequent scene of Newton's shoot-out with the police and subsequent incarceration, the narrative reasserts the difference between Pruitt and Newton and once again demonstrates the degree to which Newton's racial ambiguity is erased by the certainty of his ideological integrity. Indeed, whereas, Agent Pruitt's representation places his racial ambiguity outside of the Panther's blackness, it enhances the clean and proper standing of Newton's racially ambiguous body. Newton's incarceration recalls

for the viewer an earlier scene that establishes his membership in the "black" of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

Early in the film, following an altercation with the police, Huey Newton and other protesters are taken to jail. This jail scene presents the viewer with the first extended close-up shots of Newton in relation to other visually unambiguous characters. In his exchange with the local minister who also has been jailed, Huey engages in a kind of call and response dialogue notable for its nearly aphoristic character. While Newton attempts to mobilize his fellow inmates to action, the minister uses popular quotes from the bible to encourage their quietude. "We must turn the other cheek" the minister insists, "for the meek shall inherit the earth." "We must pray for their forgiveness, for they know not what they do." Tightly framed, lit with blue tones, and standing in front of the gray cell-block bars, Newton responds by saying that "they have been practicing for over four hundred years, they know exactly what they are doing." Moving behind the seated minister and placing his hands on the minister's shoulders, Newton says, "the establishment only wants us to sing, pray, or beg. But if they see some disciplined brothers with guns they're gonna pay attention fast, they are gonna know that the Black Panther Party for Self Defense is serious about defending the rights of our people! All power to the People!" With blue tones in the muted light of the cell creating a sense of underground planning and grass-roots rebellion, these shots and Newton's dialogue determine for the viewer that Newton is not an ambiguous figure. He is impassioned, committed, driven. Huey Newton, the narrative suggests, possesses the blackness necessary to found the Black Panther Party, and his membership within authentic black being is without reproach. Huey's authenticity is further established in scenes depicting conflict between the Oakland based Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the San Francisco group also calling itself the Black Panthers.

Following a meeting with the San Francisco based group (that also calls its self the Black Panthers) to discuss security arrangements for Betty Shabazz's upcoming visit, Huey, Jamal and a few other BPP members angrily depart. The "punk panthers," as Jamal christens them, are represented as Afro-centric and foolishly elitist (we see them standing in a row, predominantly light-skinned, arms akimbo with shaved heads, dashikis, sunglasses, and spouting Swahili slogans). As they leave, Jamal complains, "Man, those orangutan lookin', armchair revolutionaries ain't fit for the name Panthers!" That these, now, racially ambiguous characters "sure as hell can't" protect "Malcolm's legacy," is even more forcefully asserted when the police arrive at the offices of Ramparts Magazine where Eldridge Cleaver is interviewing Betty Shabazz. As the scene becomes tenser and the Panthers prepare to escort Shabazz to a safe location, their militaristic professionalism is contrasted with the childlike cowardice displayed by the "punk panthers." In fact, when Huey learns that they came without loaded guns, he takes some men to their headquarters and confronts

their leader saying that the "punk panthers are counter-revolutionary," telling them they can either join the BPP, change their name or be "annihilated." Whether as cowards, as traitors, as revolutionaries, or as merely the silent backdrop to a budding black nationalism, the racially ambiguous characters bear examination for their role in figuring the enigmatic signification of mixed-race bodies in *Panther*.

Huey Newton, Agent Pruitt, the silent multiracial woman, and the "punk panthers," all have their positions located in relation to cultural nationalism and an image of authentic blackness through their relations with one another. Static to the end, the ambiguous characters in *Panther* are fixed through their verbal or actional signification. That this fixing process doesn't happen with all characters in the film is not surprising. That this *must* happen with racially ambiguous characters in order to seal the coherence of narratives of black authenticity is virtually overdetermined when considered alongside the function of the enigmatic signifier in Laplanche's theory of translation, detranslation, retranslation processes; a theory that helps illumine the representation of mixed-race bodies in terms of their enigmatic signification for subjects who imagine they occupy the space of fixed racial categories.

In cultural nationalist narratives of African-American history that must rewrite dominant historical accounts representing blackness as psychologically primitive, somehow outside of history, or inhuman, the racially ambiguous body functions as what Laplanche would call an "internal alien." As a signifier, the racially ambiguous body marks both the intrusion of the other, what blackness means in the context of a white racial phantasm, and the threat to an auto-theorized cultural propriety. A hand over the mouth, enigmatic signification shouts of the milky, bloody, spitty, and spermy realities of colonial contact, both marking and obscuring them in the telling of self-in-community that is historical reconstruction. In the context of this discussion, then, the representation of racially ambiguous bodies allows for interpretations of the cost of colonial horrors (rape, in the case of *Sankofa*), explanations of current and ongoing trauma (misguided betrayal, as evidenced in *Panther*), and the opportunity for cultural legitimacy to be signaled by one's performance of "good" ideology, idealized masculinity, or real blackness. In each of these examples, however, and as revealed in even cursory reviews of popular representations of mixed-race characters, the social structure that produces a need for these kinds of representations drops from consideration, although it has always already been present. The other in this case, the desire that structures the white racial phantasm, recedes behind the screen representing embodied racial ambiguity. Thus structured, narratives of African-American experience approximate either interpretations or deterministic explanations of the troubling presence and absence signaled by the fact of mixed-racial subjectivity. The work of translation in this instance lies precisely in managing the disturbing insinuations suggested

by racial ambiguity. Indeed, the mixed-race body (always already everywhere present) troubles the very assumptions necessary to narrativizing African-American humanity. Thus any account of African-American person-hood must translate the enigmatic meaning of racial ambiguity.

Rather than discussing the elusive experiences of mixed-race subjects, we must focus on how these positions are represented, on reading these representations in terms of Laplanche's translations, and, ultimately, seeking to understand what these translations "ardently wish to translate." This entails one's not assuming that a past already slipped away can deterministically yield truths about the present, or that treating reconstructed histories of the mixed-race body as translations will provide a hermeneutic for interpreting the meaning of past traumas from the safe vantage of the present. Rather, translation processes themselves condition the possibility of mourning, working through, and self reimagining. Thus Laplanche's theory offers insight into the powerful role personal narratives like memory and history play in constituting one's sense of self. Examining the "discursive repertoire" of responses to the mixed-race body as enigmatic signifier highlights implications for historical representation. Moreover, such an analysis foregrounds the importance of mourning processes as they are evidenced in what Laplanche describes as translation, detranslation, retranslation.[20] Representational responses to the anxiety engendered in the encounter between the subject that considers itself to belong to a fixed racial category and the mixed-race body as ambiguous signifier, have been limited to three categories figured by the defensive mechanisms of projection, displacement and disavowal. Functioning on two levels, the mixed-race body either provides a screen for the projection of typed images or translations of the meaning it implies, or "screens out" and thereby obscures partially repressed historical memories that would otherwise inhibit the formation of coherent notions of African-American identity. Thus, in its role as internal alien, the figure of the mixed-race body acts as a kind of constitutive inside to interiorized conceptions of self within black subjectivity.

The first category of typed representational response works to project the discomfort elicited in the encounter with the ambiguous signifier onto the mixed-race subject. Images of the troubled and suffering "mulatto/a", who will contain the psychosis-inducing admixture of incommensurable cultural and racial difference, typify this mode of representation. Although usually gendered female in its application, the character "Joe" in Gerima's *Sankofa* stands out as exemplary of the suffering mulatto type. The second category of response, as seen in Marlon Riggs' otherwise groundbreaking work *Black Is, Black Ain't…* seeks to disavow anxiety provoked by ambiguity by representing mixed-race subjects as somehow essential themselves. Whether as the Creole, the Mestizo, or even Time Magazine's computer generated "New Eve," mixed subjects thus represented possess the "best of all worlds," even while reinscribing (and

reregistering) the notion of essential cultural property and difference. This mode of representation posits that although forcibly mixed in the violence of originary moments or primal scenes, these figures have, at least, retained some essential aspect of their "source" cultures. The final category of response to the enigma signaled by mixed-race bodies similarly submerges the assumed threat to fixed racial categories by representing the mixed-race subject as the diplomat, peacemaker, or problem solver. The characterization of Agent Pruitt in Van Peebles' *Panther,* demonstrates how this type of representation depends on the assumption of the singularity and incommensurability of racial difference to suppress the signifier's ambiguity under the sign of mediation and the hope of reconciliation or resolution. Laplanche's reworking of Freud's theory of "afterwardness" best illumines the work of reconstructed histories working in the service of vindication.

Laplanche's reflections on the enigmatic signifier provide an elaboration on Freud's underdeveloped notion of deferred action. In Freud's conceptualization, an event with traumatic potential can become traumatic only when the subject has the cognitive capacity to ascribe traumatic meaning to that event, when the real can enter the symbolic to borrow Lacan's reframing of the process. Thus, upon witnessing or recording an event, the subject signifies what it is capable of understanding. In Laplanche's schema, whatever cannot be either understood or translated (the unsignifiable excess) is partially repressed. Remaining in consciousness, the trace of what has been repressed, the enigmatic signifier marks the place of an unsignified entity and enables its obfuscation. As the subject develops increasing degrees of understanding, or creates more tolerable translations of what it does comprehend, it begins the process of continually translating, detranslating, and then retranslating the now conscious component of the enigmatic signifier.

In its enigmatic signification in the narrative of African American human being, the mixed-race body suggests what has become of the trauma of racialized dehumanization. Thus, as an unstable, elusive and threatening image, the mixed-race body provides a site where stabilization, clarity and the safety of knowing who one is in the world, can be performed. Because it is itself a retranslation of popular representations of the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (as indicated by the use of found footage and black and white recreations), *Panther* clearly demonstrates how translation processes that cohere around representations of the mixed-race body, struggle with and ultimately screen the anxiety evoked by the prospect of understanding past events as anything but past. The screening function of the mixed-race body as enigmatic signifier protects the cultural psyche from the threat of dissolution implied by the incorporation of facts that cannot be understood and, therefore, remain untranslated.[21] The facts thus obscured relate not to the past perfect sense of historical trauma, but to its present and material ubiquity.

Translated or not, remembered or not, the enigmatic signifier, now "internal alien," finds its way into displaced representation as it floats among the detritus of what can be translated. And there, in some measure, it remains; at worst a ghost, at best an echo preceding and conditioning its sound. As long as Lacan is correct in suggesting that "people act in order not to remember," the expulsion of ambiguity and other threats of destabilization will ensure that African-American auto-theorizations continue "not to remember" even as they reconstruct and once again, make history.

Conclusion:

This chapter opened with Frantz Fanon's powerful account of the alienation from self that is the singularly most debilitating aspect of the "fact of blackness." The interiority he outlines, and what is described by Hortense Spillers as the "paradox of non-being," is, really, the very same interior dilemma that is possessed and occupied by the filmmakers here examined. *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther,* in attempting to heal the alienation Fanon described, have attempted to respond to Spillers' paradox by vindicating black humanity and agency and placing it squarely in the midst of images and ideas that have produced the "fact" of which Fanon speaks. Whether predicated on representing what "really happened" or realistically representing what may have happened, each film "fixed" specific boundaries in order to produce its own facts over and against dominant and negating narratives, facts that in the African-American case have rested on troubling conceptions of authenticity. We must not, however, be dismissive of these representational gestures; vindicating narratives should be lauded for the cultural work they perform, for they do indeed provide crucial possibilities for identification. Moreover, the identifications thus enabled have made life possible for many people who have come to understand themselves as African-American.

The fact that they rely upon the reproduction of the same modes of prescription, exclusion, and forgetting that characterize the hegemonic representations they seek to resist, impairs these films' trans(per)formative potential. Having thus far looked at each of the films independently and focused on different features and psychical mechanisms in each, we can now briefly examine the similarities across the films to assert that they enact a broader performance of the boundaries of African-American cultural authenticity; which is a performance that, in fact, impedes trans(per)formance.

In each of the films discussed, phenotype comes to be encoded in relation to authentic membership in the group bounded by black cultural nationalism, creating a kind of phenotyped authenticity. In *Sankofa,* various filming techniques emphasize characters' skin color in direct correspondence to their

proximity to the film's political agenda. In particular, the careful use of back-lighting and costuming links Mona/Shola and Joe's shifting skin color to their equally changing cultural consciousness. *Malcolm X* conveys the relationship between phenotype and authenticity through its depiction of Malcolm's relations with white or racially ambiguous characters. Thus, the film matches Malcolm's growing black consciousness with his decreasing contact with people like Sophia and Rudy. *Panther* relies on the play of differences between its racially ambiguous characters to equate authenticity with ideological "correctness." Whether setting up signifying systems between racially ambiguous characters, erecting binary oppositions between the black self and non-black other, or simply tying phenotypic appearance to cultural consciousness, African-American vindicating narratives inevitably invoke images of blackness underwritten in part by biologistic models of race and racial formation. Although such models are usually not adhered to in overly rigid ways, they do privilege biological ideas about cultural membership that have themselves been the source of much of the violent trauma that marks African American history and contemporary social relations.

