Unsociable Poetry: Antagonism and Abstraction in Contemporary Feminized Poetics

by

Amy De’Ath

M.A., University College London, 2009
B.A. (Hons), University of East Anglia, 2007

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

© Amy De’Ath

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2017

Copyright in this work rests with the author. Please ensure that any reproduction or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.
Approval

Name: Amy De’Ath

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Title: Unsociable Poetry: Antagonism and Abstraction in Contemporary Feminized Poetics

Examining Committee: Chair: Clint Burnham
                                    Associate Professor
                          Stephen Collis
                          Senior Supervisor
                          Professor
                          Jeff Derksen
                          Co-Supervisor
                          Professor
                          Carolyn Lesjak
                          First Reader
                          Associate Professor
                          Jaleh Mansoor
                          Second Reader
                          Assistant Professor
                          Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory
                          University of British Columbia
                          Roxanne Panchasi
                          Internal Examiner
                          Associate Professor
                          Department of History
                          Christopher Nealon
                          External Examiner
                          Professor
                          Department of English
                          Johns Hopkins University

Date Defended/Approved: March 28, 2017
Abstract

*Unsociable Poetry: Antagonism and Abstraction in Contemporary Feminized Poetics* argues that feminized poetry aesthetically theorizes non-conceptual and otherwise hidden dimensions of gendered and racialized experience, in order to show how such experience is form-determined by late capitalist modes of value production and the socially-binding forces of real abstractions. This “unsociable poetry” mobilizes two key dynamics—abstraction and antagonism—both of which can be thought of as concepts, categories, and processes, sometimes all at once. Theorizing the relation between aesthetic abstractions and capitalist abstractions, I demonstrate how feminized poets articulate and critique the effects of deindustrialization, and the forms of positive representation advanced by the liberal politics of recognition that serve to reproduce colonial structures of domination. I document a variety of antagonisms in their work, showing how these arise from the contradictions of social life as it is dominated—that is, form-determined—by value. To this end, I read Bernadette Mayer’s and Catherine Wagner’s work as antagonistic poetics of social reproduction, tracking forms of recalcitrance in their poetry through systematic dialectics; Marie Annharte Baker’s and Dawn Lundy Martin’s poems as modes of *transformative* antagonism which refuse the very ground upon which racial representation is staged; Claudia Rankine’s use of tone as an aesthetic mode uniquely suited to critique the systematic reinscription of blackness as a real abstraction; Bhanu Kapil’s mobilization of a *counter-(re)productive negativity* that is able to aesthetically trace the negative dialectics of the value-form itself; and Alli Warren’s poetry as an attempt to collapse the distance between essence and appearance, to abolish capitalist mediation, even if it knows the inadequacy of poetry to this task. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that dialectical reading—and specifically, systematic dialectics—is key to understanding the apparently isolated moments of an integrated totality, one in which gendered and racialized states of precarity often appear formally disconnected from the economic relations out of which they emerge. In this way, reading feminized poetry dialectically leads us to a meaningful understanding of value as the ultimate abstraction, the one that propels capital in its moving contradiction, and consequently as the real abstraction that shapes all others.
**Keywords:** Feminized poetry; racialization; abstraction; antagonism; value; systematic dialectics
To Sean
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was completed on the unceded and traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Sto:lo First Nations. Living on this land, I have been compelled to confront many uncomfortable truths about my position here, and I feel grateful for what I’ve learned. I hope to continue that learning, to not let it fall away, when I leave.

Thank you to Steve Collis for his constant support, thoughtful feedback, his activism and his kindness, especially in including me in family gatherings when I had no family of my own around. And thank you to Jeff Derksen, whose confidence in me at every stage helped me to find my own confidence, and whose keen critical eye encouraged me never to be unambitious. I am deeply grateful to both of you for gently helping me to see where this project was going and what I really wanted to say.

Thank you to my first reader, Carolyn Lesjak, for providing me with a model of scholarship to which I can only aspire. Who could wish for a more incisive reader, especially one you can meet at the bar later. And thank you to my second reader, Jaleh Mansoor, for her encouragement, and for understanding and affirming the stakes of this project to me.

Since I arrived at SFU in August 2011, I have been welcomed, professionally supported, and intellectually challenged, and I’m especially grateful to Clint Burnham, David Chariandy, Diana Solomon, and Michelle Levy. As well, I want to thank Christa Gruninger and Wendy Harris for all the visible and invisible work they do. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Department of English and the Dean of Graduate Studies. During the latter years of my PhD programme, this project was also supported by a Leverhulme Trust Study Abroad Studentship.

I have been lucky to be cheered on in recent years by some exceptional feminist scholars, in particular Andrea Brady, Sarah Brouillette, and Marina Vishmidt, whose brilliance—in writing and in life—has taught me much about how to be critical. I am also
extremely grateful for the encouragement and academic support of Fred Moten, Juliana Spahr, Susan Rudy, Ben Hickman, Nat Hurley, and especially, Chris Nealon.

For all the conversations, friendship, and reasons to keep going, thank you to Walt Hunter, Lindsay Turner, Sam Solomon, Zoe Sutherland, Marija Cetinic, Sophie Seita, Brent Bellamy, Josh Robinson, Eva-Lynn Jagoe, Myka Tucker-Abramson, Keston Sutherland, Jeff Diamanti, Imre Szeman, Sarah Bull, Norman Mack, and Megan Farnel. Thanks too, to Sianne Ngai, Chris Chen, Joshua Clover, and Jasper Bernes, for your support at various stages of this process and your A-1 analysis, to which this dissertation is indebted. It also owes a lot to the anonymous work of the Endnotes collective.


Thank you Jack De’Ath, for reminding me how to laugh through this, for your kind heart, and for being so clever and infinitely cooler than me. And I’m grateful to the rest of my supportive family: Dave Gibbons, Gill Clayton, Jericho and Elias Clayton-Gibbons, Deborah De’Ath, Kate Fox, and of course, the Tunbridges and the O’Briens, especially my dear friend Teresa O’Brien, who kindly read through sections of this dissertation for me, and Cliona O’Brien, for her superb company during the final stages.

Living thousands of miles away from my funny, empathetic parents was by far the toughest thing about this PhD. Thank you to my mum, Sue De’Ath, for her discerning intelligence and disarming openness, and to my anti-macho dad, Paul De’Ath, for being so perceptive, unpretentious and unpretending (I also accuse you of being a communist). I hope this makes you both proud, but more than that I wish the relative freedom and autonomy that I’ve enjoyed, and which you didn’t have, might in some form be a possibility for you now.
And last, but of course, not least: thank you Sean O’Brien, for all we’ve learned together so far, and for so unhesitatingly giving your attention to my various struggles with this document, especially when you had your own to worry about. I dedicate it to you, my most careful reader. Thank you always for your feminism, your communism, and your colourful, intelligent love.
## Table of Contents

Approval .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iii  
Dedication ......................................................................................................................... v  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... vi  
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. ix  

### Introduction: Forms and Appearances ................................................................. 1  
Feminized Poetry and Totality ....................................................................................... 6  
Abstraction | Value .............................................................................................................. 14  
Reading Antagonism ....................................................................................................... 24  
Capital, Gender, and Poetry Criticism ........................................................................... 29  
Chapter Summaries ......................................................................................................... 38  
A Note on Terminology .................................................................................................... 45  

### Chapter One  Feminized Poetry and Dialectical Reading ............................. 48  
Awkward Prosody .......................................................................................................... 58  
Systematic Dialectics ..................................................................................................... 67  
On What’s Invisible ......................................................................................................... 75  
“My New Job” ................................................................................................................ 80  
Dialectical Reading ........................................................................................................ 84  

### Chapter Two  Anti-Poesis: Transformative Antagonisms ............................. 95  
Reading Between Blackness and Indigeneity ............................................................... 102  
“Help me I’m a poor Indian” ........................................................................................ 107  
Material antagonisms .................................................................................................... 122  
Captive genders .............................................................................................................. 132  

### Chapter Three  Black Ontology and Real Abstractions:  
Claudia Rankine’s Citizen ......................................................................................... 137  
Citizen and Pessimism .................................................................................................... 142  
Abstraction and Tone ..................................................................................................... 159  
Flesh and Visceral Abstractions .................................................................................... 163  
Coda ............................................................................................................................... 175  

### Chapter Four  Open Secrets: Value and Abj ection in Feminized Poetry .... 182  
The Value Theory of Labour .......................................................................................... 186  
Aesthetic Abstractions .................................................................................................. 186  
L(a)y Down in the Abject .............................................................................................. 200  
Audible Accumulation .................................................................................................. 215  
Coda ............................................................................................................................... 225
Introduction:
Forms and Appearances

[. . .] As if the planet
were a woman, living, turned against us,
and the stars pin-hole cameras in a lacquer of burning
bark around a tree . . .

—Andrea Brady, “Pyrotechne”¹

In the Grundrisse, Karl Marx famously argues that human beings are ruled by abstractions.²
By this, he means that the apparent freedom of individuals—the freedom to work, to
independently exchange goods, to have a family—appears as freedom only as a result of a
complex, constantly reconstituting array of abstractions whose simplest expression is value.
Capitalist abstractions may not be something we can clutch at, but they are real: they arise
from the concrete actions of individuals, in the process of production and in the sphere of
circulation. As such they arise “behind our backs,” independent of cognition and outside of
language.

Yet the abstract, as it often figures in conversations about poetics, is more usually
associated with the idea of formal experimentation and the nonfigurative, as opposed to the
material and content-driven operations of language. In philosophy, and especially German
Idealism, the abstract is commonly associated with cognition, and the process by which
human consciousness brings the particular—the rich complexity of the material world—into
subordinate relationship with the universal through the development of concepts. Broadly
speaking, then, “the abstract” is defined in opposition to “the concrete.” At the same time,
as is especially the case in financial literature and journalism, it can also be a byword used to

assert the seemingly impenetrable complexity, obfuscation, and immateriality of financial transactions.³

But these oppositions miss the objectivity of economic abstractions in a capitalist society, their status as “objective powers that determine individual existence, even in its most hidden recesses,”⁴ as well as their palpability as active forces, in Sianne Ngai’s words, “the socially binding or plasticizing action of capitalist abstractions.”⁵ With this in mind, we might consider a reversal of Robert Creeley’s oft-cited formulation: a proposal that in fact, content is never more than an extension of form. In the years since the 2008 global financial crisis, there has emerged a renewed critical effort to understand real abstractions as both the source and the consequence of a process in which the organization of capitalist society is form-determined by value.

This dissertation argues, first, that feminized poetry constitutes an important part of that theoretical effort, and that it does so by pursuing a dimension of “theory” which draws its power from the dialectics of aesthetic experience. Second, it argues that feminized poetry—by which I mean poetry that emerges from the subjective experiences and histories of those who occupy a structurally subordinate gendered position in capitalist societies—deserves better reading methods than those currently dominant both inside and outside of the academy, and in this regard makes a case for the necessity of theory, and especially, Marxian theory. Ultimately, I contend that the poets considered here express a desire to transcend the separation and isolation that, increasingly, defines subjective experiences of capitalism. As such, their work grapples with the fragmentary nature of lived experience, in which moments of a systematic whole take on forms that appear to be disconnected from that whole. As Diane Elson, a major contributor to the field of value-form theory, noted in 1979,

³ This is Leigh Claire La Berge’s observation. In her essay, “Rules of Abstraction,” she points out that financial print culture tended to describe finance as complex at the same time as academic studies described it as abstract. La Berge notes in addition that the same print culture also moved to describing finance as “simple” – a dichotomy that warrants investigation into “how and when finance is both experienced and critiqued as pivoting between representable/unrepresentable, simple/complex, and concrete/abstract.” See Leigh Claire La Berge, “Rules of Abstraction: Methods and Discourses of Finance,” Radical History Review 118 (2014): 94-5.
those who experience capitalist exploitation do not need a theory to tell that something is wrong. The problem is that the experience of capitalist exploitation is fragmentary and disconnected, so that it is difficult to tell exactly what is wrong, and what can be done to change it.\(^6\)

As we will see, for most people this process spells disaster of one kind or another.

With these theoretical and political coordinates in mind, I have tried to avoid the temptation to make feminized poets and their work stand in as representatives of a cause—the cause of feminist poetry—not simply because gender is only one aspect of the political concerns these poets express, but because gender in their work appears less as a declaration of feminist politics and more as a series of constitutive moments in a totality of social relations and its reproduction. That is not to say that the poets studied here don’t identify as feminists. Indeed, I think all of them do. But in a time when the popular idea of feminism has become so malleable that it can be used to endorse the imperialist death-machine that was Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy, and when feminism in academia is still so often just a by-word for various modes of affirmative white feminism, it seems wrong to enlist poets whose work would rage against such things, or is concerned first and foremost with “race,” in defence of feminism without at the same time mounting a critique of the entire discourse as it stands today. Still, it is worth noting that my approach differs from many intersectional feminisms in that it proposes a Marxian form of “intersectionality” quite removed from the investments and methodologies commonly associated with that term, which is often employed to denote narrow forms of essentializing identity politics, Foucauldian understandings of coinciding vectors of power, or theories of queer assemblage, among other approaches. Rather, I argue that categories of race, class, gender, and so on are “real abstractions” produced and reinscribed by capitalism. While it is impossible to guess what might emerge from their abolition, the artist-duo Claire Fontaine’s description of “the whatever singularity […] the whateverness of everybody as the open secret that social classes hide”\(^7\) seems a poignant way to think of it.

---


Advancing a thesis on the capitalist production of abstract identity categories, this project reads Bernadette Mayer’s 1970s and 1980s work, and the twenty-first century work of Catherine Wagner, Marie Annharte Baker, Dawn Lundy Martin, Claudia Rankine, Bhanu Kapil, and Alli Warren as “unsociable poetry,” to argue that much feminized poetry in the twenty-first century invokes two key dynamics—abstraction and antagonism—both of which can be thought of as concepts, categories, and processes, sometimes all at once. Indeed, these poets “theorize” abstraction and antagonism, recognizing the conceptual and affective contours of each of these dynamics as sites for thought and political argument. I read in their work lateral and affect-driven explorations of the relationship between cognitive and aesthetic abstractions on the one hand, and real abstractions on the other. At the same time, the following chapters trace and theorize an ensemble of antagonisms: forms of temporal and spatial antagonisms emerging from the dialectical contradictions of Bernadette Mayer’s and Catherine Wagner’s poetry; modes of what I call transformative antagonisms leveled at the politics of representation in Marie Annharte Baker’s and Dawn Lundy Martin’s poetry; tone as an antagonistic strategy of abstraction and a critique of antiblackness in Claudia Rankine’s poetry; and finally, two different forms of aesthetic negativity in Bhanu Kapil’s and Alli Warren’s poetry, which I theorize in terms of negative (and systematic) dialectics. I mean all of these things when I describe such work as unsociable: a term that hints at a subjective recalcitrance, prevalent across the poetry in this study, to being exploited and immiserated by capitalist “social relations.”

But antagonistic affects don’t disrupt capitalism, even if they might pose some minor inconvenience to business-as-usual, or mark the presence of a general mood, or level of desperation or poverty, that might be drawn practically into political action. Unlike riots, blockades, occupations and strikes, negative emotions and affects pose little threat to the sedimented and embedded structures of late capitalism. Indeed, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have demonstrated, anticapitalist sentiments can be vital to capitalism’s continuity.8 Contrary to the implicit mood of certain feminist accounts that hold up forms of care labour, ideas of “militant empathy,” or radical softness as a weapon, as ways of resisting capital’s violent assault on human flourishing, part of my aim in this study is to show how

necessary open antagonism really is. Indeed, many of the readings in the following pages are, in part, attempts to consider how recognizing antagonism when we see it—especially when it is aimed at the very structures from which we benefit, or at our individual selves as (inevitable) representatives of those structures, whether that means whiteness, masculinity, cis- or hetero-normativity, settler-colonialism, or current or past forms of class privilege—is vital to any abolitionist effort to change the world, or at least our individual role within it.

The news that poetry is not revolution is, by now, nothing new. It is my contention throughout this dissertation, however, that poetry itself a mode of theoretical inquiry, and that an attention to poetic form, affect, and structure can render intelligible a whole range of feminized antagonisms. As such, abstraction and antagonism in these works propel us towards visceral understandings of the material conditions through which those who are not cis-gendered male are exploited and immiserated – in the West, through the politics of austerity and changes in labour conditions, and through official discourses of recognition and the politics of multiculturalism which actually serve to reproduce colonial structures of domination. While lacking the logical clarity and argumentative progressions of “straight theory,” the poetic works in this study make possible “a rationality premised on sensuous non-knowledge” based on a form of experience that unfolds beyond the identificatory logic of conceptual thought. I argue that the aesthetic power of “the ‘cognitive yet nonconceptual character’ of poetry” to draw the subject into its internal dynamics is a crucial feminist tool, given how the resilient dynamics of gender, race, and class continue to morph ever-more innovatively, and ever-more counterintuitively—or is it intuitively?—into socially-acceptable forms of appearance.

9 See, for example, the artist Lora Mathis’s work (http://www.upworthy.com/embracing-your-emotional-self-without-judgment-has-never-been-so-beautiful) and her blog entry, “On Radical Softness,” http://loramathis.com/post/140474165618/on-radical-softness
Feminized Poetry and Totality

Despite the prolific and explicitly anti-capitalist output of feminist and/or feminized poets in the UK, US and Canada in the twenty-first century, feminist criticism focused on bringing analyses of contemporary modes of capitalist accumulation into direct conversation with feminized poetry remains relatively sparse. By this I mean critical analysis of changes in labour practices and modes of capitalist value-production—for example, the global restructuring of labour that began in the 1970s and continues today, the consolidation and development of a postindustrial economy and with it the “feminization” of the workforce, a hypercommodified culture and increasingly financialized economy—have rarely, though with important exceptions, been discussed in explicit relation to the formal techniques, styles and subject matter of the work of “experimental” or “avant-garde” feminized poets. Yet, as I hope to show, contemporary feminized poetry clearly reflects and provides an aesthetic critique of these processes, the types of gendered, racialized and classed social organization they produce, and the lives that they shape. By re-focusing the lens to show what is already there, this dissertation is an attempt to begin providing a set of co-ordinates—a theory and a critique—adequate to a poetics that often lacks the kind of masculinized energetic gestures that have come to characterize much anti-capitalist or crisis poetics written by cis-gendered men; projects which often announce their anticapitalist politics, and thus their overriding “meaning,” more explicitly, and which sometimes—and certainly more often than feminized poetry—come with their own hermeneutic guides in the form of corresponding critical essays. ¹²

¹² A complex and noteworthy example of this might be the disturbing drama of Rob Halpern’s eroticization of the dead body of a Guantánamo detainee in his book *Common Place*. Here, the queer politics of Halpern’s representations of sexual deviancy are a crucial part of the speaker’s self-abasement as he imagines sex with the dead detainee. On the one hand, queerness is inherent to the extreme transgression of the book’s somatics, its necrophilia, which Halpern dialectically proposes as a reaching for an “other-world,” making this particular instance of the carceral lyric into a queer worlding project; a poetic prefiguring of other (communist) worlds. On the other hand, a problem arises because the poem’s queer desire cannot be separated out from its disturbing dynamics of colonial dominance, and if the queer particularity of the embodied speaker serves as a guarantee of the poem’s truth-content, it ends up becoming a justificatory mechanism for this dominance. Perhaps, here, we encounter a limit-point of a queer project grounded in a politics of desire. In the process of pushing back against liberal representations of a pedestrianized homonormativity where the distinction between deviance and normativity is collapsed, and attempting to re-assert that distinction by trespassing the limits of liberal recuperability (since while of course it is now officially at least permissible to be gay in the military, necrophilia will never (or at least not anytime soon) become permissible within a liberal framework), *Common Place* asserts an alarming racial politics. Andrea Brady’s talk at New York University in April 2016 was very helpful to my thinking here: Brady’s comparison of Halpern’s detainee “known to excess” with the figure of
Much of this feminized poetry, especially the portion of it written by poets of colour, is particularly concerned with experiences of racialization or Indigeneity in a supposedly “post-racial” era, where, as Jodi Melamed writes, “official antiracisms have established control over the discourses of rationality.” In similar terms, Anthony Reed describes this “official ‘color-blindness’” as a “mechanism for shaping allowable discourse [. . .] narrowing and policing the range of the thinkable and imaginable while presenting itself as the imperfect culmination of past struggles.” As becomes clear in the work of the poets studied here, the material politics of contemporary antiracist knowledges unfold in dynamic relation to capital’s history of colonial expansion, expropriation, slavery and genocide. One important premise of this project, therefore, is that no discussion of feminist poetry and capitalism can take place outside of this context. If, as Glen Coulthard asserts, the colonial relation is the framework—the condition of possibility—through which capital has historically ensured its continued production of surplus-value, then the gendered exploitation and expropriation of the labour of feminized bodies has provided a different, co-extensive kind of constant, and remains another constitutive element in the dialectics of capitalist modernity.

As Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati and other Marxist-feminists first argued in the 1970s, unpaid reproductive labour—the physical and often affect-based labour of housework, childbearing, childcare, care of the elderly, for example—has always been a precondition for capitalist accumulation. And while recent Marxist-feminist analyses have shown how many previously unwaged reproductive activities, from healthcare to ready-meals to sex work, have become commodified and made profitable in themselves, they also seek—following Federici’s insistence that the question of “reproduction” must be rethought from a planetary perspective—to understand these changes in direct relation to the global restructuring of the labour-market and especially the

---


relocation of women from the Global South and former Soviet countries to become, as Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland observe, the “social reproducers of the North.” As Vishmidt and Sutherland point out, Marxist-feminist theory is expanding to more adequately “consider sexuality and race, bringing into visibility the technologies of racialisation and illegalisation that prop up accumulation through the economic and social de-valorisation of (the labour of) many, if not most, of the global population.”\(^{15}\) As my dissertation aims to show, such “technologies of racialization and illegalization” are precisely the kind of things that many feminist poets in the twenty-first century, attentive to the situated historicity of their own work and subjective positions, are writing about. The structures and functions of the capitalist state through which these technologies operate, along with the changing nature of work in postindustrialized economies (including, especially, the scarcity and precarization of work in an era of diminishing demand for labour) as well as the various forms and frequencies of violence imposed on feminized and racialized people—from pay differentials to cultural expectations to gender violence—are the subject matter, the content and the form, of much contemporary feminized poetry today.

This is not to say that the poetry in this study expresses or even implicitly shares the specific Marxist-feminist, dialectical, and Black and Indigenous decolonizing analyses through which I have chosen to read it (although this is entirely probable in some cases, even as it raises the colossal question of what models of the political drawn into aesthetic forms actually do). Rather, my claim is that feminized poets have something important to add to these structural critiques, something locatable, for example, in the way the following lines of Myung Mi Kim’s poem, “Exordium,” from her 2002 book Commons, are able to rematerialize a number of abstract relations in quick succession, activating them by way of the affective charge produced in part by a mixing of contexts, connotations and scales:

Chroniclers enter texts and trade. Was to children dying before their mothers.
Accounts and recounting. A nation’s defense. Names of things made by human hands. Making famine where abundance lies.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland, “The Soft Disappointment of Prefiguration” (Centre for Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex, June 2015).

\(^{16}\) Myung Mi Kim, Commons (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 4.
Abstractions such as “a nation’s defense,” or the process of “making famine” are placed beside things “made by human hands” and an image of dying children that to a postmodern reader might, before anything else, conjure the ubiquitous image (as opposed to the real) of dying children as seen on Red Cross and Save the Children appeals. While Kim’s disjunctive sentences are an obvious sign of the influence of Bay Area and Language poetics in her work, the point of a stanza such as this is not so much to play with polysemy or ambiguity through syllogistic movement, or de-link the sign from its referent as a political act in itself, but to challenge the acceptance, and seeming obviousness, of global economic and social arrangements. The implication is that between the busy trading activities of “chroniclers” and “accounts”—the former a provocative descriptor for financial traders and the latter both suggesting the work of accountants and approximately mirroring the semantics of the first line (since “recounting” and “chronicling” are not dissimilar in meaning)—an important dimension of historical consciousness is lost. Kim’s sentences, then, suggest that “a nation’s defense,” or perhaps even a nation-state in itself, is not a historical necessity or inevitability. They serve as a reminder that “things made by human hands” are not inevitably commodities. And they point to the uneven development of a world where, contrary to capitalist narrative, famine is “made”: in other words, where famine is a political-economic, rather than an inevitable, phenomenon.

Yet, noting all of this still falls short of answering the question of what poetry does for feminism, precisely, that theory cannot. Perhaps we can start by noticing how Kim’s work contests political, social and economic relations by linking them causally to specific experiences, materials, and bodies: it is arguably the affective charge of this connection, heightened by the mechanical syntax and monotone grammar of Kim’s short and statement-like sentences, that renders the abstractions she invokes paradoxically visceral and thus disturbing. But at the risk of stating the obvious, it is also crucial to note that we would not encounter this kind of information through a passage of theoretical or documentary prose. As my chapter summaries outline, Wagner’s extended poem “My New Job” documents an abusive and gendered relationship with capitalism through formal characteristics such as distorted syntax and awkward rhythms which contribute to a durational and low-level aesthetic malaise; Kapil’s technique of compiling extra-textual “leftovers” of biographical notes, and switching between first- and third-person, complicates conventional narratives of victimhood; and Rankine’s Citizen uses a distinctly anti-universalist “Lyric ‘I’” to signal a
differentiated, racialized, order of isolation, where tonal evenness is paradoxically and disturbingly imbued with the quotidian currents of structural racism.

In their inclusive, vernacular character, and reference to a social totality, I argue that the poetic works in this study also suggest important links between Marxist-feminist analyses, Marxist analyses of surplus populations and expulsions from the formal economy, and theories of anti-blackness and of Indigeneity. To paraphrase Chris Chen, “race” is not a property or attribute of identities or groups, but an array of ascriptive procedures that structure social life, and must be conceived of as a structural coercion rather than a cultural particularity or deviation from socio-political norms. While I contextualize this understanding of “race” within a history of black Marxist thought through the work of Stuart Hall and Barbara and Karen Fields, placing it in conversation with Afro-pessimist, poststructuralist, and phenomenological theories of blackness from Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Saidiya Hartman—where a surprising array of Marxian vectors emerge—I also place it in dialogue, primarily through my discussion of the Anishinaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker’s work, with materialist analyses of Indigenous politics and critiques of the liberal politics of recognition by Coulthard, Melamed, and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez.

At the same time, my reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* challenges Marxian analyses insofar as her work suggests that that which is excluded ontologically from the premises of linguistic or symbolic meaning makes no sense in the language of structure. Through a close reading of *Citizen*, I refer to the theoretical tendency in black studies known as Afro-pessimism, which posits “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of

---


the Human in a constitutive way,”—a divide necessitating an ontological status of social death for the black subject—and suggests that Marxist cultural theory’s focus on the wage fails to account for gratuitous violence against black bodies, what Frank B. Wilderson calls “a relation of terror” in contrast to the rational/symbolic wage-relation that defines the subject of Marxist discourse. But rather than focus on Afro-pessimist theory’s philosophical incommensurability with Marxist analyses that consider processes of racialization in terms of structural unemployment, expulsion from the formal economy, and vulnerability to state violence, this project seeks to show how work by feminist poets such as Rankine appears to be in conversation with both of these frameworks, and may even suggest ways to negotiate, reject or expand their analytical categories.