The racialization of gender and sexuality is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Lee's *Malcolm X* because the film situates Malcolm's development in relation to various female nurturers and male authority figures. Nevertheless, the racialization of gender plays a founding role in the articulation of black authenticity in *Sankofa* and *Panther* as well. As much as Betty Shabazz's feminity is racio-idealized, so too do the figures of Nunu in *Sankofa* and Alma in *Panther* reflect the degree to which a steady and unwavering image of heterosexual black womanhood must accompany vindicating narratives themselves concerned with recuperating heteronormative black masculinity. Propped up against rigidified representations of femininity, and using fixed images of black womanhood as props that give it meaning, the similarly racio-idealized "black manhood" constructed in *Malcolm X* has its counterparts in *Panther* and *Sankofa*. The dialogue of *Panther's* hyper masculinized Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, for example, goes so far as to intimate Cleaver's power as an image when he says "no, no NO more words!" in a scene following Martin Luther King's assassination. In fact, Cleaver's character shifts throughout the film from a careful and cautious spokesperson with a limited range of movement, to an increasingly active participant in the panther's struggle, to a reactionary militant. In one of the final scenes in which he appears, this movement culminates in Cleaver stripping his clothes off following a gunfight, and walking naked into the shining lights and pointed guns of the police. *Sankofa's* Shango displays a similar shift from interiorized observation to externalized agency and expression, from a conflated passivity/femininity to activity/masculinity ideal. Not unlike Malcolm's development in *Malcolm X,* the relationship between female

characters in *Sankofa* enables Shango's evolution. In each of these movies, the idealization and racialization of gender plays a significant role in establishing the contours of African-American identity, the grammar of its enunciation, and the heteronormative policing, the homeland security, that manage its border. The representation of mixed-race characters too has repetitions across these discrete reconstructed histories.

Just as phenotyped authenticity and racio-idealized gender are prominent organizing tropes in *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther,* the representation of mixed-race bodies as the site of suspicion, inauthenticity, and betrayal also shapes what must and what cannot be imaged in African-American vindicating narratives. In Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* nonlinear temporality, mixed-raciality signifies the double threat of conquest and genocide. Joe is both the rotten fruit produced through his mother's rape, and brings about the fruition of that violation by ultimately killing her. He, like the ambiguous characters in *Malcolm X* and *Panther,* signifies both the incommensurable nature of racial difference and the irreducible fact of racial sameness. *Sankofa's* Joe, *Malcolm X's* Rudy and *Panther's* Agent Pruitt, are all represented as contributing to the diminution of Black social agency and racialized heternormative gender performance.[22] Of even more importantance to the role of reconstructed historical narratives that seek to vindicate blackness and, in nationalist modes, black masculinity, these representations work to account for the feminization of blackness. Indeed, these images make sense of the ongoing cultural attack on black masculinity by locating it in relation to the putative site of cultural contact. That the attack on black masculinity has always also been an attack on black femininity, black women and black gay men, is necessarily excised from these translations precisely because they are situated within the context of masculinized Black Nationalist narratives of communal self-hood. The representation of racially ambiguous characters allows for the avoidance of two notions that pit and score the smooth surface of black human being.

First, African-American subjectivity must necessarily start from a point of dehumanization. That is, the Black subject in the American context possesses a concept of self that, while not being reducible to, includes being understood in binary opposition to the very concepts that make one American: possessing a history, being human, having interiority, contributing to the process called civilization, and having the capacity to experience ecstasy or suffering. *Black* desire, thus configured, is animal, and its suffering protests in the face of starvation and famine mere bestial and inchoate groaning. Representations of mixed-race bodies in reconstructed histories working in the service of vindication attempt to obscure the potentially traumatic realization of this notion by locating it outside of a history defined by black agency, and outside of a cultural body defined by black authenticity.

Second, the historical trauma of biologistic racism is precisely not historical

because it has been institutionalized in everyday psychical, scopic, and material social relations. That is, while ideas about biologically based cultural difference may be disappearing, the trauma of their presence has itself been institutionalized and continues to haunt social relations and shape social performance. Though working without the benefit (or hindrance) of contemporary trauma theory, Fanon called this the "fact of blackness" and saw it as the source of what he imagined as "Negro psychopathology." The threat of experiencing trauma and working through the terror it induces dramatically prescribes the content of reconstructed histories and leads to our final point.

Whether as abjected and constituting the outside of blackness, or as introjected and residing within as the internal alien, the racially ambiguous body as enigmatic signifier performs the absolutely essential function of providing the ground against which a coherent, clean and proper black identified sense of subjectivity can take shape. Although the enigmatic signifier must recede just beyond final translation, its presence produces effects that, once engaged, can be instructive and productive. Indeed, as *Sankofa, Malcolm X* and *Panther* have demonstrated, even without engagement, the marking and obscuring enacted by enigmatic signifiers will continue to instruct and produce effects, and we shall carry on being presented with their lessons and products. How we will come to interpret and engage the signifiers implied by the evidence presented in African-American cultural production remains to be seen. While the figural components examined here appear in each of the films as discreet performances, they also create significant effects across the films in an intercinematic way.

More than mere similarities, or even necessary moments of repetition, these images are linked in their action. They piece together a fixed and scopically dominant field of codes that define and restrict what blackness looks like, its visuality. These images signify what the "fact of blackness" can mean for subjects claiming positions within the ethnically absolute group African American. The viewer *cum* black subject need not identify with any one character or representation or code in the visuality thus constructed. Indeed, without regard for competence, the viewer need only identify with the struggle over signification that is implied in and through the films watched. These films' vindicating function provides the pleasure of repetition, the mastery it promises, and the melancholic satisfaction of practicing a ritualized and limited bereavement in the face of trauma. The "struggle over the sign of blackness" reflected in vindicating narratives makes troubling facts tolerable by reciting, in predictable and dependable ways, the success story of African-American efforts to tell "the truth" in the face of powerfully negating representational forces.

Our emphasis must shift from the "blackness" that is struggled over, and toward the nature of the costs exacted by such contestations, for they are too high, and perhaps not entirely necessary. The following chapter will ask, finally,

whether there already exist modes of struggling over representational signs that do not demand the same price for images of African-American agency and possibility. In fact the cultural productions to be explored in the next chapter suggest alternative ways of thinking, representing, and performing blackness, and provide useful approaches to creative pedagogies and acts of trans(per)formance that expound the boundaries of blackness in more open and less debilitating ways.

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1. Hortense J Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" in   *Pleasure and Danger,* ed. Carol Vance, (Boston: Routledge & K.Paul, 1984): 77.

2. Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* 6:2–3 (1994): 133, quoting Kimberle Crenshaw.

3. "Sankofa" was directed by Haile Gerima whose other works include: "After Winter: Sterling Brown" (1985); "Ashes and Embers" (1982); "Wilmington 10– U.S.A. 10,000" (1979); "Bush Mama" (1976); "Mirt Sost Shi Amit" (1982)…aka "Harvest: 3,000 years" (1975); and "Child of Resistance" (1972). It was produced by Diproci (Burkina Faso)/Ghana National Commission on Culture/Mypheduh Films/Negod-Gwad Productions/Norddeustscher Rundfunk (NDR) in English with a runtime of 124 minutes. Its main characters included Kofi Ghanaba as Sankofa, Oyafunmike Ogunlano as Mona, Alexandra Duah as Nunu, Nick Medley as Joe, and Mutabaruka as Shango.

4. Kobena Mercer, "Black Hairstyle Politics" in <u>Welcome to the Jungle</u>, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 111.

5. Pamela Woolford "Filming Slavery," *Exchange* (1993)

6. Ibid

7. Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 121.

8. Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X,* (New York: Hyperion, 1992): 68.

9. "Malcolm X," was completed in 1992 and produced under 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks/JVC Entertainment/ Largo International N.V., with a runtime of 194 minutes. Lee's other works include: He Got Game (1998), Subway Stories: Tales from the Underground (1997) (TV), 4 Little Girls (1997), Get on the Bus (1996), Girl 6 (1996), Clockers (1995), Lumière et compagnie (1995)…aka Lumière and Company (1995), Crooklyn (1994), Jungle Fever (1991), Mo' Better Blues (1990), Do the Right Thing (1989), School Daze (1988), She's Gotta Have It (1986), and Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads (1983). Its cast includes among others: Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, Angela Bassett as Betty Shabazz, Albert Hall as Baines, Al Freeman Jr. as Elijah Muhammad, Delroy Lindo as West Indian Archie, Spike Lee as Shorty, Kate Vernon as Sophia, Giancarlo Esposito as Thomas Hayer, and Roger Guenveur Smith as Rudy.

10. J.Laplanche and J.B.Pontalis, *The Language of Pychoanalysis,* (New York: W.W.Norton Company, 1973): 119.

11. In her book *Desiring Whiteness,* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Kalpana Seshadri Crooks makes use of Lacan's notion of the inexpressibly "Real" of sexual difference as a rubric to consider the anxiety and pleasure inherent to racial meaning and race as social force. Seshadri-Crooks also emphasizes the importance of using caution in deploying the analogous relation between sex and race.

12. Bell Hooks, "Consumed by images," *Artforum,* v31, n6 (Feb, 1993): 5

13. Completed in 1995, *Panther* was directed by Mario VanPeebles whose other works include: Love Kills (1998), Gang in Blue (1996) (TV) , Posse (1993), and New Jack City (1991). Some of its cast members include: Kadeem Hardison as Judge, Bokeem Woodbine as Tyrone, Joe Don Baker as Inspector Brimmer, Marcus Chong as Huey Newton, Anthony Griffith as Eldridge Cleaver, Courtney B.Vance as Bobby Seale, Nefertiti as Alma, Angela Bassett as Betty Shabazz, and Roger Guenveur Smith as Agent Pruitt.

14. Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* , trans. David Macey, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977): xiii

15. John Fletcher, "The Letter in the Unconscious: The enigmatic signifier in the work of Jean Laplanche," *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives,* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992): 100.

16. Fletcher 104–5.

17. Fletcher 108.

18. Ibid.

19. Mendi Obadike, "Reading Ursula,s Silence: Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Crossed Signals in Set it Off" *Black Arts Quarterly,* (Stanford: Committee on Black Performing Arts, 1997). In her work, Obadike argues that silence is produced at moments of narrative excess that functionally disallow the "voicing" (emplotment as representational object) or even speaking of particular subjects from within the narrative, thus leaving a deafening and telling silence as signs that both mark and obscure those things about which the narrative cannot speak.

20. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, race matters: the Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993): 16. Frankenberg thinks of discursive repertoires as "clusters" of discursive elements available to specific subjects. For her, "'repertoire' captures something of the way in which strategies for thinking through [racialized relations] were learned, drawn upon, and enacted, repetitively but not automatically or by rote, chosen but by no means freely so."

21. Jean Laplanche, "Psychoanalysis, Time and Translation" from *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives,* Ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts 1992): 174–77.

22. It is important to note that Roger Guenveur Smith was cast as both Agent Pruitt and Rudy in these films. Moreover, this kind of racialized economy of bodies is

evident in the hiring of Angela Bassett to play the part of Betty Shabazz in both movies as well. That other actors could not be found to play these parts is ridiculous, even in the competitive environment of contemporary Hollywood acting. That there was a deliberate effort to create a sense of continuity across the films, and thereby produce a more seamless narrative of Black political agency and action during the 60's, is more likely.

The Power to Trans(per)form

The duende, then, is a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought…. It is not a question of ability, but of true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation… The duende's arrival always means a radical change informs. It brings to old planes unknown feelings of freshness, with the quality of something newly created, like a miracle, and it produces an almost religious enthusiasm.

<div align="right">

Federico García Lorca[1]

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In 1929 while studying in New York, the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca began revising his ideas about the Spanish folk music called *cante jondo*. Rather than continuing to support its representation as a collective and "impersonal" Spanish musical form, Lorca began to describe *cante jondo* as a performative activity that, in fact, depended on individual performers "and their search for the spirit known as *duende*."[2] While it is unclear to what degree the cultural effects of the Harlem renaissance shaped Lorca's thinking, we do know that by 1933, the year of his lecture "Play and Theory of the Duende," Lorca was imagining *duende as* a mode of performance that had personal, social, political and religious stakes. In the lecture from which the epigraph is taken, Lorca speaks of a performance that overflows expected patterns and brings one close to the troubling realities of death and ambivalence. Having asked "where is the *duende?*" he answers, "through the empty arch comes a wind, a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents; a wind that smells of baby's spittle, crushed grass, and jellyfish veil, announcing the constant baptism of newly created things."[3] *Duende* evinces (and elicits) the irresistible imperative to be simply more than one can. It is, ultimately, the impulse to give and thereby expend the self, rather than merely consume. *Duende* is an unapologetic and fierce mode of

performative representation, one that cannot stop with individual discomfort. Indeed, fear, disease, trauma, and ambivalence provide the compass to *Duende's* force, drawing and directing its agonizing activity.

This final chapter invokes Lorca's image of the *duende* because it relies upon and centers a vision of personal transformation that emerges through performance. Neither muse delivering aesthetic appreciation, nor word of God speaking the law, the *duende* brings "a radical change in forms" by demanding action, the "true, living style, of blood…of spontaneous creation." The *duende's* force travels through performances that change their performers and audiences, producing in them increasingly disruptive levels of experience. While Lorca speaks of the *duende* in relation to muses and divine voices, he also grounds it in performances informed by the political and social experiences that occur between people, the micro-social filaments of connection in the frontier between neurobiology and ideology.

Drawing upon "private" and "interior" personal experience as well as "public" and structural fields of knowledge, trans(per)formance is similarly dangerous, potentially radical, and productive of Lorca's "unknown feelings of freshness." Trans(per)formance, like inhabiting *duende,* requires giving oneself over to the narratives that make one, while simultaneously taking action to refashion the very discourses that one relies upon for a sense of safety and community. Consequently, engaging trans(per)formance or *duende* necessarily produces terror and invigoration because trans(per)forming one's sense of self always consists, in part, of negotiating the private and public terrors that have previously made re-writing self seem impossible. The preceding chapters examined performance as it takes place in the academic, religious, psychical and cultural spheres. This chapter furthers the movement of *retranslation* to include cultural production that because of its willingness to respond to *Duende* exhibits trans(per)formative possibility. Briefly revisiting the perspectives established in the first four chapters will help set in relief Marlon Riggs' and Anna Deavere-Smith's performance work.

Chapter One surveyed the complex terrain of academic knowledge production in relation to the relatively new presence of scholars of color. It suggested that one notice the stakes and ramifications of identity politics in as much as they delimit the expectations and protocols shaping how academics of color are received and announce themselves. Indeed, it cautioned that the formation of the group "academics of color" be understood tentatively as a fraught manufacture of self in the field of knowledge production, and that suppressed or marginalized religious and racialized narratives complexly determine social relations in the academy through their expression within the performative actions of academics of color. It recommended an attitude of active ambivalence for the academic of color, positing that such a posture provides the foundation for a self-critical knowledge production capable of resisting the

restrictive purposes to which it might be put. This chapter ties these ideas into a concluding discussion of radical pedagogy that can be a generative practice for scholars of color and others in the academy interested in producing and disseminating knowledge differently.

Chapter Two explored the performance of self-hood as a collective and individual practice of figuring and representing one's person in relation to narratives of self-in-history and self-in-cosmos. The discussion of Ibn Al-ᶜArabi and James Cone pivoted around the complex status of the 'self as contextualized within religious narratives of history. In Chapter Two, demonstrated how both of these important thinkers managed to draw signs and symbols from constraining orthodoxies (Islam for Al-ᶜArabi and Christianity for Cone) to fashion narratives of self that created fresh visions of agency and political possibility. Importantly, neither Al-ᶜArabi nor Cone envisioned a heterodoxy that wrote their subjectivities out of orthodox discourse. Unlike many other liberative or critical theories, theirs did not depend on the construction of a utopian location outside of the material and psychic reality of their social situatedness. Rather, their philosophical and political struggling created room within dominant discourse and social structure for new modes of self-imagining.

The ways in which Anna Deavere Smith and her performance work have been received by American mainstream theater calls attention to how racialization, as an historical formation, indeed a history in itself, dramatically shapes the contours of social relations and knowledge. Racialized modes of locating and understanding human activity, agency, and worth have produced orthodox and accepted protocol for making sense of social conflict. Smith's work, like that of Al-ᶜArabi and Cone, challenges accepted orthodoxies, drawing upon the very words and gestures with which individuals signal, enact, and reproduce racialized ways of knowing. Smith performs a kind of 'heterodoxy' powerful for its trans(per)formative potential. As will be made clear, however, race as a primary register for making visual sense of difference and identity in the American scopic regime, remains powerfully steadfast in its ability to provide subjects with a sense of self-in-cosmos and social structure. Indeed, its status as a constructed transcendent ethos and foundational matrix through which subjectivity takes and has ascribed to it relational meaning, demanded that any further discussion begin with some analysis of how race produces real effects in the register of social experience represented as interior and presumably autonomous.

Thus, moving from conceptions of the self grounded in exterior origins of subject formation to notions of subjectivity that privilege interior experience, Chapter Three looked to psychoanalysis with three intentions. First, to raise questions highlighting the connections between the field traditionally represented as external to the self, and the terrain attributed with interiority. Second, to disrupt the notion of the transcendent ego that is represented in much

ego psychology as responding to social hierarchies grounded in racialized difference, rather than being constructed through them. And finally, the evocation of psychoanalysis also worked to provide the theoretical foundation for an analysis of visual culture as the realm of psyche extruded; or at least as the terrain wherein differential degrees of working through the troubling features of traumatic history take place. Chapter Three relied on the work of psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon and his crucial theorization of "sociogeny," illumining his assertion that any attempt to analyze the psychical experience of people of color acknowledge that their subjectivity is constituted in relation to having been defined as "other" in the white racial phantasm. Articulating the intense and important contributions provided by Fanon and Hortense Spillers in relation to the post-Lacanian (and, in many ways, neo-Freudian) psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche and Julia Kristeva, produced the critical psychoanalytic framework carried into chapter Four.

Looking closely at *Sankofa, Malcolm X,* and *Panther,* three films that exemplify contemporary attempts to create counter-memories of African-American reconstructed history, Chapter Four examined the struggle over potent signifiers that have, over time, come to stand in for authentic black consciousness and experience. Its examination of these visual narratives explored the necessary and limiting strategies and effects of representing self (or practicing self-hood) in the mode of vindication, and argued that psychoanalytic mechanisms of disavowal and abjection supported these films' socio-political investment in producing visions of authentic black being. Whereas Chapter Three focused on how traumatic history poses a problem for cultural producers interested in representing blackness as a human and socially viable terrain of subjectivity, Chapter Four had a different focus. Chapter Four pointed out the excisions and moments of policing these films undertake, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, in the name of creating images with which black people might identify. It posited not only that these instances of disavowal and abjection avoid working through historical trauma by creating narrative fetishes that cover over troubling historical events, but that they also institutionalize in visual practice the trauma they seek to evade. Disavowal and abjection, then, as they configure reconstructed historical narratives, actually guarantee that boundary management itself stands in as a form of ongoing traumatization precisely because of the co-constitutive relationship between the white racial phantasm (as one field of subjectivity) and the terrain of otherness it has produced under the sign of blackness.

Without depending on constricting concepts of black masculinity and femininity, fixed ideas of authentic phenotype, or notions of mixed raciality that necessitate its abjection, Marlon Riggs engages the struggle over blackness as a signifier. Rather than vindicating the authenticity of subjectivities marginalized in relation to what "black is" or can be, Riggs affirms the contributions subjects

seen as somehow existing outside of blackness have made to the development of black history. Moreover Riggs' re-historicizes the presence of marginalized subjectivities within a blackness shaped through a struggle to develop a sense of identity. While not entirely unproblematic in how he does so, Riggs champions ambiguous raciality and queer sexuality as always already present features of blackness that have gone unacknowledged in the cultural performance of black authenticity.

This chapter, then, examines Marlon Riggs' *Black Is... Black Ain't* and Anna Deavere Smith's performance work as exemplary of contemporary cultural performances that create trans(per)formative potential. Rather than closing off discussion and discursive possibility with the clamp of authenticity, these performative pieces elicit the potentiality inherent to working through troubling beginnings and traumatic history and in this way call forth the *duende.* Instead of being limited by the psychoanalytic mechanisms of disavowal and abjection, Riggs and Smith imagine and enact new and viable modes of agency by elaborating multiple ways of being and understanding contemporary black experience. Riggs' *Black Is... Black Ain't,* for example, undermines the suspicion attached to ambiguity and cultural transgression by acknowledging difference within 'blackness' and the benefits it promises for African-American concepts of community. Smith's two performance pieces, "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight," dig through the ashes and injury of urban unrest to involve actors and observers in the process of self-reflection necessary to understanding and intervening in the discourses that bring about racialized social rebellion. Moreover, Smith's founding of the Institute for the Arts and Civil Dialogue created the space wherein actors, scholars, activists, and various professionals (however temporarily) could engage thorny social issues that derive from and impact the complex intersections between the various modes of social categorization that are often articulated through notions of racialized difference.

In order to fully appreciate the possibility produced through these performances, over and against the constraining effects of the vindicatory visual narratives discussed in the last chapter, we can no longer frame the self as the stable product of its own manufacture. Rather than focusing on an African-American cultural self that has required the production of vindicating narratives to ensure its viability in the context of a white racial phantasm persistently defining "blackness" as outside the boundaries of full humanity, we must shift to considering African-American selfhood as "an embodied and historically situated practical knowledge."[4] In her introduction to *Rhetorics of Self-making,* Debbora Battaglia asserts that the self is neither an existential given nor a clearly finished product of socio-cultural activity. As she frames the issue:

> …the production of some *thing,* or even a multiplicity or a sequence of unitary self-objects or coherent self-images (since this position implies a self there or

invariably worked toward at the beginning) is likely to appear beside the point of how to represent the nonsteady state of selfhood in different cultural situations, and varying degrees and relations of determinacy.

According to Battaglia, investigations of the production of self-hood ought to attend to "what *use* a particular notion of self has for someone or for some collectivity."[5] In a similar vein, *Troubling Beginnings* has argued that particular images in African-American vindicating narratives carry rhetorical weight grounded in the persuasive power of a promised authentic black being.

   To this point, it has been evident that the sociality of self-hood and the relationship between personal and communal narratives of self cannot be adequately understood from the fixed position of a self/other or interiority/ exteriority binary; and that the strict opposition between sanity and insanity cannot retain its strength in the face of a disrupted concept of coherent ego. Rather than conceiving of the socially constructed rhetorics of difference (especially as articulated through racialization) as encountering a fixed subject, it has been here described as a socio-psychic context in which the subject, as discursive event, is co-produced within frameworks of difference. In the end, self-hood is an act, a performance, a continual telling that articulates with culture's scripting of identity, and the material social structures that embody these texts. The "self" is the real effect of social constructions like race, and subjectivity is produced through acts of representation articulated in terms of culture, politics, religion, culture and psyche as they are situated in space and time.

   Trans(per)formance suggests the possibility of telling self in such a way that different modes of articulating with dominant scripts become possible, thus transforming the putative "self" and "culture" that appear to encounter each other as separate entities in struggles over signification. The following analyses show how narratives responding to black experiences can undermine ideas of suspicion or threat, expand notions of performance to include self-refashioning, and articulate pedagogical methods that depend on and produce new and even radical ideas of agency and political possibility, even in the face of unresolved trauma. Engaging in trans(per)formance, like embracing the *duende,* involves terror; it compels ambivalence; it requires, in fact, a tolerance for the very contradictions that make being so exquisitely difficult. Consequently, the performance works examined in this chapter reflect moments wherein trans(per)formance becomes possible through risky acts of representation. This analysis highlights those risks and points to their informative failures and successes, however limited and however crucial.

Probable Cause and The Suspicion We Obtain: Marlon Riggs' *Black Is… Black Ain't*

In his posthumously completed work *Black Is… Black Ain't,* Marlon Riggs grapples with difficult questions about what notarizes membership in the black community and what determines one's exclusion from its protective boundaries.[6] The film confronts and negotiates folktales, stereotypes, histories, counter-narratives, popular images, political ideas, and common-sense understandings that constitute African-American communal auto-theorization. Although Riggs has described *Black Is… Black Ain't* as his "own living memory," its narrative structure and content were ultimately decided by the co-producers who survived him. Footage from Riggs' hospitalization, which plays such an important role in organizing the finished piece, might not have been included had Riggs lived. Since these scenes foreground Riggs' commentary on the process of making the film and his reflections on its components, *Black is…lack Ain't* hangs fitfully in the tension between the social death of historical erasure and the life promised through vindication.