Insofar as the ambiguous aesthetic meanings engendered by formal techniques in poetry means that poems occupy a different epistemological register to theoretical writing, they of course provide none of the assurances commonly found there—reported facts, argument proceeding by logic, context and explanation. It should come as no surprise then, that certain characteristics of avant-garde poetry, such as its lack of narrative, opaque semantics, unholy mixing of previous aesthetic styles, and—to borrow a term theorized by Lyn Hejinian—rejection of closure, were in the late twentieth-century cited as proof of poetry’s aptness as a postmodern, post-Fordist aesthetic suitable for an era of global capital which could not be cognitively mapped or represented in culture but which, as Fredric Jameson famously argued, could nevertheless be glimpsed by a viewer willing to concede her own incapacity to give representation to what was no longer glimpsed as Nature, but as Capital.

Jameson’s argument about postmodernism, and particularly his point about the proliferation and incessant mixing of aesthetic styles—in his words, “something like a camp or ‘hysterical’ sublime”—has been largely accepted by Marxist literary and cultural critics since the first publication of “Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” in 1984. But as Sianne Ngai underscores, in the course of making his claim about the decline of

---

21 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 34.
style’s ability to index or map sociohistorical conditions, Jameson himself “relies on stylistic categories throughout Postmodernism to make the historical claims about postmodernism that underlie this very point.” Ngai highlights stylistic categories such as messiness and glossiness as examples of the styles theorized by Jameson, and her 2012 book, Our Aesthetic Categories, draws on these to argue persuasively that the “interesting,” the “cute” and the “zany” together make up the constantly rotating repertoire of aesthetic categories to have emerged from the performance-driven, hypercommodified networks of late capitalism.

Unlike the compartmentalized social fields theorized by Pierre Bourdieu (which have specific histories apart from the social world as a whole), Ngai’s vernacular styles “are not products of restricted fields,” and “by this account they would seem at least theoretically capable of indexing ‘states of the social world’ more directly, thus providing certain advantages for the analysis of culture as a whole.” The tripartite thematic-theoretical framework of aesthetics, affect, and labour that coordinates Ngai’s handling of these inclusive and vernacular categories therefore holds promise for a Marxist-feminist and anti-racist theory of contemporary poetry. Ngai explains that:

It is because the zany, the interesting and the cute index the uncertain status of performing between labor and play, the increasing routing of art and aesthetic experience through the exchange of information, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to commodities that they are ‘about’ production, circulation, and consumption.

Lingering throughout the background of Ngai’s discussion is the question of which aspects of sociohistorical conditions have historically been excluded or perhaps romantically misrepresented by (bourgeois) art and art discourse, at least since the Enlightenment shift towards more supposedly “natural” or realist forms of aesthetic representation. But in Ngai’s argument for the necessity of new aesthetic categories, there is also a consistent implication that twentieth-century Marxist theories of postmodern aesthetics put forward by figures such as Jameson and Terry Eagleton, perceptive as they were in associating a new, spatialized cultural experience with economic globalization, still missed something about the realities of

22 Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, 32.
23 Ibid., 31.
24 Ibid., 13.
contemporary life and work for most people. Indeed, the emphatically inclusive nature of Ngai’s own delineation of paradigmatic categories tacitly responds to Gayatri Spivak’s critique of Jameson’s *Postmodernism* as a theory of cultural dominants desiring to “keep heterogeneity at bay.” As a result of this imperative, Spivak argues, not only does Jameson risk reinforcing cultural dominants by “refusing [emergent heterogeneity] access to the status of the idiom of cultural description”, but also elides the difference between radical and conservative resistance to the dominant. Spivak’s reminder that, “the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union can reveal to us that high-tech postfordism is supported, in the lower ranks, by labor practices that would fit right into old-style industrial capitalism” is also a version of a point echoed more recently in Marxist-feminist arguments about the uneven development of global economies: arguments that have emerged partly in response to the Euro-centrism of theories of semio-capital and “techno-linguistic automatisms” of twenty-first century cognitive labour.25

Perhaps Kim’s “Exordium” can be read as a similar kind of corrective, since her use of a quintessentially postmodern poetic form—one that in many ways neatly follows Ron Silliman’s prescription for “the new sentence”—is not primarily interested in any postmodern aesthetic correlative or enactment of the informational networks, commodified styles, or the giddy zeniths of high finance, even as it may invoke those things. Rather, what Jameson calls “a new depthlessness,” “a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum,” and “a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality,”26 is challenged in Kim’s work by a technique we might think of as the inverse of these heteroglossic formal codes. Ironically, Kim confirms their limitless pliability by inverting their usual significations—and reversing their “contentlessness”—in order to draw attention back from the image to material history, a technique much closer to the kind of rearticulatory poetics theorized and practised by the Canadian poet Jeff Derksen, in which “rearticulation is about disarticulating and

25 Spivak takes care to remind us that while Jameson’s “subject” seems intended to be universal, s/he is nevertheless a subject who goes to museums, who might be found on an escalator in the Bonaventure hotel, or who is in another, less physical way, caught in global communicational networks. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

rearticulating linkages within systems.” The sentence, “Was to children dying before their mothers” brings to mind not only the image of Red Cross appeals, but its status as an image *per se*, a reminder that—as with the line, “names of things made by human hands”—seems to return us to the material and embodied (which is to say, gendered and racialized) realities that form the dialectical counterpart of the abstract relations so central to postmodernist art and theory.

### Abstraction | Value

It is easy to equate the idea of capitalist abstractions with the vast, unseeable global networks of late capitalism and the opaque transactions of finance capital that arose in the long 1980s. But capitalism has always depended on abstraction. First and foremost, it has depended on abstract labour, which emerges from the dual character of labour under capitalism, in the process whereby concrete labour appears as qualitatively different use-values, and abstract labour appears as the value-form. The understandable sense, especially prevalent in rich countries, that capitalist life is *more* abstract than it was in, say, the 1960s, is difficult to substantiate, since as Leigh Claire La Berge puts it, “the assumption of more abstraction is prevalent but never adequately explained, probably because abstraction, by its very nature, is not quantifiable; if it were, it would hardly be abstract.” What is more, the prominence of the idea of capitalist abstractions as a certain type of inscrutable, recently-arrived set of planetary forces (abstractions that, of course, nevertheless exert incredible force) can deflect from the fact that capitalist abstractions also determine relations at the most intimate, often seemingly concrete, levels: in the social atomization that means one lives in particular familial formations, or that one is separated from their co-worker by an office divider, or that one is denied their Jobseeker’s Allowance this week and goes hungry, to pick three of the most obviously “structural” examples.

---

27 Jeff Derksen, “A Conversation,” *Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Moure, Dionne Brand, Marie Annharte Baker, Jeff Derksen and Fred Wah* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2005), 130-1. See also, Derksen’s writing on an urban poetics of the global, an aesthetic practice in which “a cataloguing of forces, effects and practices which, when arrested, can be arranged into a form which gives materiality and denseness to these forces.” *After Euphoria* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2015), 81.

Marx's argument with empiricist models of political economy, which took as their starting point the observable concrete world, is that in order to understand capitalist totality, it is necessary to move analytically from the abstract and towards the concrete. As he writes in the *Grundrisse*, “the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.” The following passage by Tony Smith not only helps to clarify why Marx’s theory begins with abstract labour in order to think about abstraction, but underlines how capitalist abstractions, emerging from the material actions of individuals, have an objective reality:

The notion of abstract labor is not won through a formal cognitive process of abstracting a common feature shared by all commodities. It emerges instead from the *social process* of commodity exchange, a real process that is independent of the subjective cognitive acts of the theorist. And abstract labor is an abstraction that uncovers the essential determination of the object realm under investigation. It captures the intrinsic specificity of a particular form of social production. For both of these reasons labor must be considered as a “real abstraction” rather than a merely formal abstraction.

As Beverley Best underlines, it is only within this particular form of social production, where individuals establish an indifferent relationship to their labour and can easily move from one type of labour to another, that labour can become a *universal* (which is to say, abstract) category. From this simple abstract category, Marx suggests that we can move through successive stages of abstraction to arrive at the determinate particulars of the concrete world. But significantly, he presents this journey as a round-trip, in the process demonstrating the inadequacy of empiricist attempts to account for a differentiated totality:

Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [Vorstellung] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [Begriff], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest

determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. The former is the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins.  

Thus, the concrete appears as a result, and not as a point of departure, in a systematic analysis of capital’s movement, even though, as Marx also stresses, “it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure of observation [Anschauung] and conception.”

On the converse, however, it is important to remember how abstract labour—and subsequently, all capitalist abstractions, “independent of the cognitive acts of the theorist,” emerge from a real process. As the inaugural analyst of real abstraction, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, puts it:

> Abstraction is therefore the effect of the action of men, and not of their thought. In reality, it takes place “behind their backs,” at the blind spot, so to speak, of human consciousness, that is there where the thinking and efforts of men are absorbed by their acts of exchange.

Emphasizing the reality of capitalist abstractions as a palpable force, this dissertation is intended as a contribution to the effort to recover an understanding of materialism as the analysis of real, social abstractions, to borrow Alberto Toscano’s words; a materialism fundamentally opposed, among other things, to the recent emergence of feminist new materialisms, whose understandings of particulate matter as a vital, transhistorical force—

32 The well-known passage continues: “The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, the population, state, several states, etc., but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations, such as division of labor, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labor, division of labor, need, exchange-value, to the level of the State, exchange between nations and world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100-1.

33 Ibid.


matter whose agency preexists and extends beyond the human subject—are already coming to bear on critical interpretations of feminized poetry and ecopoetics.36

But this is a tricky, and so far under-theorized task: how should we think of the relationship between aesthetic abstractions and real abstractions? This question brings forth a related one concerning the ambiguous relation between aesthetic production and commodity production. Marx says little about the aesthetic in the Grundrisse.37 In Capital, however, he observes that “for labour to be designated productive, qualities are required which are utterly unconnected with the specific content of the labour […] hence labour with the same content can be either productive or unproductive.” His differentiation between John Milton, writing Paradise Lost, as an unproductive worker, and the “productive” writer who “turns out work for his publisher in factory style,” has been key for Marxian aesthetic theorists such as Dave Beech and Sven Lütticken.38 Yet much confusion persists around the status of aesthetic works as commodities, and as Daniel Spaulding and Jasper Bernes argue, Marxian aesthetic theorists tend to “make a muddle of Marx’s categories when they attempt to argue that this determination has rendered art a line of capitalist production more or less like any other.” For Beech, art is not produced as a commodity, and only becomes one when it is sold in the sphere of exchange. Yet as Spaulding and Bernes point out in their review of Beech’s Art and Value, this conclusion tests art’s economics against the normative categories of wage-labour, commodity, real subsumption and capital, neglecting the fact that Capital “simply was not built to explain production of this particular sort.”39 What would a systematic account of art’s behaviour in the economy look like, given the questions Spaulding and Bernes put forward about the relation between art and accumulation (in particular, the function of high art as a form of financial investment or storage of capital), or about how the fine arts differ


37 In the Introduction is a note, “(6) The uneven development of material production relative to e.g. artistic development. In general, the concept of progress not to be conceived in the usual abstractness. Modern art etc. This disproportion not as important or so difficult to grasp as within practical-social relations themselves. E.g. the relation of education.” See Marx, Grundrisse, 109.


from “culture industry” sectors? What would such an account look like if we considered questions more specific to literary production, such as the difference between the small press publishing of “avant-garde” poetry and the mass-market trade paperback, or the cultural uses of poets (and the aura they carry) within the creative economy, or the unprecedented expansion of the profit-driven MFA industry in North America and Creative Writing programmes in the UK?

Let us return to the question of aesthetic abstraction with this debate in mind. While it would require another study to attend to the large questions above, the fact that “capitalist society exerts a determinative effect on art” is surely, as Spaulding and Bernes insist, indisputable. I follow a number of Marxian art and literary critics, then, in assuming that poetic texts cannot escape mediation by capital, even when they are published in the so-called “gift economy” of the supposedly anti-capitalist small press, and especially when they are concerned with those aspects of feminized and racialized experience that are often understood to lie outside the sphere of value-production (a complex Marxist-feminist question that I take up in Chapter Four). Following Jameson’s note that “we can think abstractly about the world only to the extent that the world itself has already become abstract,” Jaleh Mansoor helpfully notes that, “aesthetic abstraction is only a mediation of abstraction at the level of the real, the ‘real abstraction’ wrecked by capital that Marx elaborates in Grundrisse and against which he brackets off ‘aesthetic abstraction.’”40 How can we characterize the variety of shapes, or forms, that mediations of real abstractions take in poetry? Jameson’s observation about the ability of cultural objects to mediate the contradictions inherent to the reproduction of capital is useful here:

The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow “reality” to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext.41

Is the “real” of real abstractions carried in poems as a textural, “immanent subtext,” as Jameson argues is the case with narrative “as a socially symbolic act”? What is clear, at least, is that the poems studied here always exceed the conceptual knowledge available to us, asking us to go along with them into new, uncharted forms of thought. While there is nothing new about making such a claim for poetics, my posing of this idea is distinct from its poststructuralist variant: it is not that poems broach the psychoanalytic real, nor that they traffic in a poststructuralist excess, but that they tell us something of the real of real abstractions, which as Sohn-Rethel emphasizes, takes place “behind [our] backs,” apart from cognition. This is not to say that poems have some unmediated access to the real of real abstraction—which is to say, value—but rather that they trace its palpable effects. The new forms of thought that emerge from such endeavours might make us question our knowledge, for example, of what processes of feminization in capitalism actually entail, as in Bernadette Mayer’s work over the 1970s and 1980s; or of how Indigeneity is mediated and reconstituted, as in Marie Annharte Baker’s *Indigena Awry*; or even, as with the example of Alli Warren’s work that concludes this study, what our nebulous, disorienting, and highly personal relationship to untouchable real abstractions feels like.

Simultaneously a premise and hypothesis, at the centre of this project is a claim about what aesthetic experience can do for feminist critique. I take aesthetic experience to name not only the generative, thought-producing process of “the expression of the imagination,” as Percy Shelley defended the “vital metaphorical” poetic language that “marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension,” but also—and more significantly, according to the terms of the discussion to come—the dialectical modes of perception and aesthetic judgement that Theodor Adorno describes in *Aesthetic Theory* and *Notes to Literature*. Speaking about the aesthetic concept of interpretive understanding, Adorno maintains that

if that concept is meant to indicate something adequate, something appropriate for the matter at hand, then today it needs to be imagined more as a kind of following along afterward [*Nachfahren*]; as the co-execution [*Mitvollzug*] of the tensions sedimented in the work of art, the processes that have congealed and become

---

objectified in it. One does not understand a work of art when one translates it into concepts—if one simply does that, one misunderstands the work from the outset—but rather when one is immersed in its immanent movement; I should almost say, when it is recomposed by the ear in accordance with its own logic, repainted by the eye, when the linguistic sensorium speaks along with it.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, \textit{Notes to Literature} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 96-7.}

The power of “the ‘cognitive yet nonconceptual character’ of poetry” to draw the subject into its internal dynamics is not missed by Ngai, who, drawing on Shierry Weber Nicholsen’s reading of Adorno, underlines that “the enigmatic ‘muteness’ of poetry is thus linked not just to its refusal of communicative language, but to its turn toward a mimesis that involves the subject, in a ‘silent internal tracing of the work’s articulations,’ assimilating herself to the object’s form.”\footnote{Ngai, \textit{Our Aesthetic Categories}, 99; quoting Nicholsen, \textit{Exact Imagination, Late Work}, 149.} Because the poetic works that comprise the focus of this study emerge from experiences of simultaneously abstract and material relations, they not only tell us about the formal characteristics of gender relations as they are lived and felt on both highly personal and all-too-disinterested scales, but do so in a way that allows us “extra-conceptual” access to a perceptible world understood in dialectical relation to the abstractions that both emerge from it and in turn define it. Thus, I aim to show how what Vishmidt has called, “a rationality premised on sensuous non-knowledge,”\footnote{Marina Vishmidt, “Maintenance of What.”} or a form of experience beyond the concept, is made possible in these works, as well as how this “non-knowledge” may help to show, often with painful specificity, how gender oppression is inextricably bound up in racial oppression and the reproduction of class relations.

* 

Since the 2008 financial crisis, a series of Marxian concepts and categories have been re-deployed in a renewed attempt to grasp the relation between political economy and society more broadly. Chief among these is the category of real subsumption, which in the period immediately preceding the financial crisis, developed in the post-autonomist thought of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Franco “Bifo” Berardi, among others, as the category through which to think the hegemonic status of cognitive and immaterial
labour in contemporary Western life. Inspired by Marx’s “Fragment on Machines” in the *Grundrisse*, these theorists argue that the central role once held by the industrial proletariat in the production of surplus value now belongs to the sphere of cognitive, communicative, immaterial labour power in post-Fordist labour relations, where we see the proliferation of smaller scale, flexible systems. They emphasize labour’s resistance to capital, and the revolutionary potential of the general intellect, or “the multitude.” The autonomist project is thus predicated on the affirmation of labour as the motor of history and basis for a society to come: it proposes the idea of a communist project won through the liberation of cognitive labour from capital. However, recent critiques of real subsumption as a category adequate to the exploration of capitalist society beyond the direct production process note both the difficulties we encounter in historicizing the uneven shift from formal subsumption to real subsumption such that these terms retain any useful meaning as periodizing models, and the fact that Marx’s own use of them was limited to its description of logical moments (isolated for explanatory purposes) in the production of increased relative surplus value through technological ratcheting. As Endnotes put it:

> These transformations [in capitalist social relations] occur *with*—or *as a result of*—the real subsumption of the labour process under the valorisation process: they do not necessarily constitute an aspect of real subsumption itself; nor do they define it, and indeed they may be considered mere *effects* of real subsumption.

This is not to say that the real subsumption of labour doesn’t have profound consequences for the way we narrate the history of capital accumulation and its consequences for society more broadly. It is simply to note that it cannot serve as the primary heuristic to understand this history; it is not capacious enough. This dissertation therefore follows a turn, both in Marxian critiques of value, and in emerging communization theory, to the concept of *form-determination* as a more accurate and capacious framework through which to think the complex and obscured relationship between capital and culture.


47 This is Hardt and Negri’s reading of the *Grundrisse* in *Empire*.

Form-determination, as I take it up here, refers in its most basic sense to the organization of life under capital by a simple abstraction called the value-form. As noted at the beginning of this section, the value-form is equivalent to—indeed, is the objectification of—abstract labour. The following passage by Sianne Ngai gives one of the clearest contemporary accounts of the process by which value comes about:

In the capitalist production process, existing value in the form of constant capital or what Marx at times calls dead labor is brought together with variable capital or living labor. Only living labor has the capacity to produce additional value while also carrying over the value of the commodities functioning as means of production, such as machines and raw materials, into the value of the product. Capitalist production is thus a “valorization” process that takes place only when the two things whose separation forms the basic precondition of generalized commodity production, labor-power and means of production, are rejoined through the newly privileged and expanded agency of money capital. Yet the values valorized in production also have to be “realized” through their conversion into the independent and necessary form of value, which is money.  

Note the difference between “the values valorized in production” and their “conversion” into money (exchange-value). There are two sides to value, and as Diane Elson underlines, it is important to uphold distinctions between the three discrete categories Marx offers in Capital: labour-time, value, and exchange-value. In Chapter Four we will see how value-form theorists (in conversations which began in the 1960s but have lately gained a renewed sense of purpose) take value—as distinct from exchange-value, or the money form—as their point of departure, and labour as their object of study, in order to show how value-form’s dominance extends over the organization of capitalist production, and thus capitalist society as a whole. As Elson puts it in her reading of Capital, “the domination of the capital form of value is not confined to labour “fixed” in products, it extends to the immediate process of production itself, and to the reproduction of that process.”

Thinking about form-determination in this way can reveal much about the workings of real abstractions, allowing us to get beyond an analysis based on their observable or palpable effects. Alberto Toscano’s writing on the ontological character of capitalist abstraction as both an affirmation of the concrete world in its many particular forms, and a revelation of “the void at the heart of Capital, as it were, the fact that the Real of its abstraction—to speak in a Lacanian vein—is its absence of determinations, the fact that it has no historical or cultural content per se,”\(^5\) is a disturbing reminder of the emptiness of the value-form. And a specific account of the dynamics of form-determination can be found in Christopher Arthur’s argument that capital’s self-reproductive logic (which aims only at its own infinite growth) must be understood through the difference between and dialectic movement of formal and material determinations. As Roberto Finelli glosses:

Formal determination, for Marx, expresses the functions that come from the self reproductive logic of the capitalist totality, that is, the totality of social relations necessary for the production and reproduction of capital. These, precisely because they are relations, cannot ever be expressed by something material and finite, but organise and give sense to every material and finite content. It is, therefore, fundamental, in order to comprehend Marx’s critique of political economy, to distinguish the “formal determination” from the “material determination.”\(^5\)

“Formal determinations” and “material determinations” can be straightforwardly—if somewhat reductively—understood in terms of the abstract and the concrete aspects of real abstractions. In contradistinction to Arthur, however, Finelli rejects the category of what he calls “opposition-contradiction” as a way to understand the nexus “abstract-concrete” in Marx’s Capital, instead arguing that abstraction should be conceived not in opposition to the concrete, but in terms of emptying-out [svuotamento]: “in the specific sense that the abstract occupies and itself invades the concrete, filling it according to the exigencies of its expansive-reproductive logic.” Finelli notes, however, that the abstract “leaves a semblance, an exterior surface of concreteness.”\(^5\) This semblance is the “superficialisation-externalisation” that

---


characterizes the postmodern world, and represents a dialectical deepening of abstract wealth and its accumulation towards more intimate levels of the social. Finelli’s interpretation of the abstract as a force which occupies, invades, and empties-out the material world—what he subsequently refers to as real abstraction—is posited against the view of the abstract as a force which dominates and defines the concrete “from on high, violating [it] and forcing [it] to follow its logic.”

While the writings of Arthur, Finelli, and other contemporary value-form theorists such as Moishe Postone and Robert Kurz can be highly theoretically abstract in themselves, Finelli’s argument about the deepening of real abstraction as it “fills” the concrete is compelling not least because it seems to fit more comfortably with the way we encounter capitalist abstractions in life, as metamorphosing forms of appearance that hide their internal structural dynamics. It is a point being explored in different terms, and with different emphases and political agendas, in the work of some feminist poets, particularly Catherine Wagner and Dawn Lundy Martin, as we shall see later in this study. But the instability of the dialectic of abstraction and concretion, to borrow a phrase from Lütticken, is confronted through specifically textual aesthetic strategies in all the feminized poetry presented here, in writing that recovers the invisibility of capitalist social relations, that stages various kinds of temporal, spatial, and affective antagonisms, that strategically engages the abstract aesthetic qualities of tone, and that always seems to struggle with the all-too-humanist qualities of poetry as a form. Yet these struggles in poetry do not unfold through the quintessential modernist ambition to evacuate the poetic subject. Instead, they explore more situated understandings of the subject’s unstable relation to a totality – understandings that are also often marked by a relative lack of interest in the usual heroics of the avant-garde, and by gendered forms of anxiety and modesty.

Reading Antagonism

In some ways this dissertation aspires to further develop the project begun by Christopher Nealon’s 2011 book, The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century, which makes a pivotal intervention in poetry scholarship to show how the “matter” of twentieth-

54 Ibid., 65.
century Anglophone poetry was always concerned, directly or indirectly, with capitalism’s permeating movement through the social field. Nealon’s study is, expressly, not an argument that poets in the twentieth century are writing coded lyrics about capitalism, but that “the imagination of different roles of poetic textuality” defines poetry’s relation to capitalist crisis.  

For Nealon, two poetic emphases dominate the century: strategies of compilation and collage, and self-conscious modes of heroic and/or camp lyric. Tied as they are to capital’s crisis-ridden development over the American Century, these modes function as a means of registering obliterable life, or as “a strategy of the frightened.”

The recent parallel efforts of the US- and UK-based Endnotes collective, and the preeminent critic of capitalism and literature, Fredric Jameson, to think the dialectics of space in relation to unemployment, famine, violence, and the contemporary displacement of production to the “Global South,” also substantially inform my reading methods. The key basis for my methodology in this regard, however, is Carolyn Lesjak’s long essay, “Reading Dialectically,” both a rebuttal of contemporary academic leanings towards and explicit arguments for (as Lesjak shows, ultimately ideological) modes of surface and distance reading, and an exposition on dialectical reading as a spatial and thus philosophically capacious method of reading literary texts. As Lesjak demonstrates, reading dialectically “speaks to the lost sense of historicity within the present” but also entails “learning to read space in dialectical relation to time, which, in turn, presupposes new constructions of consciousness or seeing.”

Identifying an increasingly conservative mood in literary studies, manifest in the move towards a variety of New Formalist and surface readings, and pursued in the name of a “return to the literary,” an abandonment of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a reclaiming of the pleasures of reading, Lesjak underlines how “the impulse to be affirmative, to talk about what texts do rather than what they don’t do, occludes the negation upon which such affirmation is based – […] the ontological assumptions structuring what


appears ‘in the text.’” Unlike dialectical reading, these methods are incapable of thinking or even acknowledging “the occlusion that structures the surfaces being privileged.”

As Lesjak explains, and as we will see in Chapters One and Four, dialectical reading is not simply about doing ideological critique with the intent of unmasking the capitalist relations maliciously lying in wait beneath literary texts. Rather, it means thinking “surface” and “depth” together and in relation to one another, and in turn within a moving totality of spatio-temporal relations. Only in doing so is it possible to move beyond one’s immediate lived experience—what I outline above as the observable or palpable effects of real abstractions—to consider how the world around us and our subjectivities are form-determined through a set of relations whose internal operations lay beyond our immediate powers of perception.

To this end, a primary framework for the mode of dialectical reading I perform in this study is drawn from Arthur’s Hegelian theory of systematic dialectics. In addition to the account of form-determination briefly summarized by Finelli above, Arthur’s argument for systematic dialectics—laid out succinctly in the 1998 essay, “Systematic Dialectic”—is distinguished from historical (that is, linear and temporal) dialectics as a systematic theory of a spatio-temporal totality that unfolds as a logical progression through a series of moments. As Arthur puts it: “the system comprises a set of categories expressing the forms and relations embedded within the totality, its ‘moments.’ The task of systematic dialectic is to organize such a system of categories in a definite sequence, deriving one from another logically.” I sketch the basic coordinates of Arthur’s exposition of systematic dialectics in the following chapter, but it will suffice for now to note that one of the major concerns of his project is to account for the architectonics of dialectical totality. Indeed, as Arthur has it, systematic dialectics is a theory of the movement of a system, its mutations and recompositions through moments of appearance and the contradictions that arise from their very status as appearances, contradictions that in turn produce new appearances and new contradictions.