As a black, gay, HIV+ man then living with AIDS, Riggs' proclamation of presence wrestles with and against overly limited notions of black identity and the way they threaten to rub his personal story out of existence. In courageous tones and sometimes chilling images *Black is… Black Ain't* marks the costs, the unacceptable costs, of essentialist politics that limit the boundaries of blackness by ejecting its internal aliens. The narrative flow of Riggs' film moves unyieldingly, with the certainty of Riggs' own declining health, toward a paradox that becomes more and more clear as his narrative runs its course—disappearance presupposes presence. "My weight and T-cell count are the same" Riggs announces in voice over during the opening montage. Shots of the hospital, blurry images of his pushing naked through trees and greenery, and text overlay marking his loss of T-cells…225, 175, 110, appear in procession, each carrying the weight of Riggs' truths equally. "AIDS forces you," Riggs explains from his hospital bed, "because of the likelihood that you could die at this moment, AIDS forces you to deal with that, and to look around you and say hey, I'm wasting my time if I'm not devoting every moment to thinking about how can I communicate to black people, so that we start to look at each other, we start to see each other."[7]

Three recurring images shape and motivate the twists and turns *Black Is… Black Ain't* takes on its "journey through black identity." Shots of Riggs running naked through the woods, images from his hospitalization, and scenes depicting the preparation of "Big Mama's gumbo" visually represent the stakes of social and actual death, and the themes of family and community that support the project. Riggs says of the scenes in the woods that they:

…had a powerful image for me in terms of searching through the clutter in my life, searching through the clutter of the project, searching through the attempts by society at large to cover you and to confine you into some space in which you are not seen for the naked truth of who you are. Those scenes are critical in their metaphorical importance. I mean, it's easy for me to make the parallels of being confined and lost in woods, and a community confined by its own limited ideas of identity. You see. That's not a great leap for me. I can say that.[8]

Riggs and his narrative suggest that the black community as well searches to find its way out of restrictive definitions of being, that the cultural body of blackness endeavors to name and proclaim its "naked truth" in the face of representational violence and social oppression. Throughout the first two-thirds of the piece, Riggs poses self-preserving developments within the black community in opposition to ubiquitous social forces that have sought to do away with black humanity. Beginning with self-naming practices and moving through pigment variation, Black Power struggles for liberation, Black music, Black history, and Afro-centric philosophy, Riggs documents both the journey of blackness through the cultural imaginary of whiteness and his own difficult and contested movement within the boundaries of blackness. Building on testimonials and the critical reflections of Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Bill T. Jones, Cornel West, bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Essex Hemphil, and other interviews, Riggs uses found footage and performance material to display for the viewer racialized social forces that have necessitated the culturally preservative act of creating and controlling the category "Black." Biologistic ideas of black inferiority, police brutality, de facto segregation and racialized social protocol, omnipresent derogatory representations of blackness, and colorism are some of the social facts that Riggs marks as contributing to the drive to represent a coherent black communal body, and the troubling need to police membership within that body.

The social and political importance of constituting a coherent Black identity notwithstanding, the final third of Riggs' *Black Is… Black Ain't* documents the often-dangerous ways that coherence is maintained. In particular, Riggs shows how modes of being that have always been a part of blackness come under a kind of cultural suspicion that compels their erasure from authentic black being. Owing to the prevalence of phenotypic and gendered notions of black authenticity in discourses of black uplift, it comes as no surprise that in Riggs' work color and sexuality emerge as central points of contestation in the struggle over what black is and what black ain't. Indeed, color and sexuality become sites that accrue suspicion and represent transgression, real or imagined, against heteronormative notions of black authenticity. Although notions of authentic blackness can and do exist within some queer and multi-racial discourse, Riggs' work emphasizes how dominant conceptions of what "Black is" assign

suspicion, violation, and danger to these subject positions. Exploring how suspicion is attached to particular bodies and the function this problematic ascription serves, highlights the questions necessary to acts of retranslation, and ultimately trans(per)formance suggested in *Black Is… Black Ain't.*

In an effort to work against the erasure of black subjectivities that transgress dominant hetero-patriarchal ideas of authentic blackness, Riggs posits gumbo as a metaphor for a broadened conception of blackness. A dish that can be prepared in many ways and with varying ingredients, gumbo possesses specificity and a variability that make it a useful metaphor for Riggs. As a sign that calls to mind a spatial geography of authenticity within African-American historical consciousness—the South—it simultaneously locates creolization and signals a certain ambiguity inherent to that imaginary and actual space. Rather than appropriating Riggs' gumbo metaphor to insist upon the presence of diverse subject positions within fixed ideas of blackness, we can use the legal concept of probable cause as a trope important to understanding the complex racializing dynamics he underscores. Whereas Riggs shows how difference has always already resided within the monolithically defined field of blackness, probable cause illumines how certain subjectivities necessarily carry the weight of constituting the outside to those identities defined as normative through authenticity discourses. Rather than working from an inclusion/exclusion framework, the trope of probable cause draws attention to the troubling experiences of fear, dread, ambivalence and suspicion that work to mark for disavowal, the presence of destabilizing subjectivities. Riggs' gumbo metaphor also makes use of the idea of the "rue" as that unifying feature or "something other" that connects the various experiences and histories of black Americans under the homogenizing sign (however broadened) of blackness. Probable cause, on the other hand, emphasizes how ideas of connection and essential features of experience or being are discursively produced and inscribed into black subjectivity and onto black(ened) bodies.

The concept of probable cause can help us understand the various representational strategies that surround the racially ambiguous and black/gay/HIV+ bodies for four important reasons. First, unlike many other legal rules of procedure for the suspension of 4th amendment rights, probable cause "…is a fluid concept—turning on the assessment of probabilities in particular factual contexts—not readily or even usefully reduced to a set of legal rules."[9] That is, probable cause has historically rested upon the assumption of the good faith use of the state's power to control its subjects. Second, probable cause confers the power to arrest, seize, or fix a subject's ability to move based on the suspicion that a crime has been committed. Third, it sutures together the gap between a body of evidence and the subjective factors that shape the representation of that evidence. Finally, probable cause (especially in relation to the ubiquitous "plain

view" doctrine) is organized under specific ocular logics, where upon first sight, a body becomes the site of accumulated and displaced suspicion and threat.

Thus, when suspicion is affixed to a particular body, the subject connected to that body is forcefully relocated to a "locked-down" discursive position established for the guilty. Indeed, in legal discourse, the set of conditions necessary to arrest, seize, or fix a subject's ability to move has been a shifting standard that has proceeded from "causes of suspicion" to the "probable cause to suspect," to the "probable cause to believe," and ultimately "probable cause" to arrest.[10] In this way, probable cause acts as a performative that merges the discursive location of suspicion with the institutional position of guilt. Even before standards of reasonable doubt can be applied, suspicion discursively marks the subject, even while fixed representations of their fingers and features are captured for the record in one institutional/discursive maneuver of "booking."[11]

Probable cause traces how notions of sexual and cultural transgression cohere to popular constructions of subjects who transgress the cultural boundaries of authentic blackness. Probable cause and the "plain view" doctrine work together to attach the suspicion of unseen (disremembered) transgression, by promising ocular verification of the suspicion they produce and in relation to which they are legitimated. Thus the progression follows the pattern "I see person X whom I suspect has transgressed cultural protocol. Person X now displays a plainly visible sign that confirms my suspicion and justifies my actions against their person. In my action against them, I find justification for my initial and ongoing suspicion of such people." Just as Riggs' gumbo, and its rue, erect a tentative boundary around a cultural blackness forever threatened by its internal differences, so too does probable cause resist enigmatic meanings and ambiguous social positionings that trouble dominant categories of difference. Put another way, bodies that might disturb the coherence of the group defined as black (gay, lesbian, racially mixed), have very specific meanings attached to them in the name of suspicion that work to prevent their ambiguous signification and defend against the dangers to cultural coherence their ambiguity freights. Thus, rather than responding to the way gay and lesbian subjectivities upset idealized notions of black masculinity and femininity, or how racially mixed bodies disturb ideas of racial purity and authenticity, narratives of what "black is" configure homosexuality as a "white thing" and mixed raciality (as a biological sign of the oppressors presence), as a "thing white."

Because the "plain view" doctrine emphasizes precisely what can be seen, and thereby provides the link between suspicion (stereotype) and the visual, it institutionalizes cultural beliefs about who can suspect and who can transgress. Kobena Mercer has suggested that the common element in the representational modes of "othering" we understand as racism, sexism, and homophobia, is that "in each instance the historical construction of differences of race, gender and

sexuality is reduced to the perceptions of *visible differences* whose social meaning is taken to be obvious, immediate and intelligible to the naked eye."[12] Riggs' imagining of an expanded vision of blackness resists narratives of fixity and essentialism that, like probable cause, establish the suspicion sufficient to justify the seizure and arrest of marginalized identities precisely at the point of imagined ocular proof.

Though highly suggestive of bodily states, images of seizure and arrest call to mind Fanon's account of the black subject who, finding itself "fixed as a dye," is abraded into "non-being." Through a series of rather easy rationalistic steps, probable cause takes the repressive force of the state (in the person of the police officer or detective) converts it into suspicion (as a kind of legalized paranoia) and attaches it to the suspect/subject vis-à-vis the fact of transgression that takes place in "plain view." Thus fixed and abraded into non-being, placed discursively into the position "other to the Other," the suspect/subject's body becomes the site of discursive action. Whether through phenotype, cultural markers of sexualized difference, class, or gender, ocular verification vouchsafes actions to seize, arrest, and hold the suspect/subject for interrogation; or, simply, to question its authenticity.

Riggs' metaphor, however, does intersect with the legal concept of probable cause because, as *Black Is… Black Ain't* artfully represents, very specific subjectivities have been ascribed the burden of carrying suspicion. What appears as exclusion in Riggs' formulation, and as fixing here, parallels the most current solidification of probable cause based on a subject's mode of signification. Whether excluding, fixing, or attaching suspicion, by erecting strict protocol in African-American historical reconstruction and notarizing that process with essentialized ideas about what it means that a subject "looks" the way it does, African-American reconstructed histories reproduce vindication through a process that Eric Santner calls narrative fetishism.

Santner sees narrative fetishism as the production of stories that seek to disavow traumatic events, and he suggests that they are counter-productive because of the way they prevent or postpone working through. They do so by inhibiting the necessary process of "elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses."[13] Indeed, the traumatic nature of historical events (be they personal or communal) necessarily implicates historiographers, those who write history, and the representations they produce in the complex transferrential dynamics that cohere around the event whether they attempt to articulate merely their "own living [memories]" as Riggs does, or the history of an entire group of people. Even if we choose to understand histories constructed in the mode of vindication as forms of anti-colonial response, they, nevertheless and perhaps necessarily, demand the production of particular sets of images that themselves work to resist the dissolution that remembering trauma threatens to

initiate. Narrative fetishism in historical representation acts as a form of resistance. This resistance to active working through and retranslation impedes the production of representational acts that are more creative (while more terrifying) than the mere repetition of fixed forms, and thereby limits notions of blackness.

In describing the genealogy of probable cause, Barbara Shapiro suggests that "the American probable cause standard represents the latest stage in a long historical evolution in which the justification for arrest moves from the personalized suspicion of a directly involved party, through the generalized suspicions of a more distanced party based as much on the suspect's life-style as on particular events, to the rough estimate of a very distant official of the chances that a suspect will be convicted if tried."[14] Within the context of legal discourse, then, probable cause has come to ensure that having had suspicion affixed to one, presumably on the basis of plainly viewed transgression, is equated with being deemed guilty should one be arrested. Similarly, possessing visually apparent signs of cultural transgression—what one's skin looks like or who one loves in plain view—carries with it the weight of being guilty of crimes against the coherence of authentic black being. The danger implied by the cultural transgression signaled by suspect/subjects is not merely that they disrupt idealized images of blackness. Rather, their very presence makes the smooth operation of abjection and disavowal, the suturing of historical wounding, difficult and even untenable.

As a trope, probable cause enables state action predicated on the oftendubious foundation of personal suspicion. At the same time it highlights one institutional location where complex subjective perceptions are legitimized, concretized, and read as objective measurements. Critical psychoanalysis helps illumine how the formation and ongoing revisions of narratives that constitute one's sense of self (memory, loss, history, and trauma), also under gird the foundation of the suspicion that supports claims of probable cause. The presence of multiracial bodies signifies, among other things, the rape of African-American women at the hands of white patriarchy and the dissolution of racial coherence and cultural purity.

In *Black Is… Black Ain't* Riggs works against the certainty and probity used to police the boundaries of blackness on the basis of what can be seen. For Riggs, creolization gives the lie to blackness as phenotypic or biologistic fact. Multiple shades and hues of black skin in scenes depicting the libations being poured for "Big Daddy," the rulers of the Olatunje Village, and pre-teen "gang" members talking about the value of education, allow *Black Is… Black Ain't* to visually attests to the phenotypic diversity of blackness. Skin color, however, is not the only signifier Riggs uses to celebrate the diversity within blackness, for he is especially forceful in demanding that variation be recognized in relation to cultural notions of blackness. Juxtaposing the masculinist rhetoric of Black

Nationalism with the multiple voices of black people claiming diverse religious, sexual, class, phenotypic, and gender positions, *Black is… Black Ain't* pushes against the boundaries of a certain kind of vindicatory blackness. Indeed, the film asserts, over and against constraining notions of what black is, that Black can be woman. Black can be gay, it can be mixed, can be HIV+. Indeed, Riggs insists, black can go home as what it is precisely because it has always already been there.