58 Ibid., 247.
60 Ibid., 448.
Of course, feminized poetry attends in many ways to the contradictions inherent in the world as it appears to us. But a poem can’t read itself, and the gap between essence and appearance—to invoke G. W. F. Hegel’s major philosophical intervention—is what reading dialectically seeks not so much to resolve (in any case, only human action could do this) but to comprehend. The second half of this dissertation focuses in large part on the cognitive gaps between the internal, structural operations of capital as it deploys or casts off bodies and subjectivities, and the ideological appearances of these operations. As we shall see, when categories such as “the unemployed,” “the poor,” or the “precarious,” are apprehended through logics of deprivation, “filed under the general rubrics of ‘exclusion,’ ‘discrimination,’ or forms of domination,” they are conceptually disconnected from the economic relations that bring them into existence. Instead, I theorize the appearance of these kinds of abjection in poetry (in particular, their feminized and racialized forms) not as categories imposed upon individual subjects but as structuring principles that mediate a series, or variety, of relationships to the wage.

It bears mentioning that while, since the financial collapse of 2008, the concept of crisis has drawn much attention in discourse around contemporary poetry as a temporal category of openings, one in which revolutionary change becomes possible in new ways, economic crisis—at least as it appears in much published poetry criticism—can easily look as if it were a phenomenon with gender- and race-neutral effects. But while “low-level” violence, “microaggressions,” and the private nature of brutal domestic violence mean that various forms of misogyny are frequently obscured, Vishmidt and Zöe Sutherland have noted a re-emergence of anticapitalist feminist criticism. These responses to the


63 The concept of crisis in contemporary poetry is a central topic in politically salient and pivotal studies by Christopher Nealon, Ben Hickman, and Jasper Bernes; as well as many essays by Joshua Clover. In addition, Damn the Caesars’ special issue, Crisis Inquiry, was published “with attention to the work of Rob Halpern and Keston Sutherland” and included a republication of Sean Bonney’s Four Letters, followed by four responses (framed as “speculative remarks”) to these by UK poets and critics. As yet, relatively little attention has been paid in Anglophone poetry criticism to how economic crisis figures in poetic work by, or about, non-cis-male or racialized people.
contemporary crisis of reproduction have “brought a sense of urgency to the renewal of feminist theory and practice”:

Over the last few years we have seen multiple forms of feminism emerge or re-emerge, revisiting past ideas and strategies or composing new, often hybrid, approaches. At the same time, in its apparent faltering, capitalism as a system has reappeared as a key object of analysis for many people, creating renewed interest in systematic theories, as opposed to the sometimes impressionistic or fragmented gleanings of previous decades.

I see my dissertation as one of the hybrid approaches to a systematic theory described here. While critical discourse in poetics has taken on an increasingly politicized language in the last decade, particularly in an effort to examine how poetry interprets concrete experience and the object-world in order to comprehend historical processes and our shared cultural experience in the broader sense, my thesis aims to show what poetry can tell us about how this is shared: what are poetry’s capabilities and limits in articulating gendered, raced and classed—in short, nonidentical—aspects of subjective experience under late capitalism?

Further, what are contemporary poetry’s capabilities and limits in showing how these gendered, raced, and classed relations are reproduced in ways that are difficult or impossible to articulate according to rational (narrative, chronological, representational, or neoliberalized) discourses? Against what Juliana Spahr describes as a “poetry of uplift with positive images of revised femininity” (3), many feminized poets write in acts of negation, with a mind to partaking in, or perhaps exacerbating, existing social antagonisms so as to transform them. Antagonism, for the poets studied here, is therefore another way of “holding open a place for the unthought,” even as its root may lie in material politics.

Thus, against the charge made by poststructuralist critics and poets in the late twentieth-century that Marxism is a closed system incapable of accounting for difference, one pressing implication of this dissertation is the contention, firstly, that Marxist-feminism, and indeed Marxian thought as a systematic analysis of an integrated totality, can provide substantially more capacious and useful analytical frameworks for feminist and anti-racist critique than previously allowed for, and secondly, that there is an aesthetic dimension to this

which has implications for literary criticism. This obviously requires the development of existing analytical categories, and the addition of new ones.

Capital, Gender, and Poetry Criticism

Lotta Femminista, a militant feminist strand of the Italian feminist movement, was instigated in 1971 by Dalla Costa in a break away from the radical left-wing Italian political group, Potere Operaio, and joined with other groups—such as Rivolta Femminile in Italy, Midnight Notes in the US, and the Power of Women Collective in the UK—in an international movement that in English-speaking countries is most commonly referred to as the network of Wages for Housework. The work of Lotta Femminista and Rivolta Femminile was part of a second-wave feminist movement that arguably did more for Italian women, in particular, than any other movement in the country’s history, leading to the legalization of divorce and abortion in 1974 and 1981 respectively. But the conceptual and practical limits of Wages for Housework—which formed promising beginnings for the subsequent development of a unitary theory of gender oppression—have only very recently become the subject of detailed analysis, after a period in which debates concerning a unified theory of capital were “left dormant for decades,” in the words of FTC Manning.

In a 2012 interview Selma James remarks, for example, that the famous 1972 pamphlet she co-authored with Dalla Costa, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community, is concerned primarily with “the housework of women in industrial countries. Whereas most of the housework in the world, and most of the caring work in the world, and, obviously, most of the agricultural work in the world that’s unwaged, as well as waged,

---


Given that a sizeable percentage of the world’s industrial production now takes place in non-Western countries such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), where the majority of the population is still organized around agricultural production, James’s division between “industrial” and “non-industrial” countries requires further clarification. But her point regarding the Western-centric mode of Wages for Housework is clear, and 1970s Marxist-feminism’s prioritizing of white housewives was noted at the time by Angela Davis among others.

Marxist-feminism’s whiteness, and its tendency to reinscribe the heteronormative categories it seeks to critique (by, for example, invisibilizing the historical roles of queer subjects and non-traditional living relations) might begin to be remedied by new developments. The analytical category of reproductive labour that emerged from feminist interventions into Marxist theory in the 1970s has lately become the subject of analysis that not only proposes new categories through which to think the direct or indirect relation of reproductive activities to the market, but also enlists systematic dialectics to think these categories as part of a social totality. While we could list a number of important interventions here—from Giardini and Simone’s theory of a reproductive paradigm, to Alys Eve Weinbaum’s work on the gendered afterlife of slavery, to Roswitha Scholz’s theory of value-dissociation—I draw extensively on an essay by the Endnotes collective, “The Logic of Gender,” as the most systematic and detailed analysis to emerge from this new turn in thinking the relation between gender and capitalism. This essay does not attend to the kinds of considerations Giardini and Simone take up when they propose the reproductive paradigm as a way to theorize reproduction without reproducing the binary heterosexual framework that tends to write the queer subject out of history. But “The Logic of Gender” is nevertheless a highly significant intervention into theories of value: influenced by German value-form theory, the analytical framework presented in this essay provides a compelling alternative to the inadequate binary of productive and reproductive labour for understanding

---


what Cinzia Arruzza calls “a dynamic and contradictory ensemble of processes of valorization, domination, and alienation.”

“The Logic of Gender” proposes two overlapping spheres—the directly market-mediated (DMM) sphere, and the indirectly market-mediated (IMM) sphere—as structural categories that are able to make two interrelated differentiations at the same time: first, between labour and “non-labour,” depending on whether activities are socially-validated as labour via the wage, and second, between productive and unproductive, depending on whether activities are directly productive of value, or productive only of the conditions of possibility for value-production, which is to say, indirectly productive. As Endnotes put it,

Forms of domestic and so-called “reproductive” activities have become increasingly marketised, and while these activities may occupy the “sphere” of the home, just as they did before, they no longer occupy the same structural positions within the capitalist totality, despite exhibiting the same concrete features.

Central to this analysis is the relation of any activity to the market, by way of the production of value. With advances in production in post-Fordist economies, many activities which previously took place in the IMM sphere have been made profitable in themselves (as in the case of mass-produced ready-meals), and thus moved into the DMM sphere. In addition, activities perceived as belonging to the “reproductive sphere,” including labours not easily defined as material or immaterial, such as care-work or cleaning, have increasingly become waged, though they are “unproductive” for capital and so remain within the IMM sphere. As Endnotes explain, it is in this sense that the sphere of IMM activities intersects with the sphere of waged labour. Thus, Endnotes theorize gender as a real abstraction, as they explain in the following key passage:

The account that follows is strongly influenced by systematic dialectics, a method that tries to understand social forms as interconnected moments of a totality. We therefore move from the most abstract categories to the most concrete, tracing the unfolding of gender as a “real abstraction.” We are only concerned with the form of gender specific to capitalism, and we assume from the outset that one can talk about

---


\(^{72}\) Endnotes, “Logic of Gender,” 57-8 (my italics).
gender without any reference to biology or prehistory. Then, having done so, we specify the individuals assigned to those spheres. Importantly, we do not define spheres in spatial terms, but rather in the way Marx spoke of the two separated spheres of production and circulation, as concepts that take on a materiality.\footnote{Ibid., 57.}

In its final section, “The Logic of Gender” also raises the question of how to subject to economic critique certain kinds of “abject” labour (for one example, childcare that was once paid but under austerity measures has again become unpaid, and in the process denaturalized as a form of labour gendered female) that cannot be subsumed or are not worth subsuming. Most intriguingly, for this study, what Marxist-feminists such as Maya Gonzalez, Cinzia Arruzza, and Marina Vishmidt are beginning to refer to as the “abject,” the “non-social,” or the “remainder,” seems impossible to theorize in Marxist terms at present, especially if, working with a critique of the labour theory of value, we are to be clear about what counts as labour within the larger framework of social reproduction. “The Logic of Gender” is very clear on this point: “for us, labour will be defined, in its opposition to non-labour, as an activity that is socially validated as such, because of its specific function, its specific social character in a given mode of production.”\footnote{Ibid., 69. Angela Davis implied this same point in 1981, in her response to the Wages for Housework movement: “But does it automatically follow that women in general, regardless of their class and race, can be fundamentally defined by their domestic functions? Does it automatically follow that the housewife is actually a secret worker inside the capitalist production process? […] If the industrial revolution resulted in the structural separation of the home economy from the public economy, then housework cannot be defined as an integral component of capitalist production. It is, rather, related to production as a precondition.” See Davis, \textit{Women, Race and Class}, 234.} For this reason, I follow recent Marxist-feminist thinking in avoiding the terms “reproductive labour” and “reproductive work,” instead referring to these (certainly often laborious) tasks as “reproductive activities,” a term which has the advantage of recognizing that reproductive activities are not directly productive of value, however indirectly essential they may be to that process.

We will discover the pertinence of this analysis to reading feminized poetry over the course of this study, but it is enough to note for now that Marxism’s habitual tendency to imagine the white, male, heterosexual wage-worker as a universal subject, in what Gonzalez
calls, “a privileging of value production as that which defines class exploitation,” finds a clear expression in twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry and poetics, where political content relating to ideas of labour, value, revolution, or the struggles of the working class have been perpetually circumscribed to a world of male, and often stylistically macho (but at times appropriatively “feminine”), poetics. This is a context in which much “avant-garde” poetry criticism has been able to hold, in Anthony Reed’s words, “the ahistorical and theoretically untenable position that ‘class’ is somehow more important than race.” Most commonly, of course, these exclusionary and patriarchal delineations are driven by poetic criticism written by men-poets: while the homosocial rallying cry of Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse”—“go by it, boys, rather than by, the metronome”—looms large across decades of avant-garde poetry in the US, the bombastic overtones of his essay have arguably served to distract criticism from many equally sexist, if more inventively cloaked, assertions that the acts both of writing poetry, and making aesthetic judgements about poetry (especially where political contexts of revolution, communism, or workerism are concerned) are something cis-gendered men are more qualified for, more daring with, and curiously more “objective” and “subjective” about—depending on which pole wields the best advantage—despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary.

*  

At the same time, the obscured relation of contemporary feminist poetry to capitalism is symptomatic of a more comprehensive omission in twentieth-century literary criticism. As Nealon has underlined, writing about the economic turbulence that came after the 1973 oil shock, “these developments are keenly felt in the poetry of the period […] but they are felt


76 For an insightful commentary on how poststructuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva “elide the gendered signature, ostensibly in the interest of theoretical sophistication, but in political effect endorsing the privilege of the male signature, of the historical twentieth-century avant garde” see Marianne DeKoven’s essay, “Male Signature, Female Aesthetic: The Gender Politics of Experimental Writing” (in Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction (Princeton University Press, 2014) 72-81.

77 Anthony Reed, Freedom Time, 3.

and dismissed, or felt and shunted to the side, in the criticism, with the intellectual cost that critics have had nothing other than a cursory account of the history of the twentieth century.”

Commenting on an inattention both to “the idea of textuality in poetry” and “the persistence of capitalism as a subject matter for American poetry,” Nealon points to “the overlap of two critical traditions”:

A New Critical tradition in which modern poetry has been understood generically, as always gesturing back to an originally oral “lyric” in one sense or another, and a poststructuralist tradition in which the idea of textuality takes on such powerful philosophical overtones that its mundane history is eclipsed.  

Pausing to describe Jacques Derrida’s influential philosophical move, which involved a rethinking of negativity, away from Hegelian and systematic analyses and towards a philosophy of chance and play best expressed in modernist poetics—a move which “aligns the poetic specificity of the modernist lyric with the uncapturable life force of the rebellious worker”—Nealon notes that what is “easy to recognize,” at least, is that the leveraging of modernist poetry into an antidialectical argument with Hegel (and implicitly, doctrinaire, party-line Marxism) becomes the gesture into which the idea of “poetry” is incorporated in the French theory that traveled to American shores in the 1970s and 1980s.

Derrida’s suggestion that the true character of the negative is expressed in chance and play, rather than being made to produce meaning—literally to labour—in a Hegelian process of Aufhebung, was taken seriously by Charles Bernstein in his early poetry books (1978’s Shade, for example), and Julia Kristeva’s statement, pitted against the functional language of the unified psychoanalytic subject, that “communication does not equal writing” (101) was a central concept in Steve McCaffery’s North of Intention (1986). These are just two instances of a larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject that, proceeding from Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author”, included a wide range of...

80 Ibid., 2-3.
81 Ibid., 11 (the discussion leading up to this point takes place over pages 11-14).
political and identity-based concerns in poetry written during the final decades of the twentieth century.

If poetic criticism of the 1970s and 1980s “tended to name, then draw back from [. . .] the crises and the triumphs of global capitalism from about 1973 on,”83 which as Nealon asserts are precisely “the conditions that arguably made it urgent to restore to the study of poetry a sense of high intellectual stakes,”84 then the stakes of investigating these conditions are surely even higher for feminist critics concerned with the historical experiences and material lives of feminized people, who have throughout the twentieth-century and on a global scale comprised the poorest of the poor, the most exploited of the working class, and the disempowered genders of the middle class. It would be absurd to dismiss the importance of the theoretical and political advances made in the feminist poststructuralist criticism of figures such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. And yet, I cannot help but track what might be construed as a feminist analogue to, and perhaps more damaging version of, the correlation noted by Nealon: a pattern in which a historical set of abstract, speculative, finance-based yet globalized and resource-hungry modes of capital accumulation were met, in feminist literary criticism, by a linguistic turn that, as Nancy Hartsock worries, undermines women’s efforts to “act as subjects rather than objects of history”85 by emphasizing the discursive production of subjectivity “outside of history,” as it were.

As we will see in Chapter One, this tendency to de-link women’s writing from the history of capital continues to hold in feminist poetic criticism, even in studies that skirt achingly close to tracing histories of poetry by reproductive workers and their relation—in poetry and life—to abstract structures of capitalist domination and exploitation. Writing about the impact of the New York School, Maggie Nelson observes that “one of its effects has been to allow male writers to explore a different relationship to materiality and immanence, and, conversely, female writers a claim on abstraction and idealism.”86 One of Nelson’s central claims, drawing on Naomi Schor’s influential study, Reading in Detail, is that

84 Ibid.
the relation of traditionally feminized aspects of aesthetic production—“the detail, the contingent, and the quotidian”\(^{87}\)—to abstraction in New York School writing, which famously shared affinities with Abstract Expressionism, demands new approaches to thinking across or between oppositional categories of “general and particular, mass and detail, and masculine and feminine,”\(^{88}\) as well as “personal and public, world and word, daily and epic.”\(^{89}\)

In a chapter on Mayer’s work, Nelson underscores how *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* is heaving with affect, the physical and emotional strains that accompany pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing, at the same time as it documents “an overriding obsession [with] economy: the economy of personal finance; the economy of time measurement, especially the time it takes to write and the time it takes to gestate; and, overwhelmingly, the economy of language production.”\(^{90}\) Like so much feminist literary criticism, however, Nelson’s sharp and sympathetic analysis stops short at making any substantial connection between economy and capital: economics in Mayer’s work is delineated here according to the parameters of the *oikos*, a domestic sphere characterized by the balances of spending and saving, and by the familiar gendered excess of womanlihood, by “female matter,” “the voracious desires” and physical-metaphorical leakage of the female body, the “pregnant woman [who] is the very epitome of this leakage.”\(^{91}\)

Importantly, both Schor and Nelson note the difficult ambiguities of attention to detail in modern art, which begs Schor’s question:

Does the triumph of detail signify a triumph of the feminine with which it has long been linked? Or has the detail achieved its new prestige by being taken over by the masculine, triumphing at the very moment when it ceases to be associated with the feminine, or ceasing to be connoted as feminine at the very moment when it is taken up by the male-dominated cultural establishment?\(^{92}\)
While critical attention to Frank O’Hara’s ambulatory, chatty poetics of consumer culture and John Ashbery’s ironic detachment and non-referentiality often focuses on how these queer poetries overturned conventional and gendered ideas about the prophetic or auratic role of the male poet (ideas held up by those modernist godfathers of US poetry, William Carlos Williams and Olson) by enacting more informal, vernacular styles in their relation to the material world, analysis of women’s poetry has rarely argued anything similar. Women poets have been granted only partial license to pontificate on world-systems, abstract forces, global capital, or “totality.” Nor, until recently, have they been granted the freedom to be unserious.

It is partly in response to this problem that my study points to the epistemological uneasiness of the relation between feminist and/or feminized poetry (including recent work that explicitly presents a Marxian politics) and historical materialist analyses in the context of a recent history where feminist poetry and poetics has drawn much of its strength as a theoretical mode from poststructuralist, and therefore specifically non-Marxist, concepts of identity as it is constituted in language. Yet, my wager is that while feminist poetry obviously cannot provide scientific economic analysis, it can give some insight into the particular character of the “non-social”—the ways that gendered, racial and class violence shape this doubly-invisible sector of reproductive activities—and that poetry’s aesthetic and affective capacities make it a form of theorizing that is especially useful for thinking through the forms of gendered, racial and classed exploitation that resist representation.

If we are inclined to sympathize with Federici’s assessment of housework as “the most pervasive manipulation,” and “the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class,” then the fact that critical attention to abstraction in post-war feminized poetry has so often focused on forms of mysticism that could not be less structural, less interested in systematic thinking, might after all be more of a symptom of this very culture of mystified gender relations than an attempt to critique it. While it is true that Mayer, Notley, Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger and others wrote about and practiced spiritual and mystical rituals, these poets also wrote about laundry, screaming children, money, and gendered violence. Why has it taken poetry critics so long to notice? Nealon suggests one possible answer:
Transposed into an academic setting, the idea seems to be that, in developing a critical analysis of capitalism, the critic forsakes daily life, the small beauties; he becomes arrogant, unable to see what’s right in front of his nose; or she becomes preachy, solipsistic, hypnotized by abstractions. If one is a critic of poetry, the too-critical critic loses the ability to perform subtle close readings.\textsuperscript{93}

It is my contention that feminist critics of contemporary poetry—by and large, women—have been disproportionately subjected to this form of disapproval, in what might even be described as a casual system of affective and material punishment for those who have dared not to affirm the intrinsic and positivist values of Literature, of the University, and of femininity. Given how often the “story” of how feminized people struggle against capital is omitted, thwarted, appropriated or shouted down, and given how difficult that inarticulable anti-story is to tell in the first place, it is about time we paid proper attention to it.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter One begins with a simple claim: that feminized poetry has for a long time explored “the hidden abode of reproduction.” Pointing to examples in Diane Di Prima’s *Dinners and Nightmares*, and in the work of June Jordan, Anna Mendelssohn, and Alice Notley, I suggest that reproductive activities as they appear in feminized poetry often constitute heavily symbolic gestures and mark a longing for what Silvia Federici calls a revolutionizing of “all our family and social relations.”\textsuperscript{94} I then turn more substantially to Bernadette Mayer’s 1970s and 1980s work. While I undertake a couple of short readings of Mayer’s work myself, these are somewhat in the service of my primary interest in this chapter, which is the disconnect between Mayer’s work as a (somewhat explicit) poetics of social reproduction and feminization, and the near-absence, or strange double-speak, of critical attention to this fact across the limited but highly variable analyses of her poetry currently available.

The most compelling of these to date is Jasper Bernes’s reading of Mayer’s 1975 book *Memory*. Yet, his shrewd reading of the feminization of labour as it punctuates *Memory* curiously elides the crucial dimension of Mayer’s work that is concerned with feminization.


\textsuperscript{94} Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework” (Bristol: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975), 2.
(and the feminization of labour) as a gendering process. Taking up Bernes’s proposal that we can read Mayer’s work through a Hegelian logic of moments, I show how an application of systematic dialectics—a method implied but not fully executed by Bernes himself—allows us to read gender in Mayer’s work as a constant movement of recompositions, and as dialectical moments that are produced in the process of the feminization of labour, and at the same time, as a type of intransigence that emerges as a result of the contradictory imperviousness of reproductive activities to the capitalist valorization process (as we shall see, only a limited portion of reproductive activities can be subsumed).

Using Lesjak’s argument for “reading dialectically,” the final section of Chapter One suggests that we can read Catherine Wagner’s poem “My New Job,” and many others like it, as an exposure of the relationship between lived experience and structure that not only develops as a politics of antagonism within the poem, but depends on poetry’s ability to bring into tension the resistant powers of affective rhetoric, and objective reference to the world of matter: a tension that in “My New Job” functions as a strategy of refusal that may open the ground for more radical feminist and anti-racist forms of thought. I argue that “My New Job” is a laborious poem, and mimetic of the virtuosic labour of a particular type of precarious post-Fordist worker—the knowledge-worker autonomous Marxism would designate as a member of the “cognariat”—just as it links this worker, by inscription, to an emotional topography that, in a moment of not quite self-recognition, belongs to a middle-class, white, bourgeois subject. As such, the poem suggests the presence of an employed subject who is positively determined by capital yet half-aware that her “presence” depends solely on her production of surplus value and, necessarily, on the “absence” of something else—an absence that might otherwise be discovered through dialectical reading, which is to say, through the globalized lens of structural unemployment.

---


96 The autonomist Marxist scholarship that has emerged out of the Italian Operaist movement of the 1960s and 1970s includes the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in addition to that of Paolo Virno, Mario Tronti, and Franco Berardi among others. Their thought has become influential in North America as a mode of response to what has been called the precarisation of work: the global reorganisation of labour and the increasingly abstract, communicative, ‘subjective’ nature of work in post-Fordist economies. The general direction of this work has also been criticised by Silvia Federici and others for its Eurocentrism and its failure to acknowledge the gendered character of much affective labour. See Hardt and Negri, Multitude (New York: Penguin, 2005), Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude, http://libcom.org/library/grammar-multitude-paolo-virno and Silvia Federici, “Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint,” http://inthemiddleofthewhirlandwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/
Chapter Two discusses techniques and strategies in contemporary feminist poetry that primarily seek not to resist or critique frameworks of white supremacy or capitalist imperialism, but to begin from coordinates that, experientially and historically, do not align with the versions of historical time mirrored and institutionalized by these frameworks. I argue that Marie Annharte Baker’s and Dawn Lundy Martin’s poems not only orient themselves antagonistically against the very concrete, physical violence of structural domination in the context of histories of slavery and genocide; they also understand that today, as always, ascriptive processes of racialization function to make structural inequality appear inevitable and fair. As such, I propose that it is possible to read a lateral solidarity across the work of Annharte and Martin in their joint rejection of the liberal politics of recognition, and through the transformative possibilities of aesthetic experience highlighted by their work—where the material antagonisms structuring contemporary social relations emerge aesthetically too—while at the same taking seriously the limitations and consequences of (to borrow another term from Chen) racial incomparability. To this end, I suggest that the object of transformation in Annharte’s and Martin’s poems is not a “thing,” but mediation, given that these works attempt to interrogate and undermine the psycho-affective attachments that, through a contemporary discourse of recognition, actually serve to reproduce colonial structures of domination. I therefore read Annharte’s and Martin’s poems as abolitionist statements—rather than suggestions or proposals—of what I call transformative antagonisms.

Indigeneity is a crucial category in thinking about the politics of abolition, because it both includes and exceeds, and is therefore distinct from, questions of racial ascription. Race is a construct, Indigeneity is not (or not only), and resists many of the forms of critique that can tell us so much about “race.” Reading the work of Annharte and Martin together requires attending to the distinct but related historical trajectories of colonial domination and dispossession of Indigenous lands and culture, on the one hand, and a racialized and imperialist capitalism driven by slavery, on the other. This methodological commitment is crucial in thinking the relation of experience to history, especially if we are to read poetry dialectically, in terms of how poetic form relates to subjectivity and to “race” as an ascriptive process and/or to the violence of colonial dispossession. It also means beginning with the poem in order to read formal characteristics and linguistic content in dialectical relation to the historical context in which they appear. Thus, even though I propose that we can read a
lateral solidarity across the work of Annharte and Martin in their joint rejection of the liberal politics of recognition, and in addition note some similarities in terms of the styles and attitudes with which they respond to present conditions, I also mean to underline the ways in which the transformative antagonisms in their work are constitutively and formally different.

The central section of Chapter Two turns to Jodi Melamed’s Foucauldian analysis of racialization as a value-making process and an ascription of difference that works, in effect, to make relations of force intelligible – and, crucially, “permissible.” Melamed points to how liberal conceptions of racialized difference are actually productions of difference, with material effects – productions of difference that are, in turn (and in my Marxian reading, dialectically) constituted by material, geohistorical conditions. This feedback loop of materially produced discourse is not so much the subject as the moving target of much recent poetry by women in the United States and Canada, and as this work explicitly links lived experience to structural determinants, it marks a return after poststructuralism to an analysis that affirms the necessity of categories of identification pertaining to race, gender and class at the same time as it calls for their abolition as indicators of structural subordination.