Riggs does not argue against the existence of black. Rather, he disrupts the notion that any one person or subjective location can justly decide what black is and what it ain't. *Black Is… Black Ain't* displays Riggs' concern with representational and social marginalization as one response to destabilizing images of blackness, especially those pertaining to gender, sexuality, and color, and recognizes how disavowal provides the organizing structure for popular constructions of authentic blackness. While Riggs' gumbo metaphor urges him to include what has been left out of or excluded from popular visions of blackness, we have considered the function of images that are included because they are socially over determined. The notion of probable cause has allowed us to focus on how fixed and ubiquitous images display ambivalence by simultaneously disavowing and demanding that notice be taken of the enigma they resist.

As a narrative that engages issues of black identity, *Black Is… Black Ain't* encourages the process of working through the effective fragmentation of "blackness." As the narrative of one black/gay/HIV+ man's journey through an *imagined coherence of blackness,* it powerfully and convincingly suggests the work of mourning and memorializing necessary to the renewal of libidinal investment and the creation of agency that "working through" can provide. Fluctuating between scenes (both primal and terminal) of Riggs running through the forest and his plummeting T-cell count, *Black Is… Black Ain't* imagistically represents moments of mourning and working through that stand as monuments in his narrative. As such, *Black is… Black Ain't* offers occasions for reflection on the distressing and promising possibility of recuperating communal and self-identity. Moreover, *Black is… Black Ain't* suggests that the suspicion we obtain in the wake of probable cause demands that our work of mourning and recovery occur simultaneously within and without the constraining boundaries of an ethnically absolute identity.

Throughout the film Riggs likens blackness to gumbo, that dish and signifier, insisting that "everything that you can imagine can go in," while warning that "when the broth is too strong…you can't taste the ingredients." Desiring to return those abjected social locations functioning as the constitutive outside, or disavowed subjects marked as "others" to the body of blackness, Riggs challenges black people to understand and actually experience blackness in a decidedly different way. Indeed, through his presentation of diverse images

of blackness as both a biological and cultural entity, Riggs' work demands a kind of revisioning; a reweaving of common sense images of authentic group membership. His is a narrative of re-memberance through translation. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is a narrative of not forgetting through re-translation. In fact, *Black is… Black Ain't* tells us that the time for mourning is here and is now; "there's a cure for what ails us as a people," Riggs asserts, "and that is to talk to each other. We've got to start talking about the ways in which we hurt each other, and the ways in which we hurt each other is also through silence, because nobody can unload the pain, or the shame, or the guilt by not speaking." The work of talking and, finally, mourning that *Black Is… Black Ain't* suggests is not about what black itself is and what black ain't…but rather it points out the pain and loss inherent to what even a vindicated black *cain't*.

Black cain't be gay.

Black cain't be mixed.

Black cain't be woman.

Black cain't have AIDS.

Indeed, once vindicated, once sexualized, colorized, gendered and normativized, black cain't go home as what it is.

Black Is… Black Ain't enacts Riggs' "struggle against the odds and the face of adversity and face of possible extinction." Indeed, in his poignant effort to mark his passage through this life, Riggs has to ask: "how do we keep ourselves together as a people in the face of all our differences? How do we maintain a sense of communal selfhood, if you will?" The final third of Riggs work seeks to answer his question by positing a notion of black community based on "a willingness to remember." The unity Riggs endorses does not require flattening out differences within blackness; rather, it must embrace them and proclaim the presence of difference in its stories of origin, in the first breaths of its troubling beginnings.

Riggs' *Black is… Black Ain't* argues, in fact, for the prideful recognition and acceptance of identities arbitrarily excluded because of they ways they are seen (read: imagined) to embody difference in relation to a narrowly understood concept of blackness. Riggs wants to surface both the unseen commonalities obscured by ideas of difference and his own hidden and visible realities…his T-cell count, his sexuality and his pain in a world of seen and shared things. Casting light upon what is not seen (I know very well, but nevertheless), Riggs' work also crucially tugs at and urges the recognition of what is not thought, what abjection renders unrecognizable. *Black is… Black Ain't* is his best effort to weave invisible threads of lived experience, painful and terrifying as it must be, into the social fabric of blackness as both seen and productive of something other than suspicion and threat.

Indeed, Riggs' lived and dying experience pushes him to "deal with identity in the global perspective." For him "the connection between AIDS and black

folks and black folks' identity is metaphoric. Both of them are a struggle against the odds and the face of adversity, and the face of possible extinction."[15] Riggs resists that extinction by initiating the important work of mourning precisely because it requires a kind of working through or facing that can condition trans(per)formative modes of translation, detranslation, and ultimately retranslation.

Black Is… Black Ain't engages entrenched notions of authentic and viable blackness and shows how African-American community has always contained, and has always been supported by, the very subjects contemporary narratives of black being would disavow, and the meanings they would abject. Riggs does not write himself out of "blackness," rather he demonstrates how he has always lived and died within it and, in that way, challenges the suspicion attached to his gay/HIV+ *and* black body.

In an entirely different format, Anna Deavere Smith explores the material realities that follow from social constructions of racialized difference. Whereas the physicality of Riggs' own body and the signs of subjectivity it bore in "plain view" provided an important narrative plank to his journey through black experience, Smith both centers and puts under erasure her own physical embodiment. She performs other peoples' responses to her questions and makes of her own physical presence a screen onto which are projected visible mannerisms, wardrobe signifiers, and voiced impersonations. Smith seeks to represent the characteristics of difference that distinguish her characters, one from another. Moreover, while Riggs chose to foreground the intersectional features of his subjectivity within the modality of his own racialization, Smith's work attempts to stave off the particularities of her racial position long enough for the audience to see her characters' psychosocial locations.

In *Black Is… Black Ain't* Riggs produced the possibility for trans(per)formative action by asserting the presence of abject meanings and disavowed subjectivities within the confines of the category "blackness." The trans(per)formative potential Smith initiates, on the other hand, comes precisely from the way she performs herself in and out of her own subject position while commenting on the thorny issue of the relationship between racialization and social rebellion.

Performance and Politics: Anna Deavere Smith's Documentary Theater

Reflecting upon the "Twilight" section of her performance series titled *On the Road: A Search for American Character,* Anna Deavere Smith suggests that she wants her work to "develop a kind of theater that could be more sensitive to the events of [her] own time than traditional theater could."[16] Unlike Riggs' *Black*

Is… Black Ain't which used an interview format and "talking heads" to convey its questions on the formation of black identity, Smith's highly acclaimed pieces "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight" depend on only one performer to enact the intricacies of American racialized social relations. In performing these pieces, Smith recites verbatim excerpts from her interviews with various people involved in racialized conflicts that erupted into civil disturbances. "Fires in the Mirror" focuses on the 1991 outbreak of hostilities between Jews and blacks in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. The "riots" followed a traffic accident in which a Hasidic man killed 7-year-old Gavin Cato and the subsequent murder of a young Jewish rabbinical student, Yankel Rosenbaum by a group of black youth. Using variations in hair-style, dress, props, physical gestures, and linguistic form, Smith re-enacts responses she received while interviewing community activists, city officials, neighborhood residents, and family members of the slain victims. Through the words of her characters, Smith reflects on the matrix of neighborhood relations, local politics, and larger themes of race and community formation that contextualized the event. Although "Fires" was first produced as a stage performance, the acclaim it garnered allowed Smith to develop a video version that was later presented as a part of the PBS "American Playhouse" series. Organized similarly to "Fires," "Twilight" too was based on social unrest and "rioting," this time, one year later and on the opposite coast, in Los Angeles.

Like "Fires," "Twilight" featured Smith presenting verbatim recitations of interview material provided her by some of the nearly 200 people who felt they had something to say about the social dynamics that erupted in the "Los Angeles riots" that followed the first acquittals of L.A.P.D. officers accused of beating the African-American motorist Rodney King.

From Yankel Rosenbaum's brother to Gavin Cato's father, or, in "Twilight," from L.A.Police Chief Daryl Gates to "gang member" Twilight Bey, Smith moves from subject position to subject position, ideology to ideology. Hasidic Rabbi, Hollywood personality, congressional representative, "anonymous young man," author, Nation of Islam Minister, community activist, cultural critic, store owner, relative, witness… Smith depicts all of this and more in the two pieces. Does Smith successfully negotiate an inter-racial terrain gliding smoothly between racialized subject positions? Does her ability to convincingly perform her characters' subject positions make sense of her being described as a "chameleon?" While one can convincingly argue that Smith's own "light skinned" appearance made her transition between characterizations smoother than they would have been were she "dark skinned," her embodiment as a woman of color gives these early performances their trans(per)formative possibility. For while the subject positions Smith enacts do change, what Fanon might call the "fact" of her status as woman of color does not differ from portrayal to portrayal. We are concerned here with the putative "facticity" of

occupying a particular racialized subject position and *not* Fanon's dangerously heternormative formulation of the "woman of color" (of whom he knew "nothing about") and the "return to the region of the homosexual" (of which he wanted to know nothing). Smith's own embodiment remains a presence, itself actively ambivalent: for although it enjoys a kind of suppression under the art of her becoming "someone else," her body's presence and the meaning it carries persist, hover, and await translation.

Although lighting does play an important role in providing visual cues for the viewer in both stage and video formats, it is primarily used to set mood, define spatial location, and intimate temporal changes in "Fires" and "Twilight." Different from its use in *Sankofa,* lighting does not produce alterations in the appearance of Smith's phenotype in the context of ideological shifts. Indeed, in Smith's work, phenotypic markers are, significantly, always under erasure and ever present in displaced fashion. Dropping the lights and fading to black between each characterization, the audience, without moving, is transported to another space and time. Lighting cues indicate whether we are indoors or out, whether it is night or day, or whether the space just entered possesses the intimacy of an office, the anonymity of a public address, or the distance of a telephone conversation. Text titles with names like "My Brother's Blood," or "Screw Through Your Chest" float behind Smith along with projected scenery, the character's name, and sounds suggesting location.[17] Because she does not use traditional sets with barriers suggesting closed spaces, the audience shares the theater space and is drawn into the interview dynamic Smith attempts to recreate. In fact, because many of the interviewees actually make verbal or physical gestures that include Smith in their responses, the audience, at times, is actually forced to occupy her position as interviewer. Smith emphasizes this relationship by including a question and answer period at the end of her performances where she responds to audience questions and concerns from the perspective, and in the character of her roles. In this way, she makes the audiences participate in the conversations about which they have come to be informed.

Smith says of her craft that it is a "constant process of becoming something," that she looks for "the humanness inside the problems, or the crises" to find points of connection that ground her performance and link the characters she portrays.[18] Because she feels that cultural workers dealing with "race relations" do so from their own subject positions, from their "own ethnicity," thereby inhibiting the "ability to hear more voices than those that are closest to us in proximity," Smith's decisions about what interview material to include are most influenced by how she feels a particular "interview text works as a physical, audible, performable vehicle."[19] That is, on consultation with others, Smith evaluates the degree to which she is able to convincingly and powerfully make present the manneristic signs (body movements, particularities

of speech, actional pauses, eye movements, and dress) that make intelligible the characters she performs and gives them a "presence that is much more important than the information they give."[20]

Nevertheless, Smith's own embodiment and the "information they [her characters] give" play a crucial role in anchoring her impersonations' oblique commentary in the register of race. Smith's characters are, at base, responding to racialized conflicts, just as the audiences for which she performs are drawn to her shows in part because of their expectation that they will be given information about race and race relations. For the predominantly "upper-middle class" and "white" audiences for whom Smith performs, she is a racialized woman who interviews racialized, classed, and particularly foreign others, promising to make sense of their actions. Since, in order to be successful, Smith's characterizations must first face the task of temporarily rendering her own racialized position under suppression, she must replace the cultural codes that mark her racialized location with those that mark the positions of her interviewees. While, of course, the social situatedness of the people Smith interviews has everything to do with class, sexuality, gender, religion, and age, the fact that questions and commentary about race constitute the matter her interviewees address circumscribes how her work is received. Like captions for a photo, the "information they give" anchors how the visual aspects of her portrayals will be understood.

Hinting at her broader intentions for theater as a site of cultural instruction and action, Smith says that:

> Theater can mirror society. But in order to do that theater must embrace diversity. It must include new characters in our human drama that have not been portrayed on our stages. Clearly even white mainstream theater could be more interesting, and more honest, if people of color were integrated into the drama rather than used as walk-on stereotypes. We now have the opportunity to be a part of the discovery of a larger, healthier, more interesting picture of America.[21]

Like the issues addressed and methods employed in Toni Morrison's literary analysis *Playing in the Dark* discussed in Chapter One, Smith endeavors in her work to give voice to people of color and the social issues that impact them, in and through theater. She works against the way their presence has been limited to the status of "walk-on stereotype" and suggests that recognizing and encouraging the active participation of people of color in theater performance and attendance will diminish the social anxieties that accompany discussions of race and racialization. Indeed, she maintains that because "presence is after all the gift of the actor" the "heart and voice of theater," that it must be reclaimed as a space of agency and action for people of color.[22] Nevertheless, while Smith's own presence, powerfully informed by *duende,* lends trans(per)formative

potential to her performance, it also carries the burden of a racial history that threatens to curtail that potential.

In his essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," Bertolt Brecht discusses the instructional value of what he calls "Epic Theatre."[23] He describes epic theatre as breaking from traditional dramatic theater through its use of "environmental factors" and its focus on social issues. Brecht suggests that this altered emphasis produces a kind of distance between the actor and her character, a distance that creates room for both audience and actor to possess critical judgment on the character and the character's actions. According to Brecht, "the spectator [is] no longer in anyway allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play." Epic theatre, Brecht suggests, takes "the subject matter and the incidents shown and [puts] them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding."[24]

Alienation, what Brecht also calls the "A-effect," disrupts the function of common sense and forces the audience's acceptance or rejection of the character's ideology and action to take place consciously instead of on a preconscious level, as he suggests happens in the context of empathetic identification. Instead of identifying with the character's emotional state, the audience identifies with the actor's alienated observation of her own act of performance. Thus the feelings or actions of the character remain inextricably linked to their historical context and material conditions.[25] In the case of Anna Deavere Smith's work, her embodied presence (along with the staging techniques mentioned above and her post-performance discussions) creates space enough for the spectator to possess a critical distance that prevents them from easily and seamlessly losing themselves through identification. Smith's racialized presence alienates her, and then her audience, from the actions and attitudes her characters report. In Smith's work, multiple racial histories intersect: that of the audience member, the character she enacts, and her own. Surfacing here, erupting there, together these histories constitute that for which Smith's project searches, American character.

In keeping with Brecht's theory, instead of identifying with her characters, the audience has the opportunity to identify with Smith's self-alienation and subsequent sense of self-observation. From this distanced perspective the audience can be made aware of the historical conditions reflected in Smith's roles and understand them as historicized. Brecht contrasts this type of historicizing with the "bourgeois dramatic theatre."

> The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged "eternally human." Its story is arranged in such a way as to create 'universal' situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour. All its

incidents are just one enormous cue, and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response: the inevitable, usual, natural purely human response.[26]

The "enormous cue" works to account for difference between separately located experiences and erases any "element of difference" in the shared "eternal" response. Epic theatre, however, faces difference, it "concentrates entirely on whatever in this perfect everyday event is remarkable; particular and demanding inquiry."[27] Smith's performance work calls audience attention to the historically racialized particularities that produced the "riots" of Crown Heights and Los Angeles. Interestingly, while very astute in its analysis of class, the racial non-specificity of Brecht's discussion reveals its shortcomings even as it illumines the racialized dynamics that limit the trans(per)formative potential of Smith's pieces. Smith, herself, possesses an historical specificity marked by her embodied presence as a woman of color. For even as her status as an ethnically racialized subject produces alienation, it softly sings a song of familiarity and common sense that always inhibits moments of trans(per)formance.

Smith has indicated that her "predominant concern" in creating "Twilight" was "that [her] own history, which is a history of race as a black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be."[28] Burdened by and working against the forceful appearance of her own history, Smith performs a kind of auto-theorization through the impersonation of her interviewees' experience of personal history. In this way, Smith's characterizations portray the world around her and belie its importance to the formation of her own sense of interiority. "Obviously," Smith admits, "I don't really like to talk about myself and race. I have used 29 characters to speak about it in my performance. But the fact is, I'm afraid to talk about race… There's a way that race is such a taboo that it confounds the very concerns that we have about freedom of expression."[29]

"Fires in the Mirror," and "Twilight" both become in her performance a present and powerful theater of instruction. Working in the space between psychic interiority and social structure, the space where subjects struggle over the signification of their identity, Smith successfully enacts a conversion. She makes of this oddly public space (for its connection to images) and somehow private terrain (for the terrors it possesses), a dramatic space, a space of theater. Analyzing exemplary popular individual and collective receptions of Smith's work in "Fires…" and "Twilight" illumines the levels of racialized discourse and the dynamics that imbue her work with its trans(per)formative potential and its "confounding" power. For, as will become evident, description and narration describing Smith and her work in part and as a whole, reveals the power her performances and her very embodied presence possess to elicit racialized and telling responses.

Sharon Fitzgerald's semi-biographical essay "Anna of a thousand faces" is

accompanied by the parenthetical description "Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman plays 'Fires in the Mirror' and 'Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992' as part of her series 'On the Road: The search for the American Character.'"[30] Although Smith's title suggests that her work does not explore the experience of one particular ethnic group, and although Fitzgerald herself describes it as an "[exploration] of humanity in turmoil" culled from "hundreds of taped interviews with members of the communities involved," an analysis of the ways in which she reads the "seamless" quality of Smith's performance shows how racialized modes of understanding the African-American capacity to experience (or not), shapes Fitzgerald's own experience. Fitzgerald describes three vignettes from the stage production of "Twilight":

Each moment in Smith's world is seamless. Throughout Twilight, she is attired in black pants and loosely tailored shirts and employs only the simplest props and accessories. In one scene she sits confidently in a power chair at center stage—one red high heel planted on terra firma, the other dangling from the foot of her crossed leg. Smith has *slipped into the skin* of Hollywood executive Suzanne DePasse.

A slide projection of Century City glimmers in the background; a supertitle bearing DePasse's name and the segment's caption, "The Money Train," hovers overhead. Smith luxuriates in DePasse's no-nonsense acumen—*her understanding of power, her belief in destiny, and her thoughts about buying a gun*—and then there is a swift blackout.

When the stage lights go up, power heels and chair have been discarded and the actress is revealed anew: a can of soda in hand, a blue sweatshirt tied about her waist, a bare foot propped on the edge of a park bench. The supertitle introduces both this "Anonymous Young Man, Former Gang Member" and his description of urban violence, titled "Broad Daylight." The background photo is of palm trees viewed through the openings in a chain-link fence.

As that image disappears, the audience is still *quaking* from the youth's *menacing* philosophy: "My theory was, when you shoot somebody in broad daylight, people gonna be mostly scared."

Smith relinquishes her stance at benchside and returns to center stage. The subtlety of her physical transition amazes—a shift of a shoulder, slight tilt of the head—however, it does not surpass the softening of voice and vocabulary. Before this new character, "Diane Van Iden, Brentwood Mother," can retie the sweatshirt in that around-the-shoulder style preferred by suburbanites, *one is*

already absorbed in her fears for her children. ("Can you imagine if somebody took a gun to the prom?")³¹ (italics mine)

Fitzgerald's experience and description of Smith's portrayal of Suzanne DePasse imbues the character with interiority. Along with a specific spatial location, she possesses understanding, belief, thoughts and a skin that can cover Smith's own skin, thereby making DePasse's subjectivity present and something with which Fitzgerald can identify. Indeed, the interiority ascribed to the characters Smith recreates directly determines the degree to which Fitzgerald can make sense of "the information they give." After herself luxuriating in how Smith herself "luxuriates in DePasse's no-nonsense acumen," Fitzgerald notes a swift black out.

Having discarded the signs of affluence that also code access to interiority ("power heels and chair"), Smith's performance of an "Anonymous Young Man" whose status as "Former Gang Member" tells all that needs telling, can only be experienced as one-dimensional for Fitzgerald. Without connection to a named space, "bare foot propped" instead of "planted on terra firma," and capable only of a"description of urban violence," Fitzgerald experiences this representation as inactive, without agency or interiority, as an image. In fact, she confirms this when she speaks of "that image [disappearing]," leaving only the shock of a "quaking" audience in the wake of its "menacing philosophy."

Shaken, Fitzgerald's calm is restored in the subsequent portrayal of "Diane Van Iden, Brentwood Mother" whose complex interiority of white motherhood allows Fitzgerald, almost instantly, to be "absorbed into in her fears for her children." Rather than discarding signs of power and thus alienating Fitzgerald, this character has taken up the "the softening of voice and vocabulary" that signal the civility and suburban safety that stills Fitzgerald's quaking and allows for identification, empathy, and absorption. The fear and menace of racialized difference have been quelled by Smith's return to familiar territory. That the difference that troubles Fitzgerald's description of Smith's performance is racialized becomes evident when one examines the shifting position Smith's physical presence takes in Fitzgerald's narration of the scenes.

In describing the enactments of Suzanne DePasse and Diane Van Iden, Fitzgerald implicitly and explicitly refers to Smith's physicalized transformations. Although she never speaks of race per se, Fitzgerald writes of Smith having to "[slip] into the skin" DePasse possesses, which, because unmarked, is assumed to be white. She also notes the amazing physical "transition" Smith must make in order to take on the persona of Diane Van Iden. Smith's shoulders must shift, her head must tilt, and her voice must change. All that Smith must do to adequately perform the "Anonymous Young Man" is identify him as a "Former Gang Member," give him a "can of soda," a blue sweatshirt, and no shoes. Here, the A-effect buckles beneath the blows of the

racial cue. Indeed, the racialized logic that shapes Fitzgerald's viewing of Smith's performance ensures that, for her, its trans(per)formative potential remains just that: a potential.

If Fitzgerald had reflected upon the sources of her "amazement" at Smith's "transition" from African-American woman possessed of a menacing difference to Century City "Hollywood executive" or "Brentwood Mother" capable of interior experience and object of identification, she would be closer to undertaking the difficult and terrifying act of trans(per)formance. Had she done so, her recollection of the "Anonymous Young Man," as Smith performed him, would have included his reflections on such issues as the degradation of transgenerational relationships and the time when "the older people" would "come out and question" when "the police had [him] and a couple other guys in the middle of the street on [their] knees." In recalling and describing the performance of the "Former Gang Member" after an encounter and confrontation with her own racialized theater going, Fitzgerald would have remembered his anxiety and courage when he moved "to the Valley…right there with rivals." She might even have been "absorbed in" his fears for his life "in their neighborhood," or identified with his "no-nonsense acumen," his "understanding of power" or thoughts about carrying a gun…and using it. Fitzgerald would certainly have come away with more than a "menacing philosophy." A less racially encumbered form of alienation (an A-effect less obscured by the race-effect) might have provided her a sense of his need to feel strong and respected when living among enemies who, but for the threat of his being more "stupid" and less predictable, might take his life because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Allowing this "Anonymous Young Man" and "Former Gang Member" to possess an interior experience that necessitated just as amazing a transformation from Smith, just as nuanced a performance, would place Fitzgerald in a different position. From this trans(per)formed location Fitzgerald would be able to hear and recall his human cost benefit analysis of having to act crazy in exchange for the temporary fact of safety, even while having a favorite song like "Am I Dreamin'."[32] Perhaps owing to her own notions of race and racial meaning, or perhaps because of the fact that at the time of this performance, much of America was invested in understanding why the 1992 uprising took place, why people did what they did, and how it could be prevented in the future, perhaps owing to these and other factors, Fitzgerald could not possibly hear (or hear the possibility of) a story based on the interiorized experience of a "Former Gang Member." Fitzgerald and those who broker power in American Theater have shown themselves very ready to hear the story that Smith's "Twilight" and "Fires" promise. Namely, the history of social collapse and catastrophe with the ethnographic promise of understanding, and social change the hopeful resolution of its conflict.

Without an actively ambivalent engagement with one's own ways of

knowing and understanding, Smith's work remains more a travel log than manifesto, moving from one remote outpost of othered subjectivity to another. Nevertheless, or perhaps owing to this fact, Smith's work has been taken up and lauded in national theater circles. Her work called "cathartic" and described as "a 'treasure' and a 'masterpiece;' Smith was touted as 'one of the most important voices in contemporary theater,'"[33] and was subsequently named the Ford Foundation's first "artist-in-residence" in 1997.[34] Looking at Los Angeles-based critic Richard Stayton's interview with Smith provides some insight into how we might understand the readiness of certain Americans to hear the story told by Smith's performances .

Stayton's "A Fire in a Crowded Theater: Anna Deavere Smith Relives the Los Angeles Riots," begins with a telling statement. "[I]nterviewing Anna Deavere Smith is *intimidating.* The 42-year-old African-American playwright and actor faces a journalist's tape-recorder *armed* with a casual confidence learned from conducting literally hundreds of interviews."[35] (My emphasis) Stayton describes Smith as an "aristocratic," "veteran war correspondent" with a "medusa head of curls" whose wars, he assures us, "are as American as Watts." With text laid over or alongside large, blurry, black and white images of Los Angeles, a police officer "[standing] guard at 9th Street and Vermont," and smaller enclosed shots from Smith's performance, Stayton introduces and maintains warfare as an important motif in the interview.