In this regard, I draw on Glen Coulthard’s corrective to Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation, which argues for a shift from the capitalist relation to the colonial relation. Coulthard’s intervention makes an important case—one I would want to retain—for the unique character of colonial dispossession, which would be exempt from certain parallels or similarities we might draw between race and gender, for example, as ascriptive processes. But, as I think Annharte’s poetry itself demonstrates, the intersectional or multi-systems approach that Coulthard recruits is inadequate for thinking Indigeneity and gender (or other concurrences) together, because it inadvertently separates the political and the economic. Indeed, Martin’s poetry would seem to discourage such separations too: as it drives towards the “insurgent ground” delineated by Hortense Spillers in her writing on the “African female subject” as a racialized yet de-gendered captive body, it also documents an experience of real abstractions, which appear here not as the impositions of inert concepts, but as painful,

97 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 11.

laborious, active processes. As the seriality of Martin’s serial poems breaks down and it becomes hard to tell which parts of the text are section headers and which are not, this effort to strategically radicalize the black female subject manifests as a transformative antagonism that literally takes the impossibility of the black female body as its foundation.

Chapter Three considers Claudia Rankine’s 2014 book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, as an investigation of black ontology that appears to equivocate between aesthetic modes that suggest Afro-pessimist theories of social death, an attitude close to Fred Moten’s theory of ontological stolen life, and a Marxian understanding of “race” as a form of real abstraction. My central argument is that attending to Rankine’s use of tone, over the other (more readily identifiable) textual strategies in her work, allows us to consider the various modes of antiblack violence documented in *Citizen* as systematic processes of racial subjectivization and representation, and as outcomes of a structure of domination in which the implicitly white subject is constituted—at the level of the social and the symbolic—by the negative impression of blackness, where to be Black is to be racially marked by the system of chattel slavery. Thus, Chapter Three underlines how, in a crucial dimension of *Citizen*, the trouble with subjectivity is fundamentally distinct from the problem of the lyric subject that has provided such productive grist for anti-subjectivist avant-gardes. The horizon of *Citizen* is set against a different striation of historical time: one that contests the white avant-garde historical imaginary altogether.

Consciously and deliberately then, Rankine sets a history of black thought in relation to present social antagonisms. I draw on Sianne Ngai’s theorization of tone as an aesthetic feature whose generalizing and abstracting qualities enable us to understand literary works as social documents that are always more than themselves, that always gesture beyond their own immediate content. Placing Hortense Spiller’s theory of the captive body as a fleshy hieroglyph in conversation with Ngai’s recent theorization of “visceral abstractions” as the palpable (concrete) effects of capitalist abstractions, I suggest that *Citizen* is an attempt to consider racializing ascriptions of blackness as abstractions that are continually and systematically reinscribed in automatic, rather than premeditated, ways. From here, I thread my reading of *Citizen* with new theories of surplus populations and unemployment that underscore the ways in which the appearances of these categories are disarticulated from their economic realities, in order to propose that *Citizen* is an account of the lived experience
of the abstraction flesbliness, conceived not as a body but as an economic unit. Chapter Three consequently ends with a look at the highly racialized readings of the literary press that so enthusiastically received Citizen on its publication by Graywolf Press in 2014, and again on its mass-market republication by Penguin Books in 2015 – readings whose tautological understandings of race reinscribe their own forms of socially-sanctioned racism.

Chapter Four proposes that we can productively read feminized poetry in dialogue with Marxian value-form theory, indeed, that the critiques these two bodies of work enact have much in common. I begin by parsing Diane Elson’s recently re-published 1979 essay, “The Value Theory of Labour,” to highlight Elson’s analysis of how value arises as an abstraction—in the form of abstract labour—through the production process, and how value in its “externally independent” aspect appears in exchange. As a result of these processes, Elson argues, the domination of the capital form of value (that is, money) fixes labour as objectified abstract labour. This value form-determination extends over the production process, and its reproduction. But what does this mean for feminized poetry? The point of Elson’s theoretical endeavour, as she states, is to overcome the fragmentation of the experience of exploitation, and I think feminized poetry attempts something similar.

In theorizing the relationship between real abstractions and aesthetic abstractions, I draw on Alberto Toscano’s development of the concept of real abstraction as the organizing principle of capitalist societies, as well as his exploration of Louis Althusser’s writing on the Italian painter Leonardo Cremonini. I suggest that while Althusser sees in Cremonini’s work a painting of the “real abstract,” we find two very different modes of “writing the abstract” in the poetry of two US-based writers, Bhanu Kapil and Alli Warren.

I read Kapil’s 2015 book, Ban en Banlieue, as a salient example of a feminized and racialized poetics focused at the level of what Marxist-feminism has recently called the “abject” or the “non-social.” For Ban, the Punjabi subject of Ban en Banlieue, the life-shaping violence of white supremacy often figures on an impersonal and totalizing—which might also be to say, abstract—scale. At the same time, the book’s imagery, somatics, tone and diaristic form convey an intimacy that spins outwards through the speaker’s references to other (non)subjects facing capital’s secular tendencies toward expulsion. Examining these dynamics, I argue that Ban en Banlieue explores that gendered “remainder”—the activities produced and shaped by capital which must remain outside of market-relations—in ways
that currently existing Marxist-feminist categories of analysis such as the “abject” or the “non-social” seem unable to account for. The symbolic category of the abject—which defies subject-object relations—could thus be put to more challenging dialectical work to examine more closely the forms of affective and intellectual labour that take place in the indirectly market-mediated sphere.\(^99\)

Pointing to Kapil’s poetic argument about the resistance of gendered racialized experience to analysis, I suggest that expanding the category of the abject to account for a range of hidden forms of structural violence—what I refer to as a doubly-dissociated sphere—is necessary if we want to begin developing an adequate account of gendered and racialized experience in late capitalism. Reading Kapil’s work in this way engenders new, de-individualized ways of conceiving of patriarchal violence as intrinsic to the logic or history of capital.\(^100\) Drawing on Arthur’s and Vishmidt’s theorizations of, respectively, counter-productive and counter-reproductive labour, I suggest that the “abject” component of reproduction can be theorized as a negative dialectic internal to capital and labour, and constitutes a doubly-invisible, non-verbal violence traced in our experience of reading feminized poetry.

Finally, I read Alli Warren’s poem, “Acting Out,” as a writing of the abstract that attempts to go one step further, to actually enter the space of mediation itself. Inevitably, the poem fails in this task. But it nevertheless contests Toscano’s suggestion that figuration is a conditio sine qua non for thinking the abstract, because the linguistic affect of Warren’s language bypasses figuration altogether. While “Acting Out” is confined to the realm of its own humanist temporality and mediated experience, it nevertheless describes the active process of form-determination through a poetics capable of acknowledging how time and history are organized by abstractions that exist independent of consciousness, by the actions of individuals “as they really are,” which is to say, “as they operate, produce materially, and

\(^99\) In the process, the “abject” might also help us to address the limiting, historically imprecise, and arguably cis-sexist and heteronormative categories of Marxist-feminist analysis, partly in order to think more critically about what kinds of subjects perform these types of labour.

\(^100\) The question of “the possibility of locating gender and race as part of the abstract, logical, or ‘essential mechanisms’ of capitalism, opting instead to incorporate these pervasive relations as aspects of capitalism’s historical and concrete unfolding” (Manning, n.p.) is a contentious topic of debate in Marxist-feminist theory at present, as some feminists seek to “delineate categories of gender] that are as specific to capitalism as ‘capital’ itself.” See the discussion in Viewpoint magazine, “Gender and Capitalism: Debating Cinzia Arruzza’s Remarks on Gender.” https://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender/
hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will.”  

**A Note on Terminology**

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “feminized” to refer both to “feminized people” and “feminized poetry.” Most importantly, this term is a reminder of the fact that gender is the result of a set of flattening ascriptive processes: it is the consequence rather than the cause of these processes of feminization. It is also a way of avoiding the static and essentialist denotations of “female,” as well as the othering, secondary connotations of the term “women’s poetry.” While this latter term seems quaint and outdated today, it retains its condescending and delegitimizing powers, not only in its continued ubiquity within the more conservative corners of Anglophone poetry, but in the compromised efforts of Western cultural institutions to foreground “women’s poetry” from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and the former colonial world in what Sarah Brouillette calls “support for cultural diversity as a means for growing cultural markets and fostering an inclusive society of active cultural consumers.”

As Federica Giardini and Anna Simone argue, “feminism as only women thinking about and for women is no longer powerful.” I think the shift from “feminized” to “feminization”—from noun to verb—provides a way of rejecting heteronormative categories without resorting to poststructuralist understandings of the fluidity of gender, since my contention in this study is that the fluidity of gender becomes “fixed” in various ways by capital. Though this project focuses on the experiences of those gendered female, “feminized people” would also include men who are feminized (in particular, gay men) and people who identify as non-binary or genderqueer, who may experience feminization in specific, and variously empowering, frustrating, or miserable ways. The term “feminized people,” as it refers to processes of feminization, is defined by but not confined to the

---


category “women,” then, and it allows for a certain pushing back against capital’s compulsion to impose universal equivalents and differentials – differentials organized and form-determined according to capital’s fluctuating needs. Nevertheless, because the category “women” is a real abstraction and therefore an objective reality, I also choose to use “women” in place of “feminized people” at times, primarily when discussing the gendered abstractions of capitalism that mark women out as “women.” I include trans women in the category of “women”. Without wishing to obscure the specific and momentous struggles faced by trans women, I mean to acknowledge the fact that, as many trans activists have pointed out, the term “trans women,” particularly when it is used next to “women,” often suggests the transmisogynist view that trans women are not so-called “real” women.

There are many parallels in my use of the terms “race,” “racialized people,” and “racialization.” In Chapters One, Two, and Three, I draw on and develop Chris Chen’s and Barbara and Karen Fields’ theories of race as a relation of subordination (Chen’s term), a hierarchical assignment and an ascriptive process: “an ideology that takes on the appearance of uncontroversial everyday reality.” In this sense, “race” figures in this study as a real abstraction and is a term I explore more thoroughly in the course of the arguments to come.

All of these terms, in my writing voice, may come across as onerously politically-correct, but I would say it is a mistake to reduce them to that. The point of this dissertation is to show how these categories reflect capital’s doing, and they are not intended to exclude an effort to understand and respond to my own complex, situated position as critic vis-à-vis the texts under study: that is, as a white, British settler on unceded Coast Salish territories; a cis-gendered woman who is (for all intents and purposes) living a heteronormative existence; and a woman from the working-class who is, these days, nevertheless highly-educated (if economically precarious as a result).

One final clarification involves marking a distinction between the terms “Marxist” and “Marxian.” When I use “Marxist,” I am referring in general to a variety of Marxist practices ranging from the Marxist-Leninism of twentieth-century state-communism to the Hegelian cultural criticism of Western Marxism associated primarily with the Frankfurt

---

104 For an up-to-date and informative glossary of queer and trans language, see the LGBTQ+ definitions page on the Trans Student Educational Resources site: http://www.transstudent.org/definitions

School and its successors. Although the latter tradition appears far more frequently in this dissertation for obvious reasons, I am explicitly interested in distinguishing my use of Marx’s work from the former tradition of Marxism that, influenced by the readings of Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky, proposes a teleological view of history unfolding in successive stages. This is what Michael Heinrich distinguishes as “world-view Marxism,” and what Moishe Postone calls traditional Marxism. It is often associated with forms of workerist politics, or the affirmation of labour as the basis of a future society.

“Marxian,” on the other hand, is a term used widely to denote modes of theory that further develop, deviate from, or in other ways move away from “traditional” or “orthodox” Marxism. Of the many possible variations, I am interested in a particular strand of the so-called “esoteric Marx”: readings that emphasize the reified illusions of an objectified system that are made to seem rational and inevitable through the social mediations of abstractions. Esoteric (or, “heterodox”) Marxian theory distinguishes itself from orthodox Marxisms that take labour as an ontological given (although, as Nicholas Brown has pointed out, Diane Elson’s essay, “The Value Theory of Labour,” is in fact “thrillingly orthodox” in its ambitions to read Marx more closely). Indeed, many value-form theorists are involved in what is often described as “a return to Marx,” not to prove Marx’s original intentions but to salvage the critical dimension of his theory of value from the over-simplifications and reductive readings of traditional Marxism.

---


Chapter One
Feminized Poetry and Dialectical Reading

The large and loose category of feminist poetry—work that might index, describe or otherwise relate a wide array of experiences, affects, representations, labours, economic processes and modalities of thought specific to the lives of those who are not cis-gendered male—has for a long time explored “the hidden abode of reproduction.” This phrase, used often by Marxist-feminists, is a play on Karl Marx’s simultaneously trenchant and unwitting claim in *Capital: Volume 1*, about the “hidden abode of production,” in which “the secret of profit-making,” the generation of surplus-value, takes place.¹ As Marxist-feminism has shown, a more deeply hidden secret undergirding capitalist accumulation has been the work of child-rearing, washing, cooking, cleaning, sex and emotional care (among many other things) that has typically fallen to—or, as some Marxist-feminists persuasively argue, actually produced²—the category “women.”

This chapter considers the dialectical movements between, on the one hand, the structures that cause reproduction and feminized labour to be performed disproportionately by certain individuals over others, and on the other hand, the forms of appearance these structures take: both as concrete, lived experiences and as abstract modes of thought (or, ideology). Unconventionally, it explores these movements through poetry as well as theory, to argue the benefits of reading poetry dialectically. As we have seen in the Introduction, reproductive activities, while not necessarily productive of value, are nevertheless form-determined by value insofar as they remain organized around value-production. But the sphere of reproduction has become increasingly marketized, in a transformation that has, in the deindustrializing West, witnessed the advent of the “pink-collar ghetto” of clerical and service work;³ the movement of feminized migrant labour from the Global South; and a subsumption of certain reproductive activities into value-producing, “directly market-mediated” aspects of a hypercommodified culture (microwave ready-meals being one

² See FTC Manning, “Closing the Conceptual Gap.”
³ This is Louise Kapp Howe’s phrase, quoted in Kim England and Kate Boyer, “Women’s Work: the Feminization and Shifting Meanings of Clerical Work,” *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 2 (2009), 325.
obvious example). Another more recent feature of this new global schema of reproduction has involved forms of reproduction once paid for by the state being returned to the unwaged care of usually-feminized people, for example, through the underfunding and closure of nurseries, public libraries, and after-school programmes.

These developments require new modes and categories of analysis in Marxist-feminism, and in literary studies, adequate reading methods. Later in this chapter I will be demonstrating how the method of “reading dialectically” explicated by the Marxist literary critic Carolyn Lesjak can be a crucial feminist tool for “seeing”—or at least, sensing—the abstractions that mediate feminized experience – abstractions that remain a conceptual sticking point for feminist poets and theorists alike, especially insofar as they inevitably (and dialectically!) lead to questions regarding the historical production of race under globalized capital, as I will later come to suggest. But first, a reminder of the ubiquity of reproductive activities as they appear in late twentieth-century poetry by women is necessary, especially as it helps to underline what kinds of tangible and intangible characteristics these activities possess, and highlights their ambiguous status as labour – that is, as forms of work that are not always directly value-productive but nevertheless necessary for the production of value in the waged sphere. From this starting point, I will move to consider the emerging critical reception of key works from Bernadette Mayer’s 1970s and 1980s archive. While this criticism is robust in its own right, its tendency to disconnect Mayer’s work from a critique of capitalist processes is troubling. Jasper Bernes’s recent work on Mayer is an important corrective in this sense. Yet I will turn to it in some detail partly because what I consider to be one of Bernes’s most salient interventions into Marxist poetry criticism—his identification of a Hegelian logic of moments in Mayer’s (and Frank O’Hara’s and John Ashbery’s) work—is limited by its focus on the waged dimensions of deindustrialization’s appearance in US poetry, and could benefit from a more detailed explication of its own dialectical method.

The laborious, repetitive character of reproductive activities, and the psychological and social conflict resulting from capitalism’s need for this fact to remain “secret” or at least stubbornly opaque, have been expertly and imaginatively (and despite the exasperating subject, often beautifully and humourously) explored in feminist poetry in recent decades, particularly since the advent of second-wave feminism in the early 1960s. Diane Di Prima’s
1961 book *Dinners and Nightmares*, for example, captures not only the mundane drudgery of domestic work, but an attendant anxiety emerging at the point where the private scene of the kitchen connects with an emphatically male and public world, as in “NIGHTMARE 2”:

Having a cleaner house than usual I did the dishes. Gathering those long slime worms, dayold spaghetti, I dropped from the sink into the garbage them whereupon one slithered to the floor and lay there smirking.

Ugh I said but having a cleaner floor than usual I tried to pick it up, where-upon it nudged limply over and again smirked. After ten minutes of chase I with dirtier hands than usual gave up.

O well I said under the water faucet it will be hard as nails tonight the bastard and I’ll pick it up stiff as a board.

Whereupon looking down again I saw a line of sleek roaches were march-ing the worm away and singing Onward Christian Roaches.

The din was unbearable and I remained horrified to the spot until a slight-ly larger roach, obviously leader, nudged me to see if I too could be car-ried off.4

The smirking, inert piece of spaghetti is cute in the sense that Sianne Ngai astutely observes when she comments on the power of supposedly impotent domestic objective phenomena to elicit a mix of tenderness and aggression in their beholder, who is “frequently overpowered by a second feeling—a sense of manipulation or exploitation.”5 Indeed, within the mise-en-scene of this poem, the spaghetti seems to be symbolic of a more inchoate force, perturbing in its paradoxical intangibility and all-too-slippery materiality. The grammatical reversal of “I dropped from the sink into the garbage them,” whereby the object unconventionally follows the predicate of the sentence, sets up an antagonism between “I” and “them,” a struggle playfully echoed in the second stanza where, “After ten

---

minutes of chase I with dirtier hands than usual gave up,” where the subject is separated from her verb by a rather antiquated use of the subordinate clause.

In their comedic and unnerving performance, these rhetorical constructions imbue the feminized figure in the kitchen with an understated stoicism, as her monologue—“Ugh I said,” “Oh well I said”—marks the everyday perseverance of women-in-kitchens, where the “usual” (mentioned three times in this short poem) serves doubly to suggest not only a quotidian cycle of tedium, but a measurable standard from which one of the primary products of reproductive work, a clean house, can be judged as “better” or “worse.” But what is really perturbing about this poetry of the household abject is its ability to highlight the surreal horror endured by the domestic worker as part of an ontological condition rooted in a lack of control over one’s own life. The poem turns a corner at the word “whereupon,” and, in a shift situating the speaker in a social world just as oppressive as the space of the kitchen itself, the image of a uniform line of roaches presents the three-dimensional horror of a historically oppressive religious regime, a militaristic and robotically obedient masculinity, and the disease-spreading, parasitical physicality of cockroaches themselves.

But this disturbing progression in the poem might not so immediately be understood to represent the terrifying trap of domestic confinement were it not for the preordained knowledge with which we encounter it. We know that women have been hustled into kitchens for a long time (or to be more precise, since at least the eighteenth century, when a new international division of labour divided the global proletariat along gender lines even as many working-class women continued full-time wage-work), and thanks to feminism we know how they have often felt and feel about this. For the same reason, we might reasonably be expected to understand, from the beginning of the poem, the obscenity of such a banal, pathetic object as a piece of day-old spaghetti somehow having the synechdochal power to symbolize—rather than represent—a whole set of (often invisible and contradictory) social relations, the determining structure of an entire life. As Silvia Federici puts it in “Wages Against Housework” (1975):

It is important to recognise that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job as other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, the
most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class.\(^6\)

While we could certainly counter that the question of who suffers the most subtle and mystified violence is moot, Federici’s emphasis on the violently naturalized social organization of gendered work, and the “pervasive manipulation” that, we might surmise, saturates the cultural in support of this arrangement, points to the highly opaque mediations between abstract structures and lived experience – mediations met with many forms of antagonistic pushback in feminist poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. These run from complaints about the pointless impedance of housework, “lion spine relaxed/hell / what’s the point to courage / when you washin clothes?”\(^7\) (June Jordan) to a simultaneously ambiguous and pointed lament that, “it’s all been run through, the academies have been decoyed / by womb snatchers on time release, to give the economy last,”\(^8\) (Anna Mendelssohn) to resentment at the condescension and literal dispossession experienced at the hands of financially advantaged men (Alice Notley):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{And he forgot to put my name on our checks} \\
&\text{However,} \\
&\text{He went to get the checks however} \\
&\text{He had checks to deposit in his name} \\
&\text{Because} \\
&\text{He's older & successfuller & teaches because} ^9
\end{align*}
\]

In each of these cases, it is clear that more is at stake than the physical toil of laundry, or the baiting of “academies” by a macho “economy,” or the sense that one’s labour has been stolen by a patriarch, as if that labour never took place, and even more so because Jordan, Mendelssohn, and Notley may in different ways be seen to fall into the category of women Federici sardonically describes as having “other choices—professional work, enlightened husband, communal way of life, gay relations or a combination of these,” women for whom

---

\(^6\) Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework,” 2.


winning a wage by identifying as a lowly housewife would be a “fate which we all agree is, so to speak, worse than death.”

Federici famously answers her own question—“what difference could some more money make to our lives?”—by insisting that the demand for wages is in fact a demand against housework, since it also demands the revolutionizing of “all our family and social relations” and not merely the recognition of housework as necessary to value-production in the waged sphere. Thus, where Marx notes the perfunctory role of the wage-worker who is transformed by industrialization “from his very childhood, into part of a specialized machine,” Federici is equally forthright about the training of girls who must transform into women:

A lot of us recognise that we marry for money and security; but it is time to make it clear that while the love or money involved is very little, the work which awaits us is enormous. This is why older women always tell us “Enjoy your freedom while you can, buy whatever you want now…” But unfortunately it is almost impossible to enjoy any freedom if from the earliest days of life you are trained to be docile, subservient, dependent and most important to sacrifice yourself and even to get pleasure from it. If you don't like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, your abnormality.

In the wake of large-scale civil rights movements, second-wave feminism, Black Power, workers’ strikes and anti-nuclear and student protest, many feminist poets did not like it and wrote as much; indeed, works by poets such as Notley, Denise Riley, and Bernadette Mayer are known, among other things, for their explorations of feelings of failure, guilt, and abnormality. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James put it, in their 1972 pamphlet The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community, the “‘unreliability’ of women in the home

10 Federici, “Wages,” 1. To be sure, June Jordan was an activist with a successful academic and literary career, Anna Mendelssohn a militant British radical, and Alice Notley has become one of the most celebrated poets to emerge from a “second-generation” New York School.


12 As many feminists before me have noted, this worker is nearly always gendered male in Capital. This seems even more of an oversight given Marx’s own observation, in this chapter on “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry,” that “in so far as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means for employing workers of slight muscular strength [. . .] the labour of women and children was therefore the first result of the capitalist application of machinery!” See Marx, Capital, Vol. I, 547.

and out of it [. . .] runs against the social factory as organization of the reproduction of labor power,”14 and it is perhaps less a coincidence, and more a matter of psychic survival and pointed antagonism, that all three of these poets have approached this specifically feminized affective territory with a sense of their own unreliability, and with a courageous sense of humour. In Riley’s Marxism for Infants, and Notley’s Songs for the Unborn Second Baby, this mode often courses with a sarcastic, bristlingly hostile attitude to the impositions of reproductive activities, a kind of animated counterpoint to the affectless Bartlebyan “I prefer not to”; yet at other times humour appears as a concessionary gesture, perhaps equally necessary to the task of making the neverending work of social reproduction somehow bearable: “Some of it is pretty and useful, like when I say to them / ‘Now we will go for a walk in the snow to the store’ / and prettily and usefully we go,”15 writes Notley.

But it is to Mayer’s work and the criticism surrounding it that I will briefly turn, not only because her well-known collections Memory, Midwinter Day, Sonnets and Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters mark her as a signal poet of social reproduction—as opposed to motherhood as one major aspect of that process—but also because the remarkable under-theorization of this dimension of her work could be read as a symptom of the disconnect between Marxist or materialist analyses of reproductive work, and feminist poetry concerned with this difficult matter.

Commentaries by two of the most attentive critics of Mayer’s work, Maggie Nelson and Ann Vickery, for example, are in addition notable for the ways they both touch on and diverge from the political economy of reproduction threaded through her poetry. Nelson discusses Midwinter Day and Desires of Mothers as documents of Mayer’s interest in “Everything Work,” linking their investigations of the body, mothering, and consciousness to their self-conscious and exploratory performative and process-based aspects. While the “expressivist, microsocial, and personal” aspects of Mayer’s work are, Nelson writes, “what interests me most,”16 she figures these aspects through Mayer’s collapsing of the traditional separation between “mind-numbing domestic duty” and the more mystical, impractical

dimensions of artistic practice. Mayer’s interest in dreams, and her poetic exercises in remembering them, lead Nelson to draw briefly on the psychoanalytic affect theory of Luce Irigaray and Silvan Tomkins. But her investigation of social reproduction in these works is, for all intents and purposes, limited to the observation that Mayer’s poetry folds “the ‘women’s work’ of bearing children into the fabric of an experimental lyricism stretched to book-length proportions.” While Nelson notes Mayer’s “obsession” with economy in Desires, she means economy in the sense of the household sphere of the oikos, noting how it merges with Mayer’s experiments in the process of text production:

considered as a whole, the overriding obsession of Desires is economy: the economy of personal finance; the economy of time measurement, especially the time it takes to write and the time it takes to gestate; and, overwhelmingly, the economy of language production. This is not an inaccurate observation about Desires. But, as Nelson notes how Mayer’s work “reminds us that humans also take great pleasure in experiencing time, money, bodily sensations and/or words that also feel somehow impermeable to measurement,” it emerges as a form of surface reading that takes Mayer more literally at her word than perhaps even Mayer would do herself: the profusions and excesses that have become a hallmark of Mayer’s writing are read—following the poet’s own remarks about the pointlessness of “not writing” —as simply and inherently pleasurable in themselves. In this way, Nelson seems to both acknowledge and disavow the political-economic tensions of Mayer’s poems – a contradiction which leads her to note that “there is a deep pleasure in the apprehension, however dim, of a world in which words are neither spent nor saved” without considering why this release is pleasurable, or how words (or time, money or sensations) might be measured, spent or saved.

17 Nelson, Women, 110-1.
18 Ibid., 109, 126.
19 Ibid., 127.
20 More specifically, Mayer is referring to notions of poetic economy that would discourage lengthy—or perhaps unconstrained—poems or books, and in particular the English aristocrat Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s comment that “the tales told never intended to be published had the only truth in them.” Implicit in Mayer’s tone is that such ideas are over-precious. See Mayer, Desires, 124, quoted in Nelson, Women, 126.
21 Ibid.
Of course, celebrations of pleasurable excess in women’s writing have a famous history, epitomized by Hélène Cixous’ revisionary theory of feminine jouissance and “woman as excess” in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” But Nelson’s positivist emphasis on the textual pleasures of Mayer’s work, which she likens to Mayer’s pleasure in the “excess” of having more children, elides the negative dynamics of books like *Midwinter Day* and *Desires*. Thus, while Nelson describes Mayer’s logorrhea—addiction to talk—as “the hallmark of contemporary discourse,” this aspect of the writing is not considered in relation to the increasing demand on women in the post-war era to talk and smile (both in service and clerical work, and in their roles as wives and mothers). In a similar vein, invoking Elizabeth Willis’s note that Mayer’s food-filled poetry “is full of dirty American content” as opposed to the Steinian, “European polish” of high modernism, Nelson chooses—against the more obvious connotations of American consumerism and the home—to discuss the implicitly transhistorical associations of women’s bodies, and in particular their menstrual leakages, with the excesses of dirt and waste. Reading Mayer as a poet reclaiming the “filthy and female,” Nelson compares Mayer’s dirt with the matteral, earthy artwork of Robert Smithson, noting the idea that “female matter (*mater*) is different from other matter—female dirt is different from other dirt.” But while Nelson evokes this thoroughly essentialist notion in the context of “the obsession with controlling women’s bodies,” she only seems to confirm it, noting in quasi-celebratory tones that, “in short, women leak: their filth—inaugurated by Eve’s disobedience in the garden—is punitive, dangerous, and redundant.”