In preparing "Twilight," he tells us, Smith drove "from a Watts district that resembles Beirut to Hollywood soundstages where the riots [were] being dramatized, past burnt out Korean mini-malls and to the Simi Valley courthouse where it all ignited."[36] Stayton describes the Mark Taper Forum staff as "anticipating controversy and eager to explore their personal experiences of the riots" and consequently altering their traditional program development process to support Smith's seemingly dangerous project. With a sense of military outfitting, Stayton writes, "Smith received a car, cellular phone and driver, translators and transcribers, Hispanic and Asian-American dramaturgs, video technicians, as well as focus group discussions with southern California's ethnic minorities." "Emily Mann," he continues, "whose 'Execution of Justice' resembled Smith's docudramas, was hired to direct, and Oskar Eustis, who commissioned both 'Execution…' and 'Angels in America,' was drafted to oversee the process."[37] Stayton also compares Smith's project with "South Africa's 'Theater of Testimony,' which emerged from the Township tradition of acting out a community's stories." Not until nearly the end of his introduction does one begin to get a sense of why motifs of war provide the structure for his reflection on Smith's performance work. Stayton writes:

> Smith stands alone onstage, reciting monologues about the riots to audiences
> who experienced the riots—*and who live in fear and dread of another uprising.*
> *The tensions, resentments and violence that crossed lines of gender, race and*
> *class get mirrored in one woman.*
>
> But in *presenting the politics of race,* Smith is careful to avoid dogma. Her goal
> is to create an urban "Rashomon" that promotes discussion without media
> interference. Although a series of monologues, "Twilight" is also a dialogue
> with *"the other"*—the audience.[38] (Italics mine)

For Stayton Los Angeles is a war-torn space. While at the time Stayton interviewed Smith certain locations in Los Angeles were indeed burned out and community tension continued to run high, not all of Los Angeles lay in ruin. Set amongst the text of his article, the black and white images of Los Angeles as urban space show us empty streets, or militaristic police officers enforcing the peace, or "a car parts store [going] up in flames," or "looters [running] with stolen shoes from a store." None of these images present scenes of residential or private space. Rather, they set in opposition the image of a white police officer and black looters, counter-posing the protection of property and its destruction or theft. That Stayton describes Smith as performing for "audiences who experienced the riots—and who live in fear and dread of another uprising" implies his position in the binary opposition that he has constructed. In his first question Stayton asks Smith of "Twilight's" origin, saying that after being invited to create the piece by the Mark Taper Forum she "immediately proposed a piece on the so-called uprising. Why back-to-back pieces on race riots?"[39] Stayton's assertion that "the tensions, resentments and violence that crossed lines of gender, race, and class" are "mirrored in [Smith]," reveals and ensures that, in fact, within the confines of her performance, Smith's audience is not "othered." Rather, Stayton's descriptions suggest that, according to racial protocol, the shoeless and lawless other to which he refers remains outside the theater (except in its safe re-enactment, over there and on stage…and alone). The other that incites racialized terror exists beyond the theater walls perhaps destroying property, perhaps planning rebellion, perhaps instigating the war feared in Stayton's subtext…the race war.

All of this is not to say that Stayton and even Fitzgerald are somehow racist. Rather, the racial protocol that has shaped the "information" Smith's interviewees give, the patterns of racialized meaning anchored by her embodied presence, also shape how their stories, their narratives of self, are received and understood. The rebellion in Los Angeles did take place amidst a war. 1992 marked the height of America's "war on drugs;" a conflict we saw become a "war on crack," and ultimately, through the metonymic auspices of ubiquitous images of African American crack users and dealers in various media forms, a

war on black. In the double movement of racializing crime and criminalizing race, America's "war on drugs" became quite literally America's race war. This war and the power of race as an historical force in the United States find one form of expression through Fitzgerald and Stayton's readings of Smith's work and how those readings reflect the racialized context of Smith's reception nationally.

Moreover, Smith herself and her body of work have also been taken up in rather complex ways owing to her racialized reception. Whether described in militaristic fashion with a "Medusa head of curls" or as threateningly deceptive, "chameleonlike…subtly [impersonating] your style, your idiosyncratic physical mannerisms, and ultimately [tapping] into your mind,"[40] attention is called to her physical embodiment. While it might well be argued that Stayton and Fitzgerald's themes of militarism or artistic deception reflect merely their own particular idiosyncrasies or artistic license in the service of the writer's craft, we must attend to the repertoire of tropes that facilitate their descriptions of Smith and her work. When questions of race and racial conflict are raised in the United States, especially when represented as pertaining to *Black* Americans, anxieties regarding boundary management consistently present themselves. The violation of a white phantasmatic space, whether by violent or treacherous means, elicits images of militant, militaristic advance or cunning infiltration. The New York Public Theater's artistic director, George C.Wolfe says of Smith, by way of compliment, that she "is like a ferret" able to get inside of language and speech acts to find the "more complicated story going on."[41]

The possibility of revealing "more complicated" stories has lent Smith's "Twilight" and "Fires…" a viability (and salability) that have rendered them hits. "Fires" earned an Obie citation, the Lucille Lortel Award, was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize, and was even featured on PBS's "American Playhouse." "Twilight," too, showed itself to be a story people were ready to hear, an account possessing ethnographic value. "Twilight" received "awards from the New York Drama Critics Circle, the Drama Desk, the Outer Critics Circle and Theater World, as well as the Obie for best play."[42] Although these successes have everything to do with the very racialized dynamics that inhibit the trans(per)formative effects of Smith's work, they also contribute to its ongoing potential for enabling trans(per)formance precisely because they ensure that more people have access to the material and that her continuing efforts receive the financial and institutional support they need. Indeed, the ongoing prospect of Smith making trans(per)formance possible resides really in what she was able to do with the resources that were directed at her creative efforts.

Following her theatrical success, Smith was able to undertake, with the help of a \$1.5 million grant from the Ford Foundation, a project to develop the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at Harvard University. Supported by the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African-American Research and the American

Repertory Theatre, Smith designed a creative space wherein artists, scholars, activists, and other professionals could explore troubling social issues through collaborative production and performance.[43] Part of Smith's motivation for beginning this project came from her "disillusionment" over the success of "Fires" and "Twilight." In an interview with Scott Cummings, Smith says of previous audiences "They were white and older and upper middle class." The demographics of her audiences confounded Smith's intentions in performing "Fires" and "Twilight." She says "I thought my idea of going out and interviewing people and putting them on stage was going to be a strong enough call to bring those kind of people into theatre. My plays had this variety of people and I thought that was what the audience would look like, but it didn't."[44] Establishing the IACD was Smith's attempt to correct this dynamic and transform the "identity of the artist in American society from that of a commodity to a vital and respected presence in civic life," by enabling the production of "art which [can] cause civic discussion."[45]

Smith's IACD invited various performance artists and encouraged them to step "out of their comfort zones by provoking them to consider their audience in the midst of the creative process."[46] From muralists to musicians, scholars to activists, the IACD encouraged its grant recipients to continue their works in progress while offering community based free presentations where they could engage civic response and engender public dialogue. Smith saw these "conversations in public" as productive of "an interdisciplinary, civic-minded community with art somehow at the center," that could begin to address the important social issues and troubling social dynamics that made "Fires" and "Twilight" both important successes and telling failures. Through the IACD, Smith fashioned a space wherein trans(per)formance might occur. But just as with the spaces created in her previous work, trans(per)formance was not ensured, for it requires the fearful and actively ambivalent act of re-writing self in the context of protective narratives of self-in-community and self-in-cosmos. It requires, in fact, that one embrace discomfort, or at least that one tolerate profound dis-ease long enough to initiate fundamentally different modes of social relation.

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1. Federico Garcia Lorca, *In Search of Duende,* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1998): 48–53.

2. Lorca, viii, Christopher Maurer's preface does a very nice job of marking some of the development in Lorca's theory of *duende.*

3. Lorca, 62, From the lecture "Play and Theory of the Duende"

4. Debbora Battaglia, *Rhetorics of Self-Making,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 3.

5. Battaglia, *Rhetorics of Self-Making* 3

6. Released in 1994, *Black Is… Black Ain't* was directed by Marlon Riggs, presented in VHS format, and ran 87 minutes. The video is distributed by California Newsreel, 149 Ninth St., San Francisco

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. 1983 Supreme Court [Illinois v. Galic, 462 U.S. 213, 231–32]

10. Barbara J.Shapiro, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt and Probable Cause,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 148.

11. This also calls to mind the ongoing Los Angeles Police Department practice of cataloging the images of young people suspected of having "gang affiliation." That the in-the-moment decisions about who ought to have their picture taken are made based on visual signs said to be codes for gang connections (clothes, posture, color), highlights how subjective beliefs about race, class, and gender are concretized as objective acts of seizure and arrest.

12. Kobena Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," (London: ICA Documents, 1995): 26.

13. Eric L.Santner "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some thoughts on the Representation of Trauma," from *Probing the Limits of Representation,* ed. Saul Friedlander, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992): 143.

14. Barbara J.Shapiro, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt and Probable Cause,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 145.

15. Riggs, *Black is… Black Ain't*

16. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992,* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994): xxii.

17. In the video format the character's identity is presented in text overlay.

18. Smith, *Twilight,* xxiv.

19. Smith, *Twilight,* xxiii.

20. ibid.

21. Smith, *Twilight,* xxi

22. Anna Deavere Smith, "Not So Special Vehicles," *Performing Arts Journal,* no. 50–51, (May-September 1995): 80.

23. Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," in *Brecht on Theatre,* ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964): 70–71.

24. Ibid.

25. Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre,* ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964): 91.

26. Brecht, "Alienation," 96–97

27. Ibid. 97.

28. Smith, *Twilight,* xxii

29. Smith, Anna Deavere, from "Forum: Race and Relationships," *American Theater,* (September, 1992): 61.

30. Sharon Fitzgerald, "Anna of a thousand faces." (Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman plays 'Fires in the Mirror' and 'Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992' as part of her series 'On the Road: The Search for American Character' about African American experiences), *American Visions,* vol. 9, no. 5.(1992): 14–19

31. Fitzgerald, "Anna of a Thousand," 15.

32. Smith, *Twilight* 27.

[33] Sharon Fitzgerald, "Anna of a thousand faces." (Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman plays 'Fires in the Mirror' and 'Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992' as part of her series 'On the Road: The Search for American Character' about African American experiences), *American Visions,* vol. 9, no. 5, 14 (1992). Throughout her discussion Fitzgerald cites examples of the popular acclaim Smith received.

[34] Scott T.Cummings, "Get budged! Anna Deavere Smith's new institute pushes art out of the comfort zone. (Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue), *American Theater,* v15, nl0 (December, 1998): 69.

[35] Richard Stayton, "A Fire in a Crowded Theater: Anna Deavere Smith Relives the Los Angeles Riots," *American Theater,* (July/August, 1993): 20.

[36] Stayton, "A Fire in," 21.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Stayton , "A Fire in," 22.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Fitzgerald, "Anna of a thousand ", p. 16.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Scott T. Cummings, "Get Budged! Anna Deavere Smith's new institute pushes art out of the comfort zone. (Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue)," *American Theatre,* v15, nl0 (December, 1998):. 68.

[44] Cummings, "Get Budged!" 69.

[45] Cummings, "Get Budged!" 68.

[46] Cummings, "Get Budged!" 70.

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Trans(per)forming Pedagogy: or Teaching Agency

The tale-telling tradition contains what is most poetically true about our struggle. The tales are one of the places where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged, for over the years the tale tellers convert fact into images which are funny, vulgar, amazing or magically real. These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is. To create such tales is a collective process accomplished within a community bound by a particular historical purpose

Honor Ford-Smith

As Honor Ford-Smith's assessment of the import of "tale-telling" suggests and as *Troubling Beginnings* has argued, the various ways in which we imagine ourselves as socially situated bear directly on the modes and effects of our efforts to produce social transformation. Nevertheless, the tale-telling she celebrates is not entirely unproblematic, and her statement stands as a powerful expression that threatens to explode under the force of the very questions it cannot ask. Our exploration has invited just such an explosion by raising questions that ask how we should understand the trans(per)formative possibilities engendered by stories that both constitute the groups about which they speak, and necessitate the policing of the always oscillating boundaries of community and self. The challenge that remains before us is to consider how active ambivalence in the midst of cultural activity might present itself and how it might reconfigure our understanding of ourselves as re-membering agents.

In his "grounded oral history" remembering the life and work of the African-American community activist Ivory Perry, George Lipsitz figures participatory democracy as manifest in collective and individual activism.[1] He suggests that "societies are shaped through contestation and conflict, that even the most static, placid, and hierarchical social structures draw determinate shape from past and present antagonisms."[2] Asserting the dialogic relationship between personal and political identity, Lipsitz urges us to acknowledge how personal experiences and frustrations inform public identity. Similarly, though perhaps in a different register, *Troubling Beginnings* has sought to highlight the interfaced relationship between self and social structures as an important first step in extending Frantz Fanon's concept of sociogeny. More than insisting that any conception of the formation or features of psychic interiority be contextualized vis-à-vis aspects of the external cultural environment, *Troubling Beginnings* has asked what it might mean to abandon the notion of an internal and relatively autonomous subject. We can again draw on Lipsitz' discussion of Ivory Perry for its metaphoric value.