Leakage, disobedience, danger, and redundancy are part of what Nelson values so highly about Mayer’s subversive techniques, and the implication that these are inherently female attributes arises again when she asserts that the Mayer of *Desires* positively identifies with the messiness of the domestic, as “a kind of prole *Symphonia Domestica*.”

Vickery’s summary of Mayer’s career, in 2000’s *Leaving Lines of Gender: a Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, takes a different approach. Like Nelson, Vickery comments on Mayer’s interest in the nature of consciousness, and her commitment to exploring this through process-based, linguistic experiments. But her main objective is to situate Mayer

---

23 Nelson, *Women*, 120.
24 Ibid., 122.
25 Ibid., 123.
within a literary and intellectual community at a particular point in history, one that she periodizes not through reference to a wider set of global political-economic shifts, but in relation to the active period of Language writing. Hence, while Vickery highlights the feminized anxieties and threat of gendered violence in Mayer’s work—pointing to Mayer’s disclosure, in *Desires of Mothers*, that “I worry about my cervix, I worry about my uterus, my ovaries, my pleasant vagina,” and her recollection of a dream in which “two men I know in New York City wanted to … strike matches on me”\(^2^6\)—the severe violence of these lines passes without comment, perhaps as a result both of Mayer’s ever-present, allieviating humour, and a laudable desire on Vickery’s part to faithfully represent, within one short chapter, over a decade of Mayer’s own thinking about gender within the context of a literary scene. Vickery’s Foucauldian approach to historicizing the work of Mayer and her feminist contemporaries, including Carla Harryman, Susan Howe, and Lyn Hejinian, is explained as “a genealogy [which] interrogates the cultural space of poetry by approaching it horizontally in time (poetry as practice) rather than vertically (poetry as canonical tradition).”\(^2^7\) But as Raymond Williams might say, cultural spaces do not exist in isolation. Indeed, as Sarah Brouillette notes, the perceived value of culture’s autonomy, especially the criticality made possible by its “bohemian” outsiderness, has been successfully incorporated by (neo)liberal capital and converted into profit-making enterprises.\(^2^8\) Language writing’s Ivy-League institutionalization in the 1990s, as well as the transformation of the concept of feminism—now so positively encompassing and flexible that it can serve almost any political agenda—would heed a similar warning.

Taking up childcare, domestic work, and biological reproduction as explicit aspects of its subject matter, most of Mayer’s poetic work through the 1970s and 1980s would make ideal subject matter for a Marxist-feminist literary analysis. While her 1989 book *Sonnets*, for example, lacks the kind of project-oriented, thematically-explicit meditations on reproductive activities found in *Memory* and *Midwinter Day*, it covers similar ground while extending and subverting the sonnet’s traditional use as a condensed vehicle for the expression of intimate,


\(^{2^8}\) Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, 17.
private psychological states, arriving at something like an ontology of feminized life. Like Midwinter Day and Memory, Mayer’s Sonnets cannot be read apart from the key problematic of—and emerging conflation between—unpaid reproduction and paid work. The affective and physical aspects of daily experience they document are both implicitly feminized, and explicitly figured in relation to the abstract organizing structures of Western capitalism, in particular the “social factory” that forms the object of Dalla Costa and James’s polemic. Clearly, such concerns fall within the remit of Marxist-feminism. But what would a Marxist-feminist reading of Sonnets look like?

Awkward Prosody

Let us begin with a close reading. Consider “Incidents Report Sonnet,” which despite its cheeky juxtapositional title, begins on vulnerable ground as it places the speaker’s active body, and the bodies of others, in awkward spatial and temporal relation to an object-world moving to its own electronic, mechanical, and capitalist rhythms: “Woke up from dream on / July 9 1965, dream was erotic / (can’t remember what was in it),” before professing a sort of explanation: “I think the woman was attempting / to sit on her chair while / lifting the man’s wallet.” From the uncomfortable movements of this unnervingly vague scene, the speaker’s body appears:

but then on the boat ride my hand
got caught in the elevator door
by the firecracker tossed in
by a child who was a woman as missing
as the coffee money, anyway I
lost balance and, falling, woke up
jerking off through the chair,
another chair, was still falling

29 This sustained political investment arguably makes Mayer look more attuned to changing conditions under deindustrialization than her Marxist-feminist contemporaries, who tended to see women’s paid work as an exception to the hegemonic model of male breadwinner and housewife, rather than—as Mayer’s lamentations seem to understand—the beginnings of a momentous shift in capitalism’s organizational structure.
What “Incidents Report Sonnet” actually reports is an ambiguous mix of disorientation, accident, embarrassment and guilt, as “my hand / got caught in the elevator door” and “[I] woke up / jerking off through the chair,” where the verb “jerking off” emphasizes an abject detachment from—and note of embarrassment about—this unconscious masturbatory act, in a tone not usually found in Mayer’s candidly-sexualized poetry. But these content-driven descriptions of bodily movements exist in dynamic relation with the poem’s linguistic and grammatical blockages: “my hand got caught”, or “I lost balance and, falling”, and “another chair, was still falling / on my foot,” all represent situations in which the “passive” speaker is impacted upon by the outside world, where the movement forced is not so much an imposition as a nightmare in which the subject pushed around by the world of capitalist objects is also burdened with the guilt and shame of being in the way in the first place. The familiar abusive relationship is perhaps most precisely captured here, however, in what we might term a “prosody of affect,” in the combination of Mayer’s distorted syntactical units, temporally confused grammar, and self-consciously halting rhythms: “but then on the boat ride”, and “anyway I”, and “the chair, another chair”, and of course the final, superfluous, “sorry.” This prosodic affect seems to vibrate as the speaker’s body slips out of step with the work environment implied by the poem’s title, where line breaks arrive mid-clause and “time is [very literally] out of joint.”

The gristly, somewhat hard-to-digest literality of Mayer’s language is in part responsible for the common characterization of her work as Language writing (a categorization that her body of work as a whole implicitly troubles 32), but there is an interesting way in which the awkward syntax and palpable ordinary language of this particular poem work in concert with the loose, tumbling musicality of the lines. What is the effect of such gangly, almost matteral prosody? One possibility is that it constitutes the

32 Both Nelson and Vickery make this suggestion throughout their chapters on Mayer’s work.
ground zero of Mayer’s record of feminized experience, insofar as her prosody quite deliberately tracks time, insisting on the awkward reality of duration itself within women’s lives. Do such formal gestures amount to a feminist politics of time?

A recent essay by Tim Kreiner is equivocal on this question. Linking Federici’s concept of the “patriarchy of the wage”33 to Mayer’s recession-era long poem, *Midwinter Day*, Kreiner argues that for Mayer, gender is “less a static marker of individual identity than the result of dynamics negotiated between people subject to forces not of their own making,”34 a view much contemporary Marxist-feminist theory would confirm. Written on a single day in December 1978, *Midwinter Day* captures key aspects of a tidal shift in the conditions of women’s work during the 1970s and early 1980s, a transformation characterized most directly by Mayer’s complaint about the unpaid domestic work she performs, and by her lament of the end of a time where bringing up children on the “margins of the counterculture,” without recourse to regular paid work, was possible. “Now my dream is ended. And we may be moving. And I may have to be a teacher while I am trying to give birth to Peggy or Max Theodore,”35 Mayer writes. As Kreiner notes, a declining manufacturing sector and the squeezing of the traditionally-male, blue-collar, Fordist family wage gave rise to the post-war “double day” for women, as record numbers of unemployed mothers secured waged work in order to make ends meet.

Kreiner’s analysis of *Midwinter Day* as a document of the quotidian effects of changing economic conditions makes a compelling argument for why “the situation of women writing in the postwar era cannot be grasped apart from the protean relationship between gender and economic forces re-shaping many women’s lives,”36 and for why, in *Midwinter Day*, this matter becomes a problem of time. Commenting on Mayer’s switching between verse and prose, Kreiner notes:

> Time is, of course, the poem’s principal thematic and formal preoccupation. The prima facie equation here of prose with housework further equates day with


35 Mayer, *Desires of Mothers*, 56.

36 Kreiner, “Dream Life,” 2.
necessity and night with labors of love. Sex, poetry, and dreaming comprise a kind of
creative, nocturnal “work” opposed to the day’s laborious “tedium of uncondensed
routine.” It is tempting, therefore, to wager that the poem’s formal logic reproduces
the familiar sexual division of labor between the prosaic, domestic tasks typically
performed by women and the artistic, characteristically masculine heroics that give
the stuff of lyric epic proportions. 37

Indeed, Nelson and Vickery emphasize Mayer’s anxiety about the perceptions of the
domestic and the artistic as mutually-exclusive domains. But as Kreiner notes, *Midwinter Day*
actually complicates “conventional notions of aesthetic theory opposing art to labor,
freedom to necessity.” Quoting Mayer, Kreiner observes how, “the necessary acts of caring
for children give rise to ruminative, well-nigh lyric (albeit prose) reflections on modes of life
and desire in Part Two: ‘What an associative way to live this is, dreams of hearts beating like
sudden mountain peaks… Everybody wanting something or nothing to be done to them,
then one of the shoes falls off again.’” 38 While these lines undoubtedly present a romantic
vision of the nuclear family model with its cosy and excluding busyness (as Vickery notes,
“the joyous celebration of her heterosexuality made [Mayer] a difficult subject for feminist
critics wanting to expound on the constraints of sexual ideology” 39), they easily cast aside the
so-called split between the domestic and the poetic: “hearts beating like sudden mountain
peaks” evokes the arm-numbing task of beating whipping cream until it suddenly begins to
form peaks as much as it does the quintessentially sublime image of mountain peaks whose
suddenness is, rather, one of lyrical awe. The clause that follows—“I can see in my chest like
other breasts” 40 brings all of this ambivalently towards the poet’s own body, whose breasts
seem at once attached to this speaking subject and as if they might belong elsewhere: indeed,
they are also now the lyrical (naturalized and sexualized) “sudden mountain peaks” Mayer
speaks of, as well as “other” breasts not her own, perhaps suggesting a feeling of
depersonalization, or detachment from one’s own body, an under-recognized anxiety
symptom which, in its less severe forms, is a common reaction to stress.

37 Ibid., 5.
38 Ibid.
But Mayer’s switching between verse and prose, demotic and lyric language in *Midwinter Day* are not the only way reproduction appears as poetic form in her work, and little has been written about the formal appearance of anxiety—a key aspect of Mayer’s “autobiographical turn” in the late 1970s, *Midwinter Day* and *Memory* in particular—as it relates to reproductive processes. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that Mayer’s compelling frankness about her self-consciously feminized and feminizing worries might leave a critic with the sense that little more could be “read into” such divulgences. The formal inventiveness of her most insistently personal work has also been ignored by those who find its domestic and subjective qualities to be a political limit. As a now-dated, and potentially sexist, observation by Barrett Watten in 1984 had it, “while the advantage of Mayer’s techniques [in the late 1970s] is their adherence to the quotidian … the ‘permanent avant-garde’ vaporizes, leading to more conventional roles. As actually happened—in the course of Mayer’s later editing of United Artists, the stylistic opening-up returns all these techniques to ‘the self’.”

More recently, Gillian White has identified this same tendency in Mayer’s work of the late 1970s as her lyric shame, while noting how Mayer actively explores the “shamefully personal” as a feminist concern. White’s analysis of *Midwinter Day* and *Desires of Mothers* moves closer towards an analysis of Mayer’s writing within the context of the pressures of social reproduction. But though White astutely notes how Mayer’s complicating of conventional notions of lyric voice involves an “admonishment against expressivity [that] produces an expressive anxiety”—as in the line, “Some say / This place is too pretty or too clean, not Marxist / Or Leninist or Maoist enough”—she also locates the locus of power governing such strictures relatively nearby: “*Midwinter Day* is stranded between needing two forms of license: seeking permission to exist from male [literary] masters—as had been true for Fuller or Stowe—it must also ask permission from the (mostly male) avant-garde poets.” While these authorities no doubt constitute a devastating, if fascinating, set of

---

41 Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), 56-7. I follow both Vickery and Gillian White in highlighting these remarks, which render in stark terms the more troubling, potentially sexist implications of the widespread anti-lyric sentiment of 1980s Language writing.


constraints across Mayer’s work from this period, acknowledging them as the two (and implicitly, the only) ideological powers to govern the world of her poetry has the effect not only of appearing to separate patriarchal domination out from its structural relationship with capitalism, but also risks missing the ways this relationship is present in Mayer’s poetry. Few would deny such regulations are part of a much more comprehensive set of social mechanisms defining how women should act, speak, work and reproduce, and Mayer’s work displays such an awareness too.

Indeed, even White’s concluding note that “Mayer’s work not only does not quite deserve its lyric shame, but may help us deconstruct its premises”\(^{45}\) would seem to imply as much. As the brief reading of “Incidents Report Sonnet” above begins to suggest, the feminized speaker’s (and implicitly, Mayer’s) shame does not stem, in the first instance, from her embarrassment about her own lyric, but from something more fundamental altogether, since lyric shame is a moment of gendered shame. Putting aside the most baldly essentializing claims of French poststructuralist feminism—that the female body is a site of temporal alterity, for example, or that there is such a thing as a nonconsecutive, nonlinear “women’s time”\(^{46}\)—we might instead think of the linguistic and temporal awkwardnesses of a poem like “Incidents Report Sonnet” as a determinate poetic technique that reaches for abstraction as a way of making-palpable, through prosody imbued with that most entangling affect—embarrassment—a set of otherwise invisible social relations.

For Simon Jarvis, prosody is, in and of itself, an argument for the reality of the world and of human experience:

Emphasis cannot but claim that our experience of duration is real. When hours, minutes and seconds drain away in front of us as this sequence of nothings universalised into the measure of life, then outworn iambics, trochees and dactyls carry the promise of a real duration, and, with it, the almost unimaginable promise that our experience might also be for real.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 208.


Thus, we might venture that Mayer’s visceral prosody is political because it insists not only on the reality of the passing of time, but on the difficulties of capitalist and reproductive time for certain subjects. Perhaps more important then, is Jarvis’s longstanding argument (much reduced here) that contrary to “the prosodists, whether metricians or rhythmicians”—who in their separation of metrical and other patterns from semantics “often had no referent”—prosody is cognitive. Jarvis rather high-handedly refutes more scientific or strictly linguistic studies of prosody—“for,” he declares, “prosody as a method is the oblivion of prosody”—but his reasons are materialist, and concern the totality of social relations shaping our conceptions of the world around us:

The familiar story, in which an initially non-signifying pure noise, a series of tones, pitches and timbres, is only subsequently assembled into signification, is a numbed recapitulation of a narrative which has long ceased to hold the attention of other departments. Once it has been pointed out that, far from representing the obvious starting point, “hearing a pure noise demands a highly artificial and complicated frame of mind,” that what when we wake at 6 o’clock is heard across the street is at once the noise of the venture capitalist’s BMW, rather than a kit-form data-set we then piece together as the acoustic afterimage of that vehicle, the dependence of even the shiniest new prosodies on the same old tool-box comes clear.

In its insistence on the immediate conceptual concreteness of “a pure noise,” this argument helps to underscore the importance of the relationship between matter and abstraction in poetry for Marxist-feminist readings, especially when we consider how the temporal abstractions of prosody paradoxically give form to the matter (both the textuality and semantic content) at hand. As such, it is possible to see how the awkward, gristly, embarrassing dimensions of Mayer’s prosody—which mediate dialectically between the temporal and the matteral, between abstract and concrete—are a key dimension of the aesthetic experience of reading her poetry, and can help to immediately articulate, rather than explain, the ways that gendered lives are mediated and indeed dominated by an abstract

---

48 Ibid., 5.
49 Ibid., 1.
50 Ibid., 8.
capitalist totality. In other words, *Midwinter Day* and “Incidents Report Sonnet” not only show us that duration is real, but that invisible social relations are too.

“Incidents Report Sonnet” is unusually resigned for Mayer, for whom the enduring agency of the subject weighed down by structural conditions is often asserted through humour, irony and nonchalance towards social and sexual regulations. That for Mayer, nonchalance is a necessary shield against the obligations and stupidities of social regulations is made abundantly clear in “Incidents Report Sonnet #2,” the second in the short series, which gently ridicules conventional speech habits and thought forms. The poem opens with, “I was not yet married when / at age 2, a female other, I / put my finger into the forms of address,” mocking, by lightly veiled reference, conventional modes of speaking about the “event” of masturbating for the first time: perhaps so that the usual secrecy surrounding this kind of intimacy not only comes to seem prudish and silly, but is also revealed as a private speech governed by public discourse, the “forms of address” that Mayer also puts her finger into. The whole stanza reads:

I was not yet married when
at age 2, a female other, I
put my finger into the forms of address
of the most blue night early in the morning
and said to my sister Rosemary, “Well,
what do you think of this!”

The exclamation here is full of irony, given the camp hilarity of Mayer’s opening and her subsequent invocation of masturbation “early in the morning.” The exaggerated description of a two-year-old who is not yet married but discovering her own sexual desires (the latter of which, it bears noting, is not an unlikely situation – a fact which imbues the first line with a fresh political ambiguity), followed by the use of the common expression, “Well, what do you think of this!” is a convivial and communicative linguistic act, especially since the expression is ironically and self-referentially employed here with an awareness of its own status as a pre-constructed speech pattern. Pathos in this instance, then, manages to avoid the fantasy of self-expression of which lyric poetry is so often accused, since linguistic

---

52 Ibid., lines 1-6.
freedom is acknowledged contextually as an ideological fallacy. In the second stanza, Mayer conflates female sexuality and housework with characteristic coyness:

At the time we were both
sitting on the floor before the balls
of blue glass we were to clean
so often in the future and by the window
Rosemary once fell out of, who agreed
our exploration was fascinating\(^5\)

Humour sharpens Mayer’s critique as it is extended across the poem’s warped temporal dimensions. The section above plays with grammatical time—an odd progression from past perfect continuous (lines 1-2), to the conditional (line 3), to the future continuous (line 4), to the past perfect (line 5), to the simple past tense (lines 5-6)—and while the retrospective casting of these lines seems to suggest the inevitability of women’s labour as housework across time, the alternative temporalities set in motion by Mayer’s counterintuitive switching of tenses might also be read—especially in the context of her experimental investigations of time in Memory and Midwinter Day—as a particular form of temporal antagonism: a straining against the clock-time that arranges feminized bodies, their desires and labour, as it accumulates into history in the larger sense. This sonnet ends with the couplet, “Only trouble is / Our mother hit the ceiling,” a closing gesture evoking the ways in which the (often well-intentioned) regulation of sex and gender is continually naturalized and internalized as a fundamental aspect of intimate relationships between women, especially mothers and daughters.

Mayer’s sonnets float in and out of traditional sonnet forms, and “Incidents Report Sonnet #2” clearly gestures towards Petrarchan and Shakespearean traditions. Despite some slight formal differences—this sonnet is made up of two sestets followed by a couplet, not exactly following Petrarchan or Shakespearean rules of three quatrains before the couplet—the poem does follow the general structure of a traditional sonnet, first by setting out a “proposition” or “problem” (which is a question: what do you think of this masturbation activity?), then moving to a “resolution” (which is a confirmation: yes, sexuality is

\(^{5}\) Ibid., lines 7-12.
fascinating!), before the Shakespearean-style volta—the sonnet’s thematic turn—arrives (only problem is, our mother is not happy about this). That Mayer has technically followed the traditional sonnet form while producing something unambiguously contemporary—and seemingly off-the-cuff to boot—indicates an exactitude also reflected in the clever balance struck by the socially inclusive powers of the comic relief she provides, a humourousness which not only avoids potential accusations of “feminist killjoy” behaviour (although that is a mode feminists could rightly be proud to adopt today), but also maintains a certain piss-taking antagonism towards sequestering gender norms and the society which upholds them. In the same stroke, Mayer’s sonnet is a refusal of certain forms of masculinized rhetorical tone and literary prowess insofar as it shows up the historically-masculine sonnet form as a malleable vessel after all: instead of reclaiming the sonnet in the name of the feminine, she performs an undoing of its gendered construction.

Systematic Dialectics

“We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives,” Dalla Costa and James write in their 1972 pamphlet, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community. While, as we have seen, 1970s Marxist-feminism universalized the figure of the white, middle-class housewife financially supported by a male breadwinner, observations such as this one—inflected by what at the time was an emerging pattern of increasing numbers of women entering paid work—acquire increased significance within our current situation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, what Bernes refers to as “proletarianized clerical and administrative work” exponentially expanded alongside the service sector, and the “feminization of labour,” a term which has come to refer to both the high numbers of women entering the workforce, and the feminized character of much of this clerical or affect-based labour, is a central theme in Bernes’s discussion of Mayer’s 1975 book Memory. In Poetry in the Age of Deindustrialization, Bernes shows how the “productive” information work of the office (typing, sorting, ordering, or annotating) dissolves or merges into “reproduction” (the domestic labour of shopping, cooking, washing dishes, running errands, and so on) through an aesthetic mode that documents and perhaps inadvertently

54 Dalla Costa and James, Power of Women, 1.
anticipates the expansion of forms of feminized labour through the service sector and white-collar clerical work.

The conflation of “work” and “housework” in Memory is a political drama as much as an experiment in memory. Bernes points to the freneticism, the “manic intensity,” of the double-day recorded in Memory, highlighting Mayer’s style as symptomatic and representative of the feminization of postindustrial paid work.55 The dialectical mode he identifies, where one type of labour presupposes the other, allows us to read Mayer’s text as a simultaneous articulation of, and observation about, the shift to a post-Fordist economic framework whereby “paid activities take on the character of the unpaid ones: secretaries and nurses and flight attendants are waged captures of the attitudes and affects of housework.”56 But, as Bernes argues, we should also “read” both Memory’s formal movements, and the particular shift in the capital-labour relation known as the “feminization of labour,” within a larger history of capital as it unfolded over the twentieth century, and as moments of a temporal and spatial totality. This assertion marks a promising way forward for a poetry criticism that neither snubs the category of the “experiential” as an exercise in identity politics, nor disconnects it from the totality of social relations from which it emerges. But the importance of dialectical reading is in some aspects downplayed in Bernes’s study. This is because his method—which links Memory’s literary features to very specific aspects in Marxist theory’s account of capitalist development—could equally be employed to draw attention to a more essential, and as I see it more urgent, concern of Mayer’s writing through the 1970s and 1980s, located not in what poetry books like Memory, Midwinter Day, and Sonnets tell us about the feminization of labour, but in what these writings reveal, conversely, about the constitution of the “feminine” through labour. Or in other words, in what they tell us about the constitution of gender itself: the process I have been calling feminization.

Bernes gestures to the advantages of thinking feminization dialectically when he suggests that the “complex transpositions of unpaid domestic labor and wage-labor”57 are temporal and logical overlaps as much as they are spatial overlaps (that is, overlaps between what have traditionally been thought of as public and private spheres). Describing Memory as “an epic of

55 Jasper Bernes, Poetry in the Age of Deindustrialization (Stanford UP, 2017), 111.
56 Ibid., 112.
57 Ibid.
filing and cataloging, transcribing and sorting, where the lines between these kinds of activities and the work of running errands, shopping, cooking, cleaning, maintaining relationships, and getting from place to place, begin to break down,” Bernes presents such dissolutions in terms of a Hegelian dialectic:

We might think of these as “moments” or “stages” in a Hegelian sense (and in the sense in which Marx and the writers inspired by him borrow from Hegel). We might think of the relationship between unwaged reproductive labor and waged labor as involving both logical and temporal succession, where each moment is the necessary “presupposition” of the others both in cognitive, logical terms and in terms of their actual unfolding in time. As we will see, such a logic of moments structures both the making of Memory and any experience we might have of it as a book, installation, or concept.  

To be sure, Bernes’s chapter on “The Feminization of Speed-Up” is about a response in feminized poetry to a fast-deindustrializing world, and not the finer points of dialectical theory. Yet, further investigation into this contested territory—a debate I will merely gesture to here—could prove how much recent Marxist-feminist theory and feminized poetry stand to benefit from dialectical readings able to mediate between them. To this end, it is worth taking a moment to ask which Hegel Bernes is taking up in the passage above. His use of the term “stages” might unhelpfully suggest the Orthodox reading of both Hegel and Marx encouraged by Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky as the basis for a teleological view of history unfolding in successive stages, a view that has been repudiated en masse by Marxian theorists from Henri Lefebvre to Tony Smith. But as a footnote to this passage acknowledges, Bernes’s invocation of Hegelian “moments” is prompted by Christopher Arthur’s theory of a systematic dialectic, which is also emphatically critical of teleological understandings of totality in Marx. Indeed, in a reading of Hegel’s Science of Logic, Arthur insists that

since all “moments” of the whole exist synchronically all movement must pertain to their reciprocal support and development. While this motion implies that moments

58 Ibid., 110.
59 Henri Lefebvre’s triadic, spatial dialectic, and his work on history, moments, and rhythms was decisive in its break from a teleological view of history. See The Production of Space (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 1992). See also Tony Smith, The Logic of Marx’s Capital.
become effective successively, the movement winds back into itself to form a circuit of reproduction of these moments by each other … The system requires a set of categories expressing the forms and relations embedded within the totality, its “moments.” The task of systematic dialectic is to organize such a system of categories in a definite sequence, deriving one from another logically … making transitions from one category to another in such a way that the whole system has an architectonic.  

In this synchronic model of totality, categories can be isolated as moments. There is no linear movement of totality, only systematic and logical movement. But while in his dialectical reading of Memory and its logic of moments, Bernes at first appears to be reading Mayer’s poetry in terms of both synchronic and diachronic movement—“forms of interconnection that are temporal and logical as much as they are spatial”—he subsequently highlights its representations of feminized multitasking as moments connected through a solely logical reciprocality – in other words, and in accordance with Arthur’s argument, as synchronic as opposed to diachronic moments. As Bernes puts it, Memory is “a remarkable portrait of the joining together of separate ‘moments’ of social reproduction and production – again, not as temporal succession but as logical reciprocality, as moments.”

The dynamics of the temporal, and their relationship to the logic of totality, create some confusion within the “systematic dialectic” account that Bernes invokes. And yet, the temporal—or more specifically, competing temporalities—are clearly key to Bernes’ larger argument about the “double day,” about Memory’s “expression of a harried and hectic temporality,” and about the feminization of labour as “not just the capture of women as waged workers, but the subsumption of previously unwaged activities by capital.” As productive labour and reproductive activities increasingly come to share characteristics, what Bernes underlines in his reading of Memory is undoubtedly close to what Arthur theorizes, pace Hegel, as the progressive and retrogressive architectonics of systematic dialectics:

61 Bernes, Poetry, 114.
62 Ibid., 112. This becomes especially clear as his thesis develops to place the restructuring of labour under post-Fordism in the context of Marx’s argument about the rising organic composition of capital (machinery) and the general intellect.
The fact that the logical progression [of systematic dialectic] is at the same time “a retrogression” means that the beginning may be shown to be “not something merely arbitrarily assumed” but itself grounded as an abstract moment of the whole (Hegel 1969, 70) … the progressive introduction of new categories cannot be deduction (for the beginning is not to be taken as an axiom), it can only be a reconstruction of reality which takes for granted that what it is headed for is logically complete.63

In this account of the “progressive introduction of new categories,” the “whole” is assumed in each isolated moment: in this way, Arthur’s systematic dialectic avoids the quandaries of foundationalist epistemologies. Yet his Hegelian account of the progression of systematic dialectics nevertheless involves what he calls a “push” and “pull”:

What constitutes progression is an arrangement of categories from abstract to concrete; successive categories are always richer and more concrete (Hegel, 1969, 840; Marx, 1973, 100). Indeed the basis of the advance is generally that each category is deficient in determinacy with respect to the next and the impulse for the transition is precisely the requirement that such deficiency must be overcome (Hegel, 1969, 828-9) … There is an impulse to provide a solution to a contradiction – a “push,” one might say – and there is the need to overcome the deficiency of the category with respect to the posited end of the process – a “pull,” one might say.64

The harried, manic intensities of Memory, where “everything [including time] is brought into the circle of work,”65 can thus be understood as the resolving of contradictions and the emergence of new categories and deficiencies, the “pull” in Memory being, of course, capital. Indeed, Bernes’s entire study argues this latter point. And so when he later moves to historicize the overlaps of reproductive and clerical work in Memory as moments which express capital’s rising organic composition (the reinvestment of surplus value into labour-saving machinery—fixed or constant capital—that serves to extract greater surplus value), and secondly in terms of the complex temporality of the “general intellect” (Marx’s concept of “social knowledge become … a direct force of production”)66, he highlights these

64 Ibid., 450-1.
65 Bernes, Poetry, 114.
66 Karl Marx, Grundrisse, 706.
overlaps in terms of the dialectical movement of contradictions and solutions. Indeed, the retrogressive aspects of the relations between these moments now appear crucial, as they link back to the fundamental contradiction of capital’s movement – its paradoxical need “to reduce labour time to a minumum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth,” as Marx’s oft-cited words from the Grundrisse remind us. As Bernes writes, “a capitalism that requires less and less work … finds its perpetuation threatened. Capitalism is a self-undermining social form.” Capital’s secular tendency towards falling profits results in a variety of (inevitably temporary) attempts to fix the problem:

As it becomes difficult to extract increased profits from investment in labor-saving technology, capitalists turn instead to non-technological means of increasing surpluses: sweating and intensifying labor, decreasing pockets of rest and downtime (the so-called “pores” in the workday), extending work hours, and finding ways of getting workers to do unpaid work off the job.

Why are all of these admittedly highly abstract details important?

They are important in part because Bernes makes a signal intervention when he suggests that the “subsumption of leisure by labour” can be theorized as a logic of moments made apparent by the technics of Mayer’s poetry. In doing this, he proposes a reading practice that can mediate dialectically between subjective lived experience and objective (and changing) labour conditions – conditions that Mayer’s poem can only laterally represent. His argument is thus an exemplary demonstration in dialectical reading, one in which systematic dialectics guide our interpretations of the meaning of the poem’s formal features—its tone, verse and prose forms, metre, parataxis—and enable large, ambitious claims.

67 Ibid.
68 Bernes, Poetry, 127-8.
69 Ibid., 128.
70 Ibid., 114.
71 Moving from the moment to the totality, Bernes’s central claim, drawing heavily on Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s theory of capital’s internalization of “artistic critique,” is that the ideas of experimental artists and poets in the postwar era provided important coordinates for the new models of value-production that emerged in the postindustrial Western world. For Bernes’s most explicit statement of this thesis, see Poetry, 15.
But more specifically, the architectonics of systematic dialectics outlined by Arthur, and the “logic of moments” that, as Bernes compellingly suggests, structures Memory, matter because they also allow us to consider the process of feminization as so many categorial moments of a synchronic whole. In this regard, Bernes’ analysis can look rather one-directional, focusing on the feminization of waged work and its relation to the increasing ratio of fixed to variable capital, but not on the development of gender itself within this systematic dialectic. That is to say, Bernes declines to linger on the question of how the becoming-alike of reproduction and production produce gender in a postindustrial era. How does feminization, and the idea of “the feminine,” appear through a logic of moments in Mayer’s work? Given that the entire concept of the “feminization of labour” presupposes the category of the feminine—deceptively imputing it with static meaning—this question, albeit posed on another abstract plane, cannot be skipped over.

Secondly, and perhaps more problematically for the anti-dialectical commitments made by many contemporary poetry critics, thinking gender through a logic of moments in Mayer’s work raises questions about the specific nature of her poetry’s various antagonisms: their sources, forms, and intended objects. Bernes reads the antagonisms of Memory as manic intensities, responses to the emergence of the flexible, precarious worker. He notes that Memory “depicts the laboring body struggling against its own transformation into and subsumption by the machine, struggling against its own becoming-machine.”72 Drawing on Lev Manovich, he suggests that Mayer’s “cut-up” and layering techniques reflect the kinds of database technology that have become “a new symbolic form of the computer age . . . a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world,’ one that rivals linear perspective and narrative in its farreaching consequences for human subjectivity.”73 While I would not disagree with these insights regarding Memory, not least because they historicize the dialectics of technology and subjectivity not as dead history but as an active process articulated by an active poetry, Bernes’s privileging of the waged sphere means that he neglects to consider unpaid reproduction in Memory much beyond an analysis of how it inflects the changing character of paid work. Yet it is precisely in the sphere of unpaid reproductive activities, I would argue, that the “closing in” of gender is felt most urgently in

72 Ibid., 121.
73 Ibid., 119.
Mayer’s work. While reproductive activities constitute a more explicit source of angst of *Midwinter Day* and *Desires of Mothers*, their appearance in *Memory* regularly reminds us of Mayer’s female status. Take the following section from an early point in the book:

like holidays in the city, we must’ve done some wash either last night or this morning & hung it out on the fire escape to dry & I remember being really tired the night before this. There wasn’t much recording to do this day though because everything was closed or empty. Ed was still asleep when I got up. I washed at least 3 blue shirts to take to Massachusetts & overexposed them on the fire escape. Tom said the underexposed ones look like a casket. Then I washed our blue hockey shirt, my 30’s outfit, a lot of t-shirts including Anne’s tye-dyed one, two pairs of army green socks, Ed’s pants & Hannah’s green & white shirt. Put them out to dry. It was sunny. We went out.74

Insofar as this passage shows the washing being done in the interstices of the day, when others are asleep, and before “we went out” (note how Mayer’s syntax slows into simple, calm sentences at this point), it suggests the abject nature of housework, especially as the male onlooker, Tom, appears to dryly comment on Mayer’s work, but not to assist with it. Could the manic intensities of *Memory* not equally be read, then, as another kind of contradiction? We might say that Mayer’s feminized subject embodies a historically particular contradiction insofar as she is caught between, on the one hand, having to perform the kinds of feminized clerical work suggested by *Memory*, and on the other hand, the fact that reproductive tasks do not disappear on holiday, or ever. Indeed, she must deal with the fact that in certain aspects reproductive activities simply cannot be sped up (to repeat the useful phrase from *Endnotes* noted in the Introduction: “you cannot look after children more quickly”), and in other aspects (from the capitalist point of view of maximum value-extraction) their automation is not worth the outlay of capital it would require.

A more attentive way to read gender in *Memory* might thus involve an exploration of how reproduction’s being forced into the “double day”—especially given how remarkably impervious to technology reproductive activities have proved—also emerges through a logic of moments in Mayer’s work. Far from a struggle against becoming-machine, the feminized

subject is faced with the unavoidable fact that many reproductive activities (most especially, childcare) cannot be subsumed. Could we read the systematic and logical movements in Mayer’s work—in *all their moments*, which include feminized clerical work, reproductive activities, gendered violence, gendered irritations and annoyances—as an active and painful transcription of the production of gender itself? My wager is that we must, if we are to be attentive to the poetry to the minimum extent of attempting to read it through the context of the historical conditions in which it was written, not only as those historical conditions more commonly appear as labour markets and shifts in the way value gets produced, but as a dialectical totality consisting of many hidden moments. Then we might shine a light, at last, both on that “hidden abode” of feminization, and on the poet’s myriad antagonisms towards it.

**On What’s Invisible**

The reorganization of labour that began in the 1970s is most often described as the shift to post-Fordism and characterized in terms of the flexibilization of labour contracts, the proliferation of immaterial and particularly affective forms of work, the rise of the “creative economy,” the heightened significance of information and communications technology, and the linguistic and cognitive capacities of the “knowledge-worker” and the “cultural worker.” These aspects have certainly been foregrounded by the prevalent theorists of post-Fordism, especially in popular books such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s trilogy, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2005), and *Commonwealth* (2009), and in the work of Paolo Virno, Mario Tronti, and Franco Berardi, whose autonomist Marxist scholarship emerged out of the Italian Operaist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Their thought has become influential in North America as a mode of response to what has been called the precarization of work: the global reorganization of labour that has accompanied the increasingly abstract, communicative, “subjective” nature of work in post-Fordist economies.

But the aspects of economic transformation emphasized here should be counterbalanced on two fronts. First, the tendency of autonomist thinkers to focus their

---

analyses through the figure of the white male worker in the Global North has been criticised by Federici, Angela McRobbie, Angela Mitropoulos and others for its failure to acknowledge the centrality of transformations in gender relations during this period (indeed, to acknowledge gender and race at all in many cases). Second, another side to the picture emerges if we consider the systematic arguments made by economic geographers and historians such as Giovanni Arrighi and Robert Brenner. Arrighi’s comprehensive argument, in *The Long Twentieth Century*, demonstrates how global and systemic cycles of accumulation are historically defined by a pattern in which periods of economic material expansion tend to be followed by periods of financial expansion, marking transitions between hegemonic cycles of accumulation, as well as how secular (that is, internal) pressures to capital govern these transitions in the world economy. Brenner’s analysis of post-war capitalist economies rests on the notion that, as the “long boom”—often referred to as the post-war “golden age” of capitalism—exhausts itself, capital enters into a period of extended crisis in which the global economy only continues to stagnate and contract (rather than expand as autonomists would suggest). Arrighi’s periods of material expansion and financial expansion correspond to Brenner’s long boom and long downtown, if we see the current period of financialization as symptomatic of a downturn that, as Brenner argues, started not with the 1973 oil crisis but in the late 1960s, and in which the rate of profit for global industrial production continues to fall. While both of these theorists have their own theories of crisis, their periodizing models can be usefully read in relation to Marx’s argument that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is inherent to the logic of capital, given that the rising organic composition of capital (that is, the gradual growth of constant capital—or to put it reductively, technology) means rising production levels and a fall in the return of profit per unit.


77 It is telling that the autonomist Marxist spatial interpretation of the concept of real subsumption holds that this process begins in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the same moment that both Arrighi and Brenner would characterize as the beginning of a new moment of economic crisis.

Though summed up very briefly here, the salience of Arrighi’s and Brenner’s analyses—especially Brenner’s emphasis on economic stagnation and Arrighi’s attention to cyclical periods of economic exhaustion—for reading contemporary feminized poetry should become increasingly clear in the coming chapters. The various forms and frequencies of violence imposed on feminized and racialized people, from pay differentials to behavioural expectations to gender violence, to the scarcity and precarization of work in an era of diminishing demand for labour, to the dismantling of the welfare state, are without exception symptoms of what Brenner calls the “long downturn.” Feminist poets in the twenty-first century are, at least to a significant extent, wise to the disingenuity of a so-called creative economy in which, to paraphrase Boltanski and Chiapello, the promise of individual self-fulfilment and autonomy held out by an “emancipatory” capitalism is only possible because it is accompanied by new forms of oppression and control necessary for the process of accumulation (or, at least, the speculative production—or conjuring—of fictitious capital) to continue. Yet, even if the discourse of post-Fordism is no longer able to convincingly account for the complexities of our current economic situation, we nevertheless remain in a post-Fordist moment. No new cycle of real accumulation has emerged from the long downturn to facilitate a new regime of capitalist expansion. How is this toxic mix of pressurized “creativity” and economic contraction encountered in feminist poetry? Can we feel the economics of the moment in a more abstract, expansive sense than we might do in, say, our more immediate irritation at an expensive grocery bill, or our sense of anxiety and precarity in a temporary contract job? The growing group of critics whose work in one way or another examines aesthetic production in relation to the economic transformations of recent decades—especially critics such as Bernes, but also scholars such as Andrea Brady, whose most recent writing concerns the poet Rob Halpern’s book about a Guantánamo detainee, Common Place—would suggest that contemporary poetry is, more often than not, interested in the difficulties encountered by the oft-thwarted subject who attempts to “see” herself in relation to a capitalist totality.

And so in the following reading of an extended poem by Catherine Wagner, “My New Job,” I am interested in how poetic accounts of the various kinds of feminized distress and malaise imposed by capitalist social relations, rather than making visible the true nature

of an abstract totality of social relations, actually seem to recover their very *invisibility* through the aesthetic production of affect, albeit often unintentionally.\(^8^0\) Secondly, I mean to show how feminist poetry can provide meaningful answers to a series of questions asked by many feminist scholars today—familiar questions which McRobbie, for example, succinctly formulates when she responds to Virno’s and Berardi’s invocations of the “psychopathologies of contemporary subjectivity”:

> Are these pathologies also gendered? How do young men and women experience distress differently in their attempts to make an independent living in these new informal fields of work? Or even in the institutions of higher education where the short contract is also normalised? Might these emotional states tipple over into anger and rage and opposition to the etiquette required of the public relations machine? This is implicit in the Operaismo writing but it remains under-developed. How would such affective states be analysed?\(^8^1\)

The particular modes and styles of antagonism that surface in the following reading of Wagner’s work are significant not only for what they tell us about their ostensible objects—be it post-Fordist feminized work, or structures of patriarchy and/or white supremacy—but for how they move dialectically through forms of gendered and/or racialized abjection and simultaneously push back against empirical “reality” as it immediately appears to us (in Chapters Three and Four, I will further take up this question of the disconnection between capitalist economic relations and the forms of appearance through which they are apprehended). The coincidence of these abject moments with the self-conscious failure, on the part of the poem’s speaker, to fully grasp the abstraction nevertheless recognized as a mediating force with deleterious effect, is of great interest to me here, and can help to avoid the quagmire of a moralizing “privilege politics.” Of course, Jameson’s famous description in *Postmodernism* of a new cultural experience, “something like a camp or ‘hysterical’ sublime,” involves a subject “called upon to do the impossible”\(^8^2\) and thereby made aware of her own incapacity to give representation to what, in this new postmodern sublime, is no longer glimpsed as Nature but as Capital. Yet, for all the scholarly excitement and sturdy critique

---

80 Thanks to Anthony Iles for this succinct formulation in response to an earlier version of my argument.


82 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.
that has emerged around the related topics of post-Fordism, technological advancements, linguistics, and immaterial labour, little attention has been paid in poetry studies to the fact that, as Susan Thistle points out, the greatest job growth in the last thirty years has taken place through the conversion of domestic tasks into paid work. Indeed, “by the mid-1990s, more workers were employed in providing food, lodging, and health services than in all of manufacturing,” and as we have seen in the Introduction, the marketization of reproductive activities means that they no longer occupy the same structural positions within the capitalist totality even if they are the exact same concrete tasks.

Yet, a cloudiness descends whenever we attempt to differentiate between paid and unpaid forms of reproductive activities. While some paid jobs—such as elderly care work, nursery care, household cleaning services, or food service work—display similar outward characteristics to previously unwaged work in the home, other types of work, such as clerical work and, especially, the growing “upper tier” of the service sector—professional, managerial, and technical jobs taken up by a new generation of educated women—take on more opaque semblances. The feminization of labour not only means that labour has been transformed, but that gender has too. What’s feminized about feminized labour today?

Recent Marxist-feminist theory, and especially the new analytical categories of “directly market-mediated” and “indirectly market-mediated” proposed by “The Logic of Gender,” help to set out this new configuration by shifting the analytical emphasis away from appearances, away from the use-value or concrete character of an activity, focusing instead on its relation to the market (which is to say, its relation to value-production). As Endnotes write, this is necessary “not for the sake of theory, but to understand why humanity is still powerfully inscribed with one or the other gender.” But attempts to conceptualize, much less to critique, the relation between the abstract, structural functions of gender within a capitalist totality on the one hand, and concrete (bodily, affective, emotional) experiences of these activities on the other, seem few and far between in feminist theory. Yet many

85 Ibid., 58.
contemporary feminist poets appear interested in this task, and it is through reading gender dialectically in their work that we necessarily arrive at moments of race and class too.

“My New Job”

Wagner’s poem “My New Job”87 is an example of the kind of ongoing and recursive form that Nealon and Ngai have characterized in recent discussions of aesthetic works that reference their own textual and rhetorical character in an effort to think the relation between matter as an objective thing and the abstract structures of social organization.88 Speaking of minor affects and politically ambiguous feelings in modern culture, Ngai has also linked this aesthetic tendency to “the confusion between the subjective status and objective status of feeling in general,” one which is “central to the philosophy of aesthetics.”89 Using Lesjak’s method of “reading dialectically,” I want to suggest that we can read this signally twenty-first century poem—and many others with which it shares key characteristics—as an exposure of the relationship between lived experience and structure that not only develops as a politics of antagonism within the poem, but depends on poetry’s ability to bring into tension the resistant powers of affective rhetoric, and objective reference to the world of matter: a tension that in “My New Job” functions as a strategy of refusal that may open the ground for more radical feminist and anti-racist forms of thought.

The speaking subject of “My New Job” is implicitly gendered, raced and classed, as a few lines from the poem’s opening section tell us:

I was lying    Down on a yoga mat
     My bones
basketing air    Barely draped in
     skin
the basket    Effulged by local

87 This poem appears in the book of the same name.
88 See Nealon’s discussion of Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely and Kevin Davies’ The Golden Age of Paraphernalia in The Matter of Capital, 140-66. See Ngai’s critique of a number of contemporary patterns: the subject’s increasingly despecified relation to work in post-Fordist economies, the thoroughly-saturated commercial culture and “aestheticization of life” that accompanies this shift (and its oppositional relation to the autonomy of art), and the pervasiveness of “weak or trivial aesthetic categories” and what this means for the longstanding discussion of art’s truth-content and commodity status in Our Aesthetic Categories, 20-1.
Air        Highquality        scented
humid air
to support    My orchid    Skin⁹⁰

Wagner’s use of capitals in this section make for a theatrical and deliberately goofy slippage: the word “Down” is capitalized so that the preceding words, “I was lying,” may be read as a single utterance, and the word, “Highquality” appears incorrectly compounded and capitalized like so much sales-speak. In this context, the speaker’s reference to her own “orchid Skin” suggests an expensive whiteness tinged with self-loathing.

But it is through these simultaneously melancholic observations and their formal arrangement that the poem is able to comment on the relation of the increasingly conflated structural forces of state and global capital to unformed and unstructured—yet still palpably felt—affective states dispersed or collected across the ostensibly “public” realm of the social, and within the pockets of the most intimate spheres of personal life, particularly in those instances where the location, origin and direction of a specific feeling are unclear. The following section should give a sense of Wagner’s self-deprecating humour and enjoyably recognizable allusions to office life, but perhaps more importantly, this excerpt helps to indicate the formal properties of the poem—its spaces, unfinished clauses, repetitions, deliberate trip-ups, and crucially, its sustained duration—which I want to suggest are some of Wagner’s most forceful and precise tools of critique. For these reasons, it is worth quoting at length:

How can I From inside this comfort
Represent Hope to
No no
I am Too tempted
To think I Deserve it
             Rigidly and with effort
know my privilege

⁹⁰ Wagner, My New Job, 107.
I know my fluorescent doorway

A rectangle Among the ceiling tiles

Ordinary flecked coated 1) foam rectangles

And one hard white light regularly rubbed
2) glass rectangle

these are my choices
the

ceiling tile I would tear
in behind the

Ugly lattice to the Duct area
Unscrew the grille Smallen myself
Into the dark cold Square pipe
To share My cold What is in
My basket Bone-basket
With the other breathers/Workers 91

The range of bodily modes suggested in this section, from the stationary inactivity of an office-worker staring at the “Ordinary flecked coated” ceiling tiles, to the (albeit seemingly imagined) activity of a desperate escape through the air ducts, are recorded via the poem’s syntactical and prosodic ungainliness. Interestingly, lines such as “How can I From inside this comfort,” or “Rigidly and with effort,” and “Smallen myself / Into the dark cold Square pipe” represent physical situations akin to those conveyed via the grammatical blockages of Mayer’s “Incidents Report Sonnet” sequence. Here too, the “passive” speaker is psychologically impacted by the objective phenomena of postmodernity, but unlike Mayer’s disoriented and dreamlike situations, where “my hand got caught”, or “I lost balance and, falling”, and “another chair, was still falling / on my foot,” Wagner’s poem reads as self-flagellating abjection—a qualitatively different mode—even as it shares the kinds of distorted syntax, temporal ambiguity, and self-conscious, awkward rhythms characteristic of Mayer’s sonnets. At the same time, “My New Job” is laborious, and mimetic of the virtuosic

91 Ibid., 107-8.
labour of a particular type of precarious post-Fordist worker—the knowledge-worker autonomous Marxism would designate as a member of the “cognitariat”—just as it links this worker, by inscription, to an emotional topography that, in a moment of not quite self-recognition, belongs to a middle-class, white, bourgeois subject.

A confession that “I am Too tempted / To think I Deserve it” is followed by the effort to “know my privilege,” and it is partly as a result of the poem’s fragmented spatial arrangement, and the robotic rhythm to which each isolated phrase passes by, that it is possible to see how this language suggests the paralysis caused by a moralizing discourse of privilege co-opted by neoliberalism. Blocked agency in the poem mutates, instead, into a perverse and abject intimacy with the ceiling tiles, whose material properties (“Ordinary flecked coated”) are seemingly the speaker’s fault: “These are my choices.” In this way, “My New Job” enacts a form of critique both material and abstract, cognitive and conative. A poem like this can easily be read as a poetic manifestation of what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.” Building on her earlier notion of intimate publics, Berlant’s concept provides a framework through which to read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to highlight the collective aspects of certain modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival in a time of “crisis ordinariness.”

While we might keep in mind the particular temporalities outlined in Berlant’s project, both in terms of the immediacy of an affective register of perception and as a suspended, ongoing present within the bounds of everyday life, we should also consider how Wagner’s lamentation of such a life, and of the precarious post-Fordist worker required as its subject, could be a necessary extremity in the face of cruel optimism. “My New Job” presents a form of antagonism that seeks to reject the feminized ontological categories of “survival” and “adjustment,” and seems to desire something else— that is, on the nervous edge between compliance and resentment there is a chance that everything holding the situation of the poem together will be (at least figuratively) abolished. With this in mind, and moving towards Lesjak’s method of “reading dialectically,” it is no stretch to suggest that

93 Ibid., 3.
there is a politics to how we read poetry that is crucial to the development of a Marxist-
feminist literary practice. It seems important to note that developing such a practice is
necessary in light of the critical turn, in some corners, towards the relationship between
poetry and political economy, if that turn is to have fidelity to a revolution that is not sexist,
but also, and perhaps more importantly, a Marxist-feminist literary and poetic practice holds
the potential to develop in meaningful solidarity— and sometimes in convergence—with
other minority struggles and epistemologies, including Indigenous politics, queer politics,
and the forms of black radical politics that I will turn to in subsequent chapters.

Dialectical Reading

In “Reading Dialectically,” Lesjak defends Marxist literary criticism against the various types
of surface reading that have emerged in the context of a conservative-liberal “return to
literature” in academic literary studies in the twenty-first century:

The impulse to be affirmative, to talk about what texts do rather than what they
don’t do, occludes the negation upon which such affirmation is based—[...] the
ontological assumptions structuring what appears “in the text”— but unlike a
dialectical reading, offers no way of actually registering or thinking the occlusion that
structures the surfaces being privileged.94

Lesjak contends that, after the heady theory days of the 1960s-1990s, the smallness of new
historical claims sends literary scholarship into comfortable retreat as “middle-level
research,” a position occupied without irony or chagrin by the non-heroic critic whose aim is
not to master the text but to appreciate it.95 Lesjak’s point, however, is not to dismiss the
relevance of a text’s surface, but to think about how “notions of surface and depth can be
seen in productive tension or unease with each other,”96 and in this regard her
methodology— albeit developed from and applied to narrative in “Reading Dialectically”—
provides a particularly salient way to read contemporary poetry and its historicity.

94 Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” 247.
95 Ibid., 245.
96 Ibid., 248.
Read on one level, “My New Job” epitomises the cynical reason and ironic detachment of a post-ideological world, as it invites us to fetishise its textual qualities, to immediately grasp its self-flagellating disillusionment, to dwell mournfully in the pauses between each phrasal expression of capitalist complicity, and in short, to be surface readers. But perhaps, thanks to its less frequent moments of ardent sincerity—moments which respond to the performative helplessness of much of the poem—“My New Job” not only also invites a dialectical reading, but attempts to read itself dialectically. In so far as it foregrounds the untruth of its own surface in order to theatrically stage the disavowal Lesjak attributes to surface readings, we could read this poem too as a rejection of surface reading and its accompanying benign, “objective,” non-heroic critic, because “My New Job” literally renders this type of critic useless. The following lines, for example, document a painful relation between constituted subject and constitutive conditions:

When I concentrate
All at once
Hooks my outsides

Hooks them into itself

Now I am
absent that

I am not / shined upon\(^{97}\)

In this instance, the “light bending” is the terrifying agent that hooks the speaker’s outsides into its own absent structure. At the same time, the speaker seems to desire absenteeism, relief from the refracting spotlight. Crucially, we can only understand the significance of “light bending” as an analogy for capital here if we read these lines dialectically, in the context of the poem’s spatial and temporal dissonances, and with the “leap of faith” made necessary—by the inhuman quantifications, ruptures and contradictions of high finance and cognitive labour—to comprehend the constitutive abstraction of globalized capital.\(^{98}\)


\(^{98}\) For a nuanced account of the ability of artistic practice to reflect on the instability of the dialectic of abstraction and concretion see Sven Lütcken, “Inside Abstraction.”
This turning inside-out of ideology is not the same as the fetishism that, in Slavoj Žižek’s analysis, we cling to in order to cancel the full impact of reality: rather, “My New Job” is dialectical in the sense that, with a metaphor at once as potent and untouchable as “light bending,” it forces us to see the visible structure’s “aching gaps” (as Lesjak, after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, calls them), at the same time as it suggests the presence of an employed subject who is positively determined by capital yet painfully aware that her “presence” depends solely on her production of surplus value. And so it is through a dialectical reading of “My New Job” that the poem’s resignation to the complete saturation of life by capital becomes, precisely at the point of saturation, an exposure of capital’s limit and a negation: by foregrounding the absence of any subject not determined by capital and its gendered and racial logics, the poem desires to call forth a negated, contradictory subject into political action, and in this way carries a feminist utopian impulse and a rejection of the state of “crisis ordinariness.” For a poem that makes frequent and depressed allusions to the normative codes of heterosexual and gendered experience under capital, we can read no small amount of joy and affirmation in its indignant anticlimax – an address to the boys that they can keep their Oedipus complex (and with these lines the poem finishes):

Disappear into a hole

Into Mama

but come back out.