Importantly, Lipsitz highlights the transformative effects Mr. Perry's social activism had on his auto-theorization, describing how it "activated" Perry's "sense of being less marginal" and made him feel "involved in important issues and events."[3] Indeed, Mr. Perry's individual involvement in collective action that also located him within a story of shared struggle, a mode of auto-theorizing that allowed him to describe an identity within the context of cultural memory that effectively *became* his identity. Collective memory—those "shared experiences and perceptions about the past that legitimate action in the present"—and the sense of personal transformation that comes through communal struggle, work together to produce moments of social learning where "experiences with contestation in the present…transform values and goals for the future."[4] Because Lipsitz focuses on the war of position facing direct-action activism and oppositional consciousness, two forces deeply rooted in American history and political culture, he privileges the notion of individual agency as something encountering social "structures of force."[5] Lipsitz's analysis usefully identifies how traditional sociological models used to describe the relationship between individual acts of social struggle and macro-social structural forces actually collapse when read through the lens of race and patterns of racialization.

Whether of mass society, collective behavior, or status inconsistency frameworks, Lipsitz argues, sociological models fail to accurately describe the micro or macro dynamics of U.S. social movements precisely because they themselves bear the marks of racialization; marks that force these theoretical frameworks to explain involvement in social movements in only two ways. First, as being motivated by individualized and interiorized factors (social hurts, psychological deficiencies, etc.). And second, as the result of an individual's

being swept up in externally located grand social movements that roll irresistibly along.[6] Although I have departed from Lipisitz to some degree, by framing agency and the ego as unstable and incoherent effects of discourse, and as neither autonomous nor overdetermined, we must, take seriously his emphasis on the presence of history, and its centrality in the unfolding of subjectivity. From this perspective, then, the social learning that takes place in the context of activism can, itself, become a site for pedagogical investigation. And because these environments of social learning also involve one in altering how the enactment of self-hood is represented, we can speak meaningfully of a *trans(per)formative pedagogy*. Individuals who recreate their sense of self-hood through social action, whether or not they—like Perry—understand themselves as activists, engage in a kind of critical pedagogy informed by the history of their social situatedness and the trans(per)formance of their self-representations. Bringing this discussion to a temporary close necessitates discussing the linkages between the performance of identity through social relation and the enactment of trans(per)formative pedagogy.

The concept of critical or radical pedagogy has been much discussed in South and Central America and the United States over the past fifteen to twenty years. Tracing, in a very general way, some of the important theoretical moves and political stakes shaping its development should illumine the contributions trans(per)formative pedagogy makes as a theoretical construct and potential practice. One important moment in the move away from traditional liberal educational theories can be seen in the formation of critical reproduction theory. Drawing on the work of such theorists as Althusser, Bourdieu, and Gramsci, critical reproduction theorists like Henry Giroux have called attention to the ways in which the educational structure and setting sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly reproduces relations of domination and oppression.[7] In their critical analyses of the educational system and its latent mission, critical reproduction theorists have focused on how economic relations, patterns of cultural interaction and the function of the hegemonic state come to be reproduced through various apparatuses, not the least of which is American schooling. While these modes of critical exploration differ in their specific foci, they bear the similarity of delineating, as Giroux has put it, "critical pedagogy as a set of conditions articulated within the context of a particular political project."[8]

Although consistently interested in socially relevant theorization regarding the production of subjectivity, knowledge and agency (especially in the context of critical pedagogy's "resistance theory"), early forms of critical pedagogy have come under criticism from new social theorists and feminist scholars.[9] As a result, the pedagogy that has evolved through these critiques lends itself to the formation of a theory of trans(per)formance as both performance and pedagogical practice. Beginning with the assertion that what is perceived as the

struggle over meaning or signification is always more than merely the struggle over language, images and textuality, articulating a trans(per)formative pedagogy begins by making three important assumptions.

First, that identity must be understood as a negotiated performance involving narratives of self (as autonomous ego, as historicized community member, and as an agent in the cosmos). These narratives work as performatives within a sociogeny that while always socially constructed, represents and reproduces real effects on actual bodies and material experiences. Second, that the objects and subjects of critical reflection, action, or study are always dialogically related, one informing the other, and each largely determining the parameters by which its other shall encounter it. Finally, a trans(per)formative pedagogy assumes the subject's investigation (an active working through) of those auto-theorizations that have served to make seamless and coherent its sense of fixity and being. Organized with these assumptions as a guiding framework, trans(per)formative pedagogical practice necessarily invokes ambivalence. Its enactment demands, really, that students and teachers in various institutional settings (schools, the military, churches, media, government organizations, etc.) engage the troubling features of their own beginnings. Equipped with the above assumptions, prepared to pay the emotional costs of enacting trans(per)formance, and operating with a profound sense of ambivalence, what effects does an engagement in trans(per)formative pedagogy promise? Patricia Alleyne-Dettmers imagines a rather hopeful set of possibilities in her article "Ancestral Voices."

Alleyne-Dettmers' piece examines the annual Carnival that takes place in Notting Hill, London, paying particular attention to what she calls "aesthetic cultural representations" evidenced in the practice of masquerade. Alleyne-Dettmers discusses how members of marginalized communities "forge" their own identity through performance, focusing on ways their enactments of communal self-hood constitute a response to material and cultural conditions produced through uneven social relations. Alleyne-Dettmers identifies this process as "meta-masking" and says that it "relates to the power of Carnival to express, define and explore national and indeed other identities, if only in play." "At every level" she suggests, "the process of meta-masking involves a movement away from the historical fragmentation and cultural denigration of the colonial legacy towards the ongoing quest for some semblance of cultural wholeness."[10] Meta-masking as a concept helps Alleyne-Dettmers trace how cultural signifiers go through a process of "break-up and disintegration to integration and reconstruction" taking "into account all the historical, sociological and cultural factors that metamorphose to produce the newly constructed…identity."[11] Alleyne-Dettmers suggests that performances of communal narratives allow popular images (even those accompanying brutal histories of colonization and "break-up") to be used as "pre-requisites for

reintegration, re-creation and new growth." Thus, the performance of history, she argues, "provides an outlet for memory…rooted in the mediative, healing and reintegrative processes of the meta-mas."[12] While Alleyne-Dettmers attributes the Notting Hill carnival performance with liberative power, I see the negotiated performance of narratives of self as possessing a more local and immediate potential.

Rather than providing "the medium for a new sense of reconciliation and ultimate healing in the wake of other problems,"[13] the activity enabled through trans(per)formative pedagogy provides a context wherein individualized acts of mourning, and working through can take place. Instead of creating a way to change the world, trans(per)formative cultural activity encourages one to change how one understands, invents, and represents one's place and possibility in a world that would represent itself as woefully static and unyielding in the face of private and collective suffering. Still, translating the notion of identity as performance into the realm of pedagogy requires altering how we understand the relationship between "objects of study'" and the subjects who study them. Giroux's consideration of pedagogy in the study of culture illumines the importance of disrupting ideas that force subjects and objects of study into a relationship of binary opposition.

Giroux's reflection on Cultural Studies as a "preeminently political and oppositional practice" and the salience of pedagogy to its social concerns, supports the contention set forth in *Troubling Beginnings,* that a trans(per)formative pedagogy must refute and re-conceptualize accepted understandings of the relationship between objects of study and those subjects who examine them.[14] Perhaps most germane to trans(per)formative pedagogy, is Giroux's suggestion that the postdisciplinary nature of some instances of cultural studies theorization makes it particularly useful in advancing a pedagogical practice capable of "questioning the very conditions under which knowledge and identities are produced."[15] Drawing support from Raymond Williams' early reflections on pedagogy, Giroux posits that postdisciplinary pedagogy responds to the problem of the "relationships between knowledge and power, language and experience, ethics and authority, student agency and transformative politics, and teacher location and student formations."[16] Trans(per)formative pedagogy, like Giroux's "postdisciplinary pedagogy," examines the intersection between culture and power. Indeed, it takes the struggle over signification of self to actually encode an antagonism and contestation over culture itself. Consequently, trans(per)formative approaches to teaching and knowledge production acknowledge, honor and respond to the situatedness of so-called objects of study and the subjects they encounter. This response comes not only in the form of recognizing what intellectual and cultural narratives have produced the investigator's questions and methods, but it also supports a relationship between the investigator and that presumably

external object it studies. In this way, a postdisciplinary (or a-disciplinary) trans(per)formative pedagogy troubles the subject/object binary that structures most practices of knowledge production and teaching, and highlights its political nature. Peggy Phelan's engagement with the politics of performance as they relate to pedagogical practices bolsters the third important assumption necessary to the enactment of a trans(per)formative pedagogy.[17]

By providing a context for active ambivalence, trans(per)formative pedagogy performs its own most crucial work, for ambivalence and discomfort function as the code keys that allow one to momentarily glimpse the terrifying contingency that binds stories of self with social structures of force and nuances of psyche, in the realm of sociogeny. Gendered, raced, classed, indeed, "differenced," subjectivity hangs here, clinging to the ribbons of representation that cover over sites of abjection, hide loss, and naturalize trauma in the service of social/psychical coherence. Peggy Phelan sees the classroom as the ultimate setting in which to engage and restage the performance of power-knowledge ubiquitous to Western institutions of higher learning that privilege acquisition and control and strategically ignore important facts of disappearance and loss.[18] The pedagogy Phelan outlines attributes a comfort with misunderstanding as the source for hope, as that which will bring about the resolution of social and intrapsychic conflict.

> *It is in the attempt to walk (and live) on the rackety bridge between self and other-and not the attempt to arrive at one side or the other-that we discover real hope.* That walk is our always suspended performance-in the classroom, in the political field, in relation to one another and to ourselves. The inevitability of our failure to remain walking *on* the bridge (when the storms come we keep rushing for the deceptive "safety" of one side or the other) guarantees on the necessity of hope.[19] (italics hers)

In Phelan's vision, comfort in the face of difference derives from an acceptance of the disappearance of understanding, the release of a sense of betrayal, the achievement of hope.

The visions Giroux and Phelan weave speak of their desire to see being in the world differently. As was evident in the previous chapter, Riggs and Smith also display a hopeful longing for a workable relationship with difference, a difference that can matter without undermining community or civil dialogue. While the trans(per)formance we have attempted to outline and encourage does not share these hopeful visions, it is not a call to pessimism or nihilistic action without goals or a sense of the social good. We must insist, rather, on a kind of radical hopelessness, a sense that we cannot act under the sign of hope when history has repeatedly reversed the effect of that sign, making it a burden that stills social movement and personal accountability. Because comfort has never

been a simple possibility attainable after one accepts the truth of misunderstanding, and the inevitability of not being able to understand, trans(per)formance strongly resists hope and calls for something more difficult. It calls for and necessitates an ambivalent facing of the everyday terrors that make one.

The trans(per)formative acts and pedagogy we must challenge ourselves to hazard, take seriously the experience of psychic interiority and the utilization of critical metaphors from psychoanalysis to trace their sources and effects in the register of representation and the social Real. Because terror hides, because trauma obfuscates, because what is troubling recedes, trans(per)formative action requires, ultimately, that one chase ghosts, that one seek shadows, and that, above all, one do so even while continuing to tell the stories that make and unmake one.

1. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988)

2. Lipsitz, 12

3. Lipsitz, 85

4. Lipsitz, 228

5. Lipsitz, 68 He says, in fact, that "structural forces do not create movements for social change—people do."

6. Lipsitz, 237

7. See, for example, Henry Giroux, "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis," *Harvard Educational Review,* 53, (1983): 257–93.

8. Henry Giroux, "Disturbing the Peace: writing in the cultural studies classroom," *College Literature,* vol. 20, No. 2 (June 1993): 16.

9. For an excellent discussion and critique of the way critical pedagogy has strictly opposed human agency to structural forces and the non-dialogical picture it has often painted, see Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux's *Education Under Siege: The Conservative Liberal and Radical Debate over Schooling,* (Boston: Bergin and Garvey, 1985). Their cogent critique highlights how a dis-articulated view of the subject produces a theory that cannot develop a gender and race critique, and does not account for the internalization of oppression. Additionally, for a very nice collection of feminist responses to and critiques of critical pedagogy that utilize post-structuralist theory, see Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore's *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy,* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

10. Alleyne-Dettmers, Patricia Tamara, "Ancestral Voices, *Trevini*—A Case Study of Meta-masking in the Notting Hill Carnival" *Journal of Material Culture,* (1997): 201

11. Alleyn-Dettmers, p. 204

12. Alleyn-Dettmers, p. 205

13. Alleyne-Dettmers, p. 217

[14] Henry Giroux, "Disturbing the Peace: writing in the cultural studies classroom," *College Literature,* Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 1993): 13

[15] Giroux, 16

[16] Giroux, 17

[17] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the politics of performance,* (New York: Routledge, 1993)

[18] Peggy Phelan, 173

[19] Peggy Phelan, 174

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