Go in boys.

Go in and stay there.¹⁰⁰

Utopias aside, it is worth noting that we could make an argument for a surface reading of this poem if we read it as a kind of testimony,

---


¹⁰⁰Wagner, “My New Job,” 104.
one that contributes to the generation of social belief in the obviousness of dominant reality, an obviousness that, as McRobbie and others have argued in a Western context, is lost to working class and lower-middle class women when verbal slurs and shaming tactics, often projected in the name of so-called self-improvement, actually function as forms of classed and post-feminist symbolic violence that are then absorbed and embodied by those to whom they are addressed (McRobbie points to the grateful and humbled subjects of television make-over programmes such as What Not to Wear and Ten Years Younger as examples of this).^{101}

But if poetry’s role is reduced to stating the obvious, the reader engaged in ideological critique is arguably left in a kind of aporetic sinkhole. This might not be so bad if it did not also entail an obscuring of even the imagined possibility of a subject capable of opposing capitalism. However, Lesjak’s argument is also that,

what is needed is a better way of reading surfaces as perverse rather than as obvious, as never identical to themselves in their “thereness,” and always found within and constitutive of complex spatial relations, both seen and not seen, deep and lateral, material and figural.^102

This is a case of “seeing what we know” rather than “knowing what we see” – “because relations, after all, cannot be seen in any solely literal sense.”^{103} Reading “My New Job” dialectically, then, also means seeing what the poem can only sense, despite its reflexive attempt at self-consciousness; which is that the depressed and anxious speaker is a subject whose “privilege” and “comfort” are dependent on the structural subordination of groups of people—including entire populations—for whom the experience of “precarity” is not only more intensely immiserating but constitutively (and perhaps ontologically) different. To confine this discussion to the US context from which “My New Job” emerges, we might look to how Fred Moten’s description of blackness in America, drawing on Frank B. Wilderson’s writing on the prison slave, as a site “that generates no categories for the chromosome of history […] an experience without analogue – a past without a heritage” is

102 Lesjak, “Reading,” 251.
103 Ibid.
tied to an image of the black subject as the “subprime debtor,” who is always in the red, always in the negative. Yet this negativity—or fugitivity, as it turns out in Moten’s project—is the basis of Moten’s appeal to the undercommons of an already integrated totality, a “social and historical paraontology” that takes place in what Moten and Harney, in *The Undercommons*, call “the surround”: a space that defends itself against the settler’s armed incursion and against politics and the law, at the same time as it calls for a revolution without a singular subject. The fugitivity of the undercommons is thus also a powerful threat to the established order, and in this complex and historical sense is fundamentally (qualitatively) distinct from and still entangled with the types of precarity that have only recently proliferated under post-Fordism for more privileged and usually white subjects, and cannot simply be figured on a spectrum of intensity.

It is not that “My New Job” provides this knowledge or thought for us, but that it is inevitably situated within its indeterminacies and in/visibility. As such, reading the poem’s prosody of affect as something more than itself is also the dialectical ability to “think ourselves and the world spatially.” It is a different way of thinking about subjectivity, where the gaps in the poem are no longer read simply as the speaker’s introspective feelings of dislocation and lack, but as a structural absence that is not one: that is in fact the history of racial capitalism. As Chris Chen has noted, it is “through race [that] black chattel slavery in the United States constituted ‘free’ labour as white, and whiteness as unenslaveability and unalienable property,” yet (to paraphrase Chen): “race” is not a property or attribute of identities or groups, but an array of ascriptive procedures that structure social life, and must be conceived of as a structural coercion rather than a cultural particularity or deviation from socio-political norms.

---

105 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 17-43.
106 As Angela Mitropoulos has noted, the grammar at work in discussions of what has recently become known as “precarity” shows us that the replacement of “precariousness” with this word also marks the transition from adjective to noun, condition to name, since, “capital is perpetually in crisis. Capital is precarious, and normally so,” and it is possible – since the rise of the relatively-empowered “cognitariat” – to speculate as to why this has only recently come to be an assumption in scholarly discourse. “Precari-Us?” *Mute*, 1, no. 29 (2005): 88-92.
107 Lesjak, “Reading,” 260.
If race is thus [unhelpfully] understood in terms of difference rather than domination, then anti-racist practice will require the affirmation of stigmatised identities rather than their abolition as indices of structural subordination. Formulating an abolitionist anti-racism would require imagining the end of “race” as a hierarchical assignment, rather than a denial of the political salience of cultural identities. “Race” here names a relation of subordination.109

If the affirmation of stigmatised identities would—as Chen implies—involves some kind of evasiveness or covering over that would precisely play to capitalism’s requirements, it is of course a continuation of the same colonial project of willed amnesia that has always been underway, and one that is never finished as long as capital continues to find new routes of racist exploitation and expropriation. It is thus no accident that this chapter, which is ostensibly centered on a specifically white experience in its claim that poetry can critique gendered post-Fordist labour, arrives at a question of race. To stay on this track a little longer: Chen’s analysis also draws on the theoretical tendency in black studies known as “Afro-pessimism,” which Jared Sexton describes as “an intellectual disposition [. . .] that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way.”110 Afro-pessimist thinkers such as Sexton, Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, as well as the poet-critic David Marriott, seek to show how the structural violence that simultaneously produces and negates black existence is naturalized and thus ontological. At the same time, Afro-pessimism emphasizes the irrational aspect of anti-black State violence, and Wilderson’s critique of Gramscian analyses of hegemony shows how Marxist cultural theory’s focus on the wage fails to account for gratuitous violence against black bodies—what Wilderson calls “a relation of terror” in contrast to the wage-relation that defines the subject of Marxist discourse:111

One could say that slavery—the “accumulation” of black bodies regardless of their utility as labourers through an idiom of despotic power—is closer to capital’s desire

---

109 Ibid., 206.
than is waged oppression – the ‘exploitation’ of unraced bodies that labour through an idiom of rational/symbolic [wage] power.\textsuperscript{112}

Contra to Chen’s emphasis on structured domination, Wilderson’s critique suggests that that which is excluded ontologically from the premises of language or symbolic meaning makes no sense in the language of structure. Yet, it is nevertheless both within and against this relation of terror that Moten locates a potential for “black optimism.” In the absence of a rational-symbolic wage-relation, and through the denial of subjecthood—the colonial relation with which Frantz Fanon famously challenged Hegel’s concept of recognition in the master-slave dialectic—Moten suggests that “another, fugitive sublimity,” and a way to approach the world “in its informal (enformed/enforming, as opposed to formless), material totality” may be possible, and this precisely through “the non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin.”\textsuperscript{113} Thus in black studies we arrive at a contradiction that resonates across radical politics and thought: the problem of the category of abolition as a “paradox of consciousness”\textsuperscript{114} and the ontological privilege of structure, the privilege of the wage. As Jack Halberstam asserts in his preface to \textit{The Undercommons}, “racial hierarchies are not rational and ordered, they are chaotic and nonsensical and must be opposed by precisely all those who benefit in any way from them.”\textsuperscript{115} Seeing what we know is a question of seeing this fact: seeing that the poem, in its nervous complicity, on some level knows it too. Moten, in problematically gendered yet racially-politicized language, puts it this way: “I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?”\textsuperscript{116}

Indeed, the conditions of possibility for the existence of the poem “My New Job” are the forms of exploitation specific to gendered and racialized capital. And it is the poem’s

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 229-30.

\textsuperscript{113} Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 182.

\textsuperscript{114} In a recent talk, Marina Vishmidt has underlined how the politics of both reproduction and abolition necessarily unfold as part of what they are setting out to challenge. The category of abolition, in Vishmidt’s argument, cannot escape what she calls a “paradox of consciousness,” the unfolding of a painful contradiction; painful because its initiation involves an identification with a structural role determined by capital, and paradoxical because a totally different individual would have to emerge the other side of self-abolition. This paradox, of course, takes on a new dimension when the wage-relation is itself revealed as an ontological privilege, and placed in relation to raced bodies who were never granted subjecthood within the structure. See “Maintenance of What.”


\textsuperscript{116} Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 140-1.
feminism met with a dialectical reading that give the lie to the smiling surfaces and services of post-Fordist immaterial and affective labour of globalized economies, which—as we know, despite the poem’s not telling us—are based on an obscuring of race relations even in broad daylight (think of the paradoxical hyper-visibility of “the ostensible racial threats posed [to the U.S.] by black wageless life, Latino immigrant labour, and ‘Islamic terrorism’”). To read this poem dialectically should be to suggest that we not repeat the obscuring gesture. It should require that “we”—the collective pronoun becomes intensely suspect here—reject readings that re-entrench a universalizing view of the world from the position of the white bourgeois subject, whose contemporary feelings are illuminated against the backdrop of an abstract and negative impression of anonymous “surplus populations,” figured only as the present iteration of a history of colonial violence after globalization. It should be to suggest that we not forcibly re-inscribe the very patterning of structural violence that theorists of Afro-Pessimism have over the last decade argued is “the formative relation” that positions the slave, and in turn constitutes the central ontological absence of black existence. That is, to read this poem dialectically is necessarily to conclude that we should also be reading different poems. Not, recalling Moten’s statement, in the hope of retroactively appending some “analog” to the under-philosophized “experience” of blackness in America, but in order to think otherness through aesthetic experience, perhaps (among other things) so as to better—or just more intimately—understand the ascriptive procedures, structural coercions and gratuitous violence that produce race.

This is perhaps what Lesjak means to encourage, when she holds up dialectical reading as a means of “extending the very frame of time,” and as “a holding open of negativity, a refusal to close the gap or synthesize the differences.” Similar capacities have been proposed under various contiguous models, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorizing of the link between “sympathetic co-experiencing” of an aesthetic event and the production of

118 “In America, the history of capital is the history of black subjection,” begins a recent, anonymously-authored essay, “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death,” an examination of the emergent discourse of Afro-Pessimism, which posits black existence as an “ontological absence,” arguing that blackness has displaced the form of the slave along a continuum whereby “emancipation does not signify any substantial break with the content of slavery.” R.L., “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death,” Mute, June 5, 2013, http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death
knowledge,\textsuperscript{120} to Marina Vishmidt’s suggestion, springing from Adorno, that “the rational core of aesthetics is that it makes us experience, not just apprehend, the radical unknowability of the world and ourselves and the way this unknowability poses a claim on reality as contingent and thus transformable.”\textsuperscript{121} Given Adorno’s insistence that the need to conceptualize means that, under capital, true otherness cannot be thought because it is subsumed by the concept despite the antagonism posed by its non-identity, the point is worth stating explicitly: a dialectical reading of surface and depth necessarily concludes with an injunction to read “other” poems because a thoroughly historical materialist critique must move from the whole to the part, from the totality to its constitutive elements.

This is not to say we are reading the wrong poem when we read “My New Job” as a critique of the precarity of the post-Fordist worker. Indeed, we could read the most disconcerting moments of the poem as the site of a Marxist-feminist politics: the movement from emotional acquiescence to affective and immaterial labour, to non-compliance with feminized modes of survival and adjustment, to a surreptitiously joyful and openly confrontational anti-male finale. But the ramifications of a dialectical reading—which deflects us from the poem at hand and sends us elsewhere—would perhaps helpfully extend and deepen Marxist-feminism’s attempts to think about race on a global scale.

It is highly significant then, that the most immediate and affective dimensions of “My New Job” are also the means by which the poem exposes the perversity of its surface. At the same time, it is possible to see how the affects of the poem’s surface also belong to its internal dynamic: the poem “hooks them into itself,” to use Wagner’s words, to create a politics of antagonism that we can think of in terms of a claim made by Vishmidt for feminist maintenance art. Vishmidt has argued that thinking about art in terms of the production of abstract labour—that is, any kind of waged work in a capitalist economy, “the generic social condition of capitalist work” as opposed to autonomist Marxist conceptions of “living labour” as an excess or constitutive outside to capital—allows for “an encounter with

\textsuperscript{120}Mikhail Bakhtin, \textit{Art and Answerability} (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1990), 86-7.

\textsuperscript{121}Vishmidt, “Maintenance of What.”
the contradictions we perform and reproduce.” Wagner’s poem suggests a strikingly similar negative movement in the following lines:

I think I’m better than the walk throughs
because something is left of me

that’s what I think I must
be wrong to think so.\textsuperscript{123}

Moten and Harney have underlined how the modern university “wants to reproduce a labor force that understands itself as not only unnecessary but dangerous to the development of capitalism.”\textsuperscript{124} Since “My New Job” unnervingly mimes and documents an experience of work, and also assumes the status of labour itself, reading the poem’s rhetorical affect as inherent to the antagonism that exists as a structural potentiality, both within the poem and within abstract labour, provides us with a way to understand—without resorting to concepts—the dialectical negativity of the post-Fordist subject who is conscious of her precarious and gendered relation to capital. But a dialectical reading shows this antagonism up as an encounter with a contradiction posed by the non-identical, as that which may be sensed but not articulated by this poem, that is, the experiential realities of the speaker’s dependence on the structural subordination of others. By Adorno’s assessment, this is dialectics: “dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint.”\textsuperscript{125} Crucially, however, the Jamesonian spatial dialectic that Lesjak’s analysis opens up as a mode of reading both surface and depth offers a way of reading and writing poetry that “no longer relies on self-reflexivity as the means toward the apprehension of history.”\textsuperscript{126} This kind of dialectical poetics might also be a better way to conceive of forms of solidarity with those individuals and groups who are negatively rather than positively determined by capital: the excluded subjects who, in contrast to the bourgeois subject of this

\textsuperscript{123}Wagner, “My New Job,” 110.
\textsuperscript{124}Moten and Harney, Undercommons, 29.
\textsuperscript{125}Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), 5.
\textsuperscript{126}Lesjak, “Reading,” 260.
poem, are expelled from the production process, and whose experience takes place in the “aching gaps” left in capitalism’s wake.
Chapter Two
Anti-Poesis: Transformative Antagonisms

“You Audience / Me Squaw,” begins Anishinaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker’s “Squaw Guide,” and with these words Annharte (as she prefers) sets out an explicit antagonism between an audience figured as settler and the Indigenous speaker of the poem. Importantly, the terms “Audience” and “Squaw” imply incommunicability, a coerced performance rather than a conversation, especially because the speaker names herself through the racist and racializing language of white settler culture. But these short lines are as much a commentary on the ways Indigenous subjects have been required to perform acceptable versions of Indigeneity in return for legal and cultural recognition in colonial settler states as they are a détournement of this relation of domination. In a double twist, Annharte’s language and line break parody settler representations of Indigenous English-language speech patterns—which, if we were to believe white settler culture, always lack conjunctions—and mock the settler narrative by pointing both to its lack of nuance in assuming a simple binary of identities and its presumptuousness in taking up the role of audience/viewer (which, as far as colonialist conventions are concerned, is the side of aesthetic judgment and of domination).

It is significant that while Annharte’s satire semantically depends on a structure of colonial oppression in order to make sense, the joke is on the settler, figured here as both ignorant and mute—now more stupefied than judgmental—in the opening of “Squaw Guide.” Her poetry, it turns out, is primarily addressed not to a settler audience, but an Indigenous community, and unfolds in relation to the history of Indigenous experience and struggle. As such, we might read these lines as a transformative gesture – transformative insofar as the coincidence of their antagonism and humour opens onto a different register of knowledge and perception, one where the colonial relation no longer gets to determine what is obvious and what is not, and where it becomes clear that it is the settler who is, and always was, mistaken. This may seem a grand political claim to make on the basis of four words. Yet, as I want to show, the grammar at work here represents a more holistic, decolonizing sensibility that forms the basis of a politics and is typical of Annharte’s work as a whole. Her

---

poetry situates itself, in turn, within a history of decolonizing practice that has often turned to humour as a mode of resistance to what Marcia Crosby calls the “produced authenticity” of the figure of the “Imaginary Indian,”

always a product of the colonial imagination, no matter whether that figure is embraced or rejected. In this regard Annharte’s work also stands in contestatory relation to the “Native trickster” archetype that appeared repeatedly in Indigenous literary texts and became the troubling focus of an emerging field of Indigenous studies in the 1990s: as Kristina Fagan demonstrates, this persona often functioned in predominantly white critical discourse on Indigenous literature as a dehistoricizing and commodifying containment of difference, one in which humour was a creative, idealized, spiritual attribute inherent to the mythologized trickster figure, rather than a strategy that emerged from and responded to socio-historical contexts.

The neat reversal of Annharte’s formulation points, in addition, to other techniques and strategies in contemporary poetry by women that primarily seek not to resist or critique frameworks of white supremacy or capitalist imperialism, but to begin from coordinates that, experientially and historically, do not align with the striations of historical time mirrored and institutionalized by these frameworks. This chapter considers two examples of such poetry, by Annharte and by the US poet Dawn Lundy Martin, reading their work as forceful statements—rather than suggestions or proposals—of what I will call transformative antagonisms.

Transformative antagonisms are in some ways close to the transformative literary capacity that Anthony Reed analyses in his study of black experimental poetics, Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing, where poesis is framed as “literature’s means of expanding the domain of the intelligible and thinkable.” As he elaborates:

In my analysis I try to recover what is oppositional rather than resistant or subversive in the experimental: its holding open a place for the unthought, for what is unassimilable to the prevailing regime of power and, most generally, its positive claims and demands. How does our understanding of literary possibility change, for

---


example, when we consider dissident practices of citation of texts and forms as transformative of those forms rather than as rejecting or mocking them?

Contrary to its clarifying tone, Reed’s question arguably brings to the fore the highly unstable relations between these terms—the “oppositional,” “resistant,” “subversive,” and “transformative,”—indeed, it is entirely plausible that forms of mockery or rejection in literature would at the same time operate as transformative forces. But his broader emphasis on literature “as a mode of self-production,” and on poetics as a mode of literary politics, “the shareable techniques that mark the site where literature touches the social and historical,” signals a complex approach that seeks to balance the possibilities of aesthetic agency and the capacities of poeisis to make space for the unthought—in this case, a black radical literary politics—with literature’s inevitable historicity, its “making legible the outlines of its time.”

Reed positions this approach in opposition to “racialized reading”—his term for the critical tendency to account for black literature by categorizing it as a literature of resistance, protest or testimony, in a form of misreading that “reduces black culture to a set of properties,” and figures black writing “as reactive rather than productive”:

The abstractness of black experimental writing and its push for what I call “radical unlearning” of the preemptive understandings of black life tends to result in its being excluded from disciplinary genealogies of African American literature except through claims remarking the text’s “resistance” to the material conditions that shape black life. The romance of resistance leaves largely unthought further connections between race and aesthetics as a mode of—and way of understanding—perception.

Despite his emphasis on the productive capacities of black writing, Reed’s argument for literature, and specifically black poetry, as a mode of self-production pushes against the “positive claims and demands” of a liberal politics of recognition, and his suggestions about what black radical poetry can achieve, aesthetically and politically, arise through a (not always announced) dialectical process of affirmation and negation rooted in its abstract qualities. Positing black experimental writing as a path to “alternate ways of valuing lives and imagining an inhabitable world together,” Reed points to how Claudia Rankine and Douglas

---

4 Anthony Reed, Freedom Time, 5.
5 Ibid., 5-6.
6 Ibid., 7-8.
Kearney’s “postlyric” work invokes “the abstractness of the black subject” in a contemporary culture where the mediatized over-representation of blackness and the particular versions of self-expression it makes available constitute a process of racialization, one that mediates and commoditizes black expression while obscuring its own alignments with the needs of global capital. The postlyric poetry of Rankine and Kearney is alert to what Reed calls “the textual nature of blackness as a social encoding of difference,” and seeks destabilized modes of expression as routes to “naming and working through social antagonisms.”

But if blackness is not an identity category Reed wishes to affirm according to a liberal mode of racialized reading, neither is it necessarily a conceptual constraint to be abolished. Contra to Afro-pessimist theories of ontological social death, yet also distinct from the abolitionist theories of racial ascription that underwrite this dissertation, “race,” for Reed, is a social encoding of difference that is specifically textual: following Robin Kelley, he defines it as a contentless abstraction whose “value always seems to precede its appearance.” Open-ended, indeterminate, endlessly mediatized and mediated, “race” can thus be transformed in black experimental writing in such a way that it becomes imbued with a productive capacity, literal poesis in the Ancient Greek sense, a mode of self-making.

Returning to those slippery categories of “resistance,” “opposition,” “subversion,” “mockery,” and “transformation” that Reed invokes, I would like to propose another possibility, not so much a departure from his compelling analysis but its negative inverse.

---

7 Ibid., see especially 97-105.
8 Ibid., 107.
9 Ibid., 12. Indeed, Reed seems to distance his position from Afro-pessimist claims for a black ontology when he notes that black experimental writing “announces a challenge—and opportunity—to disarticulate race as a pseudo-ontological category from the ethico-political obligations thought to derive from race as ‘lived experience.’” Later, in his reading of M. NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!, he deploys Derrida’s figure of hauntology, in direct contrast to the “conjuration” of ontology, as a concept for understanding genealogical accounts of history and the Middle Passage. See Reed, Freedom Time, 6, 55.
10 It is perhaps important to note that while my approach, and arguably my politics, differs from Reed’s—which, while explicitly anti-capitalist, engages Derridean notions of hauntology and textuality, Foucauldian “regimes of power,” and Jacques Rancière’s navigation of a particular Marxist poststructuralism in its theory of black radical poetics—the Marxist-feminist proclivity of my readings in this chapter is influenced by previous debate, polemic, analysis and literary criticism in the black radical tradition. In particular, it is influenced by the Black Marxism of Frantz Fanon and Cedric Robinson, writing on reproductive bondage and black women’s insurgency by Angela Davis and Alys Eve Weinbaum, Barbara Fields’ and Karen Fields’ theory of “racecraft,” and by critiques of liberal multiculturalism in the context of Indigenous studies (in particular, those of Glen Coulthard, Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, Audra Simpson, and Jodi Melamed). In drawing on these structural
call this alternative—a theory of anti-racist, feminist poetry—a poetics of transformative antagonism, for two reasons. Firstly, because many feminized poets write in acts of negation, with a mind to partaking in, or exacerbating, existing social antagonisms so as to transform them at the same time as they refuse to offer alternatives, positive outcomes or possibilities. In this way, transformative antagonisms refuse not only the identity-affirming politics of recognition but also the emotional relief of a recuperative optimism as such: the positive spin that feminist poetry has always been under pressure to provide. Secondly, I propose this negationist poetics as a kind of “anti-poesis” because in a feminist context, poesis, the act or process of making, is inseparable from the gendered and racialized history of social reproduction and the imposition to (re)produce not only babies and workers but the uneven, totalizing economic system and social fabric of capitalism, including the concepts of gender and race themselves. The verb to produce, projected onto the feminized body, is inevitably accompanied by connotations of the maternal, the fecund, and a feminized surplus or excess that has been naturalized by conservatives and poststructuralists alike into an apparent property of “woman.” Under such conditions, it is difficult to see how a productive poetics written by a feminized person could escape the essentializing dynamics of what Juliana Spahr derogatorily describes as a “poetry of uplift with positive images of revised femininity.”¹¹ But maintaining that such antagonistic—perhaps pessimistic—positions are nonetheless transformative need not acquire a moral register. Indeed, models of resolute antagonism as a stance leading to subjective (and occasionally, concretely political) transformation stretch far and wide: from the Situationist refusal of work, a concept also associated with the early Italian Marxist tradition and particularly with Mario Tronti’s essay, “The Strategy of Refusal,” to the refusal by slave women in the US South of the sexual oppressions of reproductive bondage, to the “emanating antagonisms” of a planetary social body that Massimo De Angelis describes in The Beginning of History, to the resolute antagonism and anticoalitional position of Afro-pessimist thinkers in the last decade.¹² Needless to say, these critiques, I think the conclusions I draw about poetry’s capacities as a mode of aesthetic understanding and perception stand in a strangely proximate yet angular relation to Reed’s, and I am indebted to his luminous analysis.


models are often theoretically and/or pragmatically irreconcilable. But they remind us that transformative antagonisms can be necessarily loud and violent, or they can sometimes be, to borrow Denise Riley’s words, a defense of having nothing to say for oneself.\textsuperscript{13}

But a feminist anti-poetics is a complicated matter, not least because—to put it very simplistically—maternal and matriarchal relations in First Nations societies do not necessarily hold the same kind of essentializing meaning that they hold in Western settler contexts,\textsuperscript{14} and because the erotics of fecundity (and its historicity) is specifically overdetermined with regard to black women’s bodies and the “maternalized” colonialist image of the continent of Africa. Annharte’s and Martin’s poems are clearly invested in these concerns respectively. Nonetheless, both of these poets move away from the idea of \textit{poesis} as a positive or productive force, treating it with suspicion or at the very least ambivalence. Instead, the techniques and strategies at work in their poetry, more than anything else, treat “race” as the external category that critics such as Barbara Fields and Chris Chen have described: a set of ascriptive procedures and a system of structural coercion and subordination – even and especially since Martin, in particular, places blackness within a frame of malleable conceptual ambiguity.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, while I share Reed’s de-romanticizing admiration for the political functionality of literary texts that, poetically or otherwise, “self-differentiate from the field of the literary,”\textsuperscript{16} the choice he posits between “reactive” and “productive” excludes another possibility: one that could still be figured in Fanon’s terms as a dialectical form of “actional”—as opposed to merely “reactional”—existence, maintaining its negativity and its internal and external antagonisms.\textsuperscript{17} This feminist poetics is a transformative process without a product, as it refuses to answer to the racial organizing structures of late capitalism and


\textsuperscript{13} Denise Riley, \textit{Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History} (London and Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 1.

\textsuperscript{14} For a discussion of how the concept of essentialism has become a way for non-Indigenous scholarship to dismiss assertions of Indigenous identity, emerging from “a fear of subordinate others producing and claiming some essential autonomous otherness,” see Judy Iseke-Barnes, “Living and Writing Indigenous Spiritual Resistance,” \textit{Journal of Intercultural Studies} 24, no. 3 (2003): 211-38.

\textsuperscript{15} I briefly summarize Chen’s delineation of “race” in Chapter One, page 86-7.

\textsuperscript{16} Reed, \textit{Freedom Time}, 9.

\textsuperscript{17} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 132, 197.
their various mediations and submits neither to the tyrannical (and counterintuitively cynical) demand to “provide an alternative,” nor to the less aggressive but more disconcertingly nebulous sense of obligation, still prevalent in both poetics and feminist thought, towards a politics of desire that would seek to propose some indistinct “other-way.”

At the same time, the transformative antagonisms we encounter in much contemporary feminist poetry seem intimately tied to the paradox of abolition which, as Riley noted in 1988, “involves both a concentration on and refusal of the identity of ‘women’.” If the transparently suspicious historicity of the category “women” has been sidelined over the past three decades in favour of the deconstructive play and inadvertent gendering of a poetics of the “experimental feminine,” it has returned to feminist poetry and theory with thunderous clarity. To take a statement from the materialist-feminist LIES collective:

Autonomy is a means by which we develop shared affinities as a basis for abolishing the relations of domination that make that self-organization necessary. And yet, even as we do this, we want to be freed of the social relations that make us into women, queers, women of colour, trans*, et cetera. We want to be liberated from these categories themselves, but experience teaches us that the only way out is through.

On a general level, it is possible to see how a poetry proceeding from this starting point avoids capitulation to the terms of the prevailing order, and thus how it might help to steer our imaginations beyond liberal (and unambitious) reformist horizons which—as many commentators, including thinkers as different as Marx, Harsha Walia, George Oppen, and Joshua Clover, have pointed out—misunderstand the way political change has historically

---

18 This suggestion is clear not only in Reed’s analysis but in theories of poetics by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Ann Vickery, Susan Howe, and Maggie Nelson, and in Rosi Braidotti’s 1990s work on Deleuzian feminisms. See Rosi Braidotti, “Nomadism With a Difference: Deleuze’s Legacy in a Feminist Perspective,” Man and World 29 (1996): 305-14.

19 Riley, Am I That Name, 1.

20 See Joan Retallack, “The Experimental Feminine,” in The Poetical Wager (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 90-101. This text is clearly influenced by, and in conversation with, afeminist poststructuralist theorists, as well as the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous and others. For a discussion of how Retallack’s emphasis on the politics of form perpetuates binary gender divisions, see Sianne Ngai’s chapter, “Paranoia,” in Ugly Feelings, especially pages 316-7.

come about through the often violent struggle of revolutionary political activism and mass movements.22

While I certainly do not wish to impute my own understanding of race to the poets I read in this chapter, my alternative to “racialized reading” is a proposition that we read both race and gender in Annharte’s and Martin’s poetry as a set of real abstractions: external categories and constraints not to be affirmed but critiqued as “indices of structural subordination.”23 From this angle, not only can we more clearly keep in view the difference between “race” and Indigenous sovereignty as categories of fundamentally different orders, but we can also remain clear about the fact that, as detailed in the Introduction, constructed categories such as race and gender are moments of appearance in capital’s movement and, insofar as they constitute differentials across which value can be injected or withdrawn, they are expressions of the value-form. This chapter concludes by suggesting that there is a crucial relationship between the conceptual abstractions of race and the material processes of racialization (instrumental to the structural domination of both black and Indigenous subjects) on the one hand, and the capacities for negative critique to be found in the formal abstractions and transformative antagonisms of the work of these two poets, on the other.

Reading Between Blackness and Indigeneity

The antagonisms documented, developed and mobilized in Annharte’s _Indigena Awry_ and Martin’s _Life in a Box is a Pretty Life_ spring from emotional and material conflicts that already exist within and between Indigenous and black communities, and white supremacist settler cultures like the United States and Canada. My own argument seeks to emphasize this in addition to Reed’s claim that “literary politics lie in the means through which literature articulates new aesthetic communities, addresses itself to an encounter with audiences not yet known or imaginable.”24 Both Annharte’s and Martin’s works speak to and from already

---


24 Reed, _Freedom Time_, 9.
active communities and collective knowledges. Thinking about the transformative capacities of aesthetic experience can thus be considered in light of the fact that audiences, for these writers, are at the same time both known in the present and imaginable in the future, as Indigenous resistance through movements such as Idle No More and as a key contingent of the revolutionary Rising Tide, and the recent wave of black protest and riots in response to police brutality in the United States, would suggest.

In the context of these struggles, reading the work of Annharte and Martin together requires attending to the distinct but related historical trajectories of colonial domination and dispossession of Indigenous lands and culture, on the one hand, and a racialized and imperialist capitalism driven by slavery, on the other. This methodological commitment is crucial in thinking the relation of experience to history, especially if we are to read poetry dialectically, in terms of how poetic form relates to subjectivity and to race as an ascriptive process and/or to the violence of colonial dispossession. In this regard, white supremacy and colonialism can be understood as structures which comprise a “common enemy” but do not entail a “common experience of that enemy,” a fact which should warn against models of solidarity premised on empathy, sympathy, or common interests between differently-subjugated groups. Rather, my hope is that reading feminist models of Indigenous poetics and black poetics together may bring some unique insights to the conversation about the relationship between settler-colonialism, anti-blackness, and gender that may not otherwise be encountered in “logical” modes of anti-capitalist critique, or even at times within the realm of the conceptual.

My attention to Martin’s verb constructions, syntax, modes of apostrophe and other formal features thus situates them in relation to the more “content-based” aspects of her poems—imagery, citation, narrative fragments—and within the historical context in which all of these features and their relations necessarily circulate. As I go on to suggest, Life in a Box is a Pretty Life places particular emphasis on the black female body as it is “framed by


26 The overlapping of these systems, as Chen has noted, is already a subject in the poet Myung Mi Kim’s work, where a sonic patterning of items and language connoting both contexts brings to the foreground the processes of colonial measurement used to organize plunder and unfree labour. See Chris Chen, “What is Nearest is Destroyed: Myung Mi Kim and the Poetics of Racial (In)Comparability.” Chapter in PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011. ProQuest (0028E_11769).
modernism,” focusing on the position of the black subject who is cast in the book as a constitutive non-being against which the white subject defines itself as human – though as we shall see, Fanon’s claim concerning the ontological exclusion of the black subject is invoked and then left painfully ambiguous within the deliberately limited co-ordinates of *Life in a Box*. Still, Martin’s approach to this condition is to consider gender relations and modernist aesthetics as coextensive structures of domination. The book opens by speaking of “The Negress,” to ask with ironic detachment: “What would we do without her? How would we know ourselves? Indeed, we need something against which the pristine can manifest itself, can create its artifice of pristineness.” I read Martin’s poetry in relation to theories of antiblackness in order to argue that, in the course of documenting *an experience of the denial of experience*, it places a history of black thought in relation to current social antagonisms both interior and exterior to the poem, to show how a position of antagonism can be transformative in itself.

Reading Indigenous poetics means attending to the antagonisms associated with Indigeneity. In particular, the claim of sovereignty that Indigenous scholars Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson place at the heart of Indigenous resurgence is constitutively different from “race” and exceeds racial ascriptions nonetheless imposed on Indigenous subjects, since Indigeneity names not only a structural position within a set of social relations defined by colonial capitalism and genocidal violence, but also an identification with a history of Indigenous culture and tradition that predates European contact—establishing a line of continuity between pre-contact Indigenous life and contemporary Indigenous struggles in the face of centuries of systematic dispossession and erasure. So, even though I propose that we can locate a “common enemy” across the work of Annharte and Martin in their joint rejection of the liberal politics of recognition, and in addition note some similarities in terms of the styles and attitudes with which they respond to contemporary social relations, I also mean to underline the ways in which the transformative antagonisms in their work are constitutively and formally different. As Dorothy Wang has noted, U.S. poetry critics have too often assumed interchangeability among minority poets, either reading their work within the content-driven realm of the social, material and political as opposed to the ‘high culture’

27 This phrase is cited by Martin as the title of Carrie Mae Weems’s 1996 photomontage (Weems 1996).
sphere of the literary, or else in purely formal terms, viewing formal decisions in isolation from the poet’s subjectivity (which, as Wang shows, is always inevitably influenced by social and historical conditions) and eschewing questions of race, Indigeneity and ethnicity altogether.\(^{29}\) And yet, as Wang reminds us, “while the precise nature of the link between the world and a poetic text can never be fully explicated, what is clear is that the path to understanding that relation can come only through close readings of particular poems themselves.”\(^{30}\) Showing how these two assertions about subjectivity and close reading inevitably imply one another, Wang invokes by example the hypothetical (but all too recognizable) claim that the Asian American poet John Yau and the British American T. S. Eliot display the same formal techniques when they question the idea of a stable subjectivity:

> The fallacious assumption here is that because Yau and Eliot both seem to be making similar poetic (and metaphysical) moves, these moves are formally and substantively identical. But Eliot and Yau are not actually doing the same thing in their poetries. Given how radically different their persons, subjectivities, histories, contexts, and so on are, there is no way that their projects of destabilizing subjectivity are the same. Nor can the resulting poems be the same. Poetic subjectivities and poetic practices are not interchangeable.\(^{31}\)

Indeed, these distinctions would apply to any comparison of two Asian American poets, or two African American poets, and while I present close readings of work by an African American poet and an Anishinaabe poet here, by no means should their work be held up as broadly representative of African American or Indigenous poetry in North America. Although it might be impossible (not to mention misguided), for example, to precisely measure the ways in which Annharte’s poetry is informed by her Anishinaabeg heritage, it is guaranteed that her work would signify differently if she belonged not to the Little Saskatchewan First Nation of Manitoba—who share an ancestral language, Ojibwe, with First Nations across large areas of Canada and the U.S.—but to the Nisga’a First Nation, from the Nass River valley in north-west British Columbia, many of whom live in urban areas of the same province. By the same token, Annharte’s work would look different if she


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 37.
identified as male. This is not to essentialize these poets, but again to insist that the form and content of their poetry cannot be isolated from the historical contexts and subjective positions within which it is produced and circulated.

While current modes of surface reading and new formalisms arguably constitute a conservative turn in academic literary criticism, harking back to new critical claims that formal close readings of poems need no external reference, other emerging critical models show how a paradigmatic analysis—based in a critique of the uneven development and differential value-making processes of global capital—need not ignore the specificities and frequencies of lived or aesthetic experience. As Christopher Nealon contends, in response to late twentieth-century post-structuralist critiques of Marxist “totalizing” thought, it is “as though it were the critic who tried to name the totalizing work of capital, rather than capital, who was failing to do justice to particulars, or to aesthetic experience.” Indeed, poetry critics such as Nealon, Wang, Reed and Sianne Ngai invest in the conviction that reading poetic form in relation to materially produced categories of identification can tell us something important about the simultaneously abstract and concrete global power structures by which this relation is determined. Following Coulthard’s argument in Red Skin, White Masks that “colonial relations of power are no longer reproduced primarily through overtly coercive means, but rather through the asymmetrical exchange of mediated forms of state recognition and accommodation,” we could say that the object of transformation in Annharte’s Indigena Awry and Martin’s Life in a Box is not a “thing,” but mediation, given that these works attempt to interrogate and undermine the affective attachments, manipulative solicitations, and recognition-based demands that, through a contemporary liberal discourse of recognition, actually serve to reproduce colonial structures of domination. On this premise, it is possible to see how Annharte’s and Martin’s poems not only orient themselves antagonistically against the very concrete, physical violence of structural domination, and in relation to histories of slavery and genocide; they also understand that today, as always, to


34 Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks, 15.
use Jodi Melamed’s words, “the primary function of racialization is to make structural inequality appear fair.”

“Help me I’m a poor Indian”

Before I move to my reading of Annharte’s work, it is necessary to make an acknowledgement: this dissertation has been written in Vancouver, a city situated on the unceded and traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, all of which are included in the Indigenous group of Coast Salish peoples located in the Pacific Northwest Coast. The Coast Salish peoples have been violently displaced by colonization, and today in British Columbia, First Nations community leaders are at the forefront of struggles against Texas oil giant Kinder Morgan’s proposed pipeline expansion, against gentrification in downtown Vancouver and the related closure of social housing and reduction in mental health support services, and against a federal government which for thirty-five years refused to open a national inquiry into the murder of at least 1,017 Indigenous women and girls in Canada between 1980 and 2012, many from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the British Columbia Interior. The Coast Salish territories on which Vancouver stands remain occupied territories. As a British citizen completing my PhD at Simon Fraser University, I have come to learn that the problem of my being a settler cannot be resolved through the language of apology and redress because it remains an ongoing contradiction, a material antagonism that unfolds as a relation of structural violence, which also means that I live on land from which I benefit in ways I have yet to understand.

This leads me straight to where Annharte’s poetry invokes academic projects such as this one:

- no white guilt table of contents
- hidden white privilege footnotes
- how much commentary does it take

---

35 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 13.

36 This is a conservative police figure and Indigenous communities estimate much higher numbers. See Royal Canadian Mounted Police website, http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/mmaw-faad-eng.pdf). In December 2016 the new Liberal government re-opened the national inquiry.
These lines refer us to the relation between the emotional and affective dynamics of white settler culture and the material facts of white supremacy within neoliberal multiculturalism, where, perversely and predictably, politically correct liberal arts study of Indigenous poetics by white scholars is often limited to an academic exercise and a career-booster. The couplets excerpted here are typical of Annharte’s style of using short lines and a mixture of free verse and punchy rhythms—and insofar as the iambics of these four lines stand apart from the free verse preceding them, their rhythm serves to amplify an angry rebuttal to the self-interest and condescension of benevolent academic criticism. They appear in a poem sardonically titled “help me I’m a poor Indian who doesn’t have enough books,” where Annharte’s language mocks the idea that Indigenous people do not have access to knowledge in commodity book form (which, as she implies elsewhere in *Indigena Awry*, is assumed as the most important form of knowledge, to the occlusion of other kinds). At the same time, while a title such as this draws attention to the discourses through which capital—‘L’—literature and academic literary criticism are implicitly coded as white, it might also betray a genuine anxiety regarding the complexity of a situation where the author herself, a theorist in her own right with a degree in English, is acutely aware of the state-inflicted debt problems and poverty experienced by many First Nations communities in Canada, where “CanAmerican Lit is so apartheid” and, in addition, where, as Annharte sees it, “colonized writers do not find out their own history so when literary critics step in, sort, catalogue, interpret and assess writing, they are more than happy to accept a non-Indigenous evaluation.”

Mockery in Annharte’s work is thus by no means limited to the function of a rejoinder to settler misconceptions. Rather, it is a powerful rhetorical technique designed to reposition the speaker on her own terms and, as such, affords a degree of self-determination otherwise denied by settler culture. “Toulouse Art Trick,” for example, confronts us with questions about what we expect from poetry because the slapstick humour of its apostrophe—jovially played out through syntax and imagery—elicits questions about the

---


complex relation between goofiness, femininity and race, and in the process compels a studied misalignment with so-called serious literary endeavours:

Let us duel. You and me right here not outside. Voyez-vous ça exercise bra? Tits jammed. Still a weapon. Belly gapes from dressing gown, Toulouse. Sash is draped over the chair back. Might tie you up if you want. Aiee, safety pin closure. Fat sticks out. All my fat is me and may intimidate you. If left out of life, fat is company. Forgive me this excess, mon chéri. Enough me. Back to you, Toulouse. Would you sketch crotched out panty hose? Not a trick question.39

The suspense of this poem is built on the pressure of its “tightness”—in terms of the tightness of an exercise bra, a safety pin and panty hose, as well as the implied proximity of speaker and addressee—and the threat posed to patriarchal order by gendered and racialized excess, figured physically and rhetorically as an overspill of fat and as a monologue resembling self-conscious “feminine” chatter. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, the French post-Impressionist painter who was not only famous for his images of dancers at the Moulin Rouge, but also for his short stature (he suffered from an unknown genetic disorder and stood at four feet eight inches tall), functions initially as a cipher here for high culture in the broadest sense, and is made into an inanimate addressee as the short sentences of the poem play against each other, as if enacting the duel announced in the first line. The formal contradiction inherent in the fact that there is only one side in this duel—the speaker’s side—is matched by the contradiction in which the poem is at once powerful and powerless: while it playfully teases and belittles the addressee with the threat of stabbing by a safety pin pinned too tight (“Aiee, safety pin closure”) and mocks “Toulouse” with a pun on his name next to the deliberately inane image of a belly gaping from a dressing gown, Annharte’s language at the same time displays self-conscious awareness of its own auto-referentiality and expressiveness, staging its internal drama via the mute absence of the male artist. “Forgive me this excess, mon chéri” is thus an ironic plea, in part because the poem is aware that the figures of high culture and self-appointed arbiters of “taste,” whether Toulouse-Lautrec or the editors of the latest issue of a Eurocentric literary magazine, are not really listening.

Yet, as Reg Johanson has noted, Annharte’s “guerrilla backchat” (her term) is not primarily addressed to a white settler audience. In a discussion of Annharte’s self-descriptions as a “word warrior” a “bitch” and a “circuit speaker for Horrible Anonymous,” Johanson observes that:

The weird jouissance the colonizer experiences at reading denunciations of himself and in the experience of guilt that they produce is circumvented by ridicule and humour. Listening “from the perspective of a First Nations person,” for Annharte, means hearing for the knowledge and experience shared by other First Nations people. It is they who “get” the joke. The decolonizing word warrior, then, is a figure of the critic who is turning away from dialogue with, or the education of, the oppressor to address her own people.40

Even though the grammatical object of the line, “All my fat is me and may intimidate you” is Monsieur Toulouse, seemingly standing in for European modernist aesthetics as a whole, this poem does not exist for him, even as it moves to ask: “did you, Toulouse, only paint mistresses?…Would you devote your best brush strokes to snagged fish nets abandoned by fat ladies?”41 While Toulouse-Lautrec—a disabled man of short stature, suffering much scorn himself—is perhaps not the most deserving choice of target as a representative of high culture, Annharte’s fun-making draws attention both to the gender politics of his fashionable representations of svelte dancers, sex workers and domestic workers, and to the conceivable probability that a fat Indigenous woman would be excluded from such sexist projections. In this way, the overlaps of these multiple and intersecting connotations and antagonistic power bearings might provide a means to thinking through Annharte’s complex relation to audience. Bearing in mind that her work has been awkwardly associated by white critics with the avant-garde poetics of the Vancouver-based Kootenay School of Writing,42 the fact that Annharte’s poems often turn away from this audience might perhaps be felt viscerally and

42 The Kootenay School of Writing was formed in 1984 in Vancouver and, as a non-profit organization, offered courses in writing, editing and publishing; sponsored colloquia and critical talks on writing, visual art and politics; hosted a reading series; and published the influential Writing magazine. The school is associated with writers such as Tom Wayman, Jeff Derksen, Catriona Strang, Colin Browne, Nancy Shaw and Lisa Robertson. For some hesitant observations of Annharte’s association with the Kootenay School of Writing, see Lorraine Weir “Tracking CanLit,” *Canadian Literature Review* 220 (2014): 134-5, and Rob McClellan, “Annharte’ s ‘AKA Inendagosekwe’,” *Jacket2*, January 22, 2015, http://jacket2.org/commentary/annharte’s-akainendagosekwe
most immediately by the settler reader when she is confronted with the discomforting provocation of their humour. The gaudiness of a pun like “Toulouse Art Trick” is matched by cheesy snippets of tourist French and the mocking made-up word “Aieee.” The poem verges on the bawdy, too, as the speaker suggests: “Might tie you up if you want”—a proposition that has only become more embarrassing by the time we reach the line, “Enough me. Back to you, Toulouse,” where it is clear that the ostensible addressee is absent from the poem.

Annharte’s deliberately garish puns seem to accumulate as a meta-pun—a self-reflexive parody of the racist stereotype of the overemotive racialized subject. This is a trope Sianne Ngai explores through the category she calls “animatedness”—a term Ngai uses to refer to “the exaggeratedly emotional, hyperexpressive, and even ‘overscrutable’ image of most racially or ethnically marked subjects.” For Ngai, animation seems closely related to apostrophe—lyric poetry’s signature and, according to Jonathan Culler, most “embarrassing” rhetorical convention, in which absent, dead, or inanimate entities are made present, vital, and human-like in being addressed by a first-person speaker.

Most interesting about the apostrophe of this poem, however, is the complexity of its artifice. The addressee is neither present, vital nor human-like; on the contrary, he is only made more dead in contrast to the expressive speaker. Yet, the poem’s nuanced attention to audience is signalled by this contrast insofar as it serves to dramatize the paradoxical hypervisibility and invisibility of the racialized subject—a contradiction expressed by the final sentence: “My concealed weapon will be my fat.” As the female speaker hopes that her racialized bodily excess will paradoxically allow her to escape the sexual objectification—both aesthetic and physical—that Toulouse-Lautrec’s subjects suffer under, so she hopes to discomfort, or at least turn away from, the avant-garde (read: white) poetry reader with her “tasteless” rhetorical excess. This is a joke and tactic that a First Nations reader might especially recognize and share in. It is both parodic and sincere, and, as such, circumvents settler-imposed stereotypes, which, as Ngai implies, take the fact that animatedness is “of the

43 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 93.
44 Ibid., 97.
45 Annharte, Indigena Awry, 7.
body” as confirmation of a self-evident truth—a sign of the racialized subject’s supposed authenticity or naturalness.\textsuperscript{46}

To put it another way: unlike Toulouse-Lautrec, whose paintings fashionably made use of “lowly” subjects to create high art, the transformative antagonisms of Annharte’s poetry arise from her humorous yet staunch refusal to reproduce the codifications that inscribe subjects with differential values depending on gender, race, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, level of education, and so on. In the series called “granny boot camp,” for example, we find titles such as “Her Erection” and “CY-BRO-GRAN-MOC” announcing poems whose citational and anecdotal style covers topics drawn from the category of experience, to use Annharte’s own moniker, of “basic grannydom,” where commentary on the bald genitals of a 90-year old “granny”—“grass did not grow on her race track that much”\textsuperscript{47}—is just part of the viscerally classed resilience required to be a granny of a certain kind: “‘You old fat bitch.’ She was not fazed out by that talk.”

At the same time, Annharte’s critical writing makes clear that she is acutely aware of the constraints placed upon her as an Indigenous writer— for example, when she notes how humour functions as a strategy of avoiding dismissal:

[Sherman Alexie] validates the acceptable and possible coxcombical use of irony and satire with his quip, “people listen to anything if you’re funny.” Otherwise, people would not listen to him but would “run away screaming,” “get angry” or “turn off.” The ultra-sensitive nature of a present-day audience might be eschewed by humour.\textsuperscript{48}

Nearly all of the poems in \textit{Indigena Awry} are funny, if not outlandishly offbeat. Those which are not, such as “Lady Earth Diver”—a poem in which the speaker describes the disappearance of her mother and the consequent loss of her Indigenous language—carry a subdued sadness, felt most poignantly in the contrast of their understatement. But Annharte’s committed avoidance of poetic gravitas, and the sincerity and “voice” associated with the lyric, are part of what marks her as an urban poet—the “Invisible Indian / going to

\textsuperscript{46} Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings}, 95.

\textsuperscript{47} Annharte, \textit{Indigena Awry}, 53.

\textsuperscript{48} Annharte, “Alternative Approaches to Indigenous Literary Criticism and Resistance Writing Practice,” \textit{AKA Inendagosekw}, 159.
high school in the city,”⁴⁹ who later sardonically observes, “Hollywood Indians line up. Whoop it up and please de-scalp / this time,”⁵⁰ and who regards public discourse with dry comic suspicion: “It’s hard to be a political correct squaw / my secret: don’t ever open mouth.”⁵¹ Annharte’s Indigenous subject is interpellated as a global citizen perhaps most vividly and comedically in the prose poem “multicultural timbit,” where a search for a “Timmies” (a Tim Horton’s coffee franchise) in Toronto airport unfolds as a comedy of errors. The speaker who wants a “Timbit” wryly notes: “if I spoke in hand signals, the message that I want a Tim Horton donut might be mistaken for a terrorist threat.”⁵² This donut-seeking speaker is, by turns, a participant in globalized consumerism and excluded from it. She tells us she is “on the way to Quebec and must bust through the language barrier,” which in this case means replacing one colonial language with another—a fact which brings different meaning to her playful derision of French mannerisms: “he gives me a tip on how to speak French by adopting a fake accent and drooping a lip à la Chrétien. Shrug often too.”⁵³ Other moments signal more immediately disconcerting forms of exclusion: “The flight attendant on the plane did not give out a Globe and Mail to me. Did she figure out I was ‘anglais’ and ‘autochuck’? To her, I might be part Métisse but do not speak Michif.”⁵⁴

The fundamental importance of ancestral land and territories to the continued existence of Indigenous communities, and to their self-determined cultural and political sovereignty in an age of global resource wars, undergirds the centrality of “the local” to contemporary forms of Indigenous politics and resurgence. At the same time, and in contrast to stigmatizing representations of Indigenous people as “monocultural, unrealistic, doomed, chauvinistic, or ‘tribal’,”⁵⁵ the subject of “multicultural timbit” really is global, and has been made so by force—perhaps into the mutable figure of “Indigena Awry.” The multiple and layered registers in Annharte’s poems of global and local, intimate and public, commercial and communist—and especially the mimesis and parody of the language of

⁵⁰ Ibid., “Mind the War,” 97.
⁵² Ibid., “multicultural timbit,” 74.
⁵³ Ibid.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
⁵⁵ Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 183-4.
neoliberal multiculturalism—invite us to read her work in relation to specific contemporary antagonisms whose historical character appears in all its thickness as it is set in relation to pivotal moments of colonial history. The Indian Act of 1876 is invoked several times in *Indigena Awry*, for instance, as “the Indian Act shoved down our throats,” or more allusively through references to “half breeds,” or to the borders of the “rez” (Indian reservation), in a catachrestic reminder that, as Bonita Lawrence notes, “to be federally recognized as an Indian […] an individual must be able to comply with very distinct standards of government regulation […] The Indian Act in Canada, in this respect, is a body of laws that for over a century have controlled every aspect of Indian life.” Imposed by the Canadian government, the *Indian Act* was designed under the auspices of assimilation in order to facilitate capital accumulation through the systematic destruction of Indigenous communities (perhaps most infamously through the residential school system). Annharte’s subject speaks not only against the backdrop of this history, but from within its present manifestation, as ongoing negotiations between the Canadian government and band councils are pursued with the aim of “self-governance,” and bands are steadily transformed into Aboriginal governments whose economic self-sufficiency depends on selling or leasing land, resource exploitation and taxation. As the Coast Salish-based Warrior Publications put it: “in this way, self-government will really be the self-administration of our own oppression.”

The category of Indigeneity is a crucial means of self-determination and opposition to genocidal state-led practices. Yet clearly, Annharte’s poetry is keenly aware of the complexity of the term “Indigenous,” the tensions of the “global” and the “local” that course through it, and its appeal to a liberal politics of recognition that produces Indigeneity as a manageable category that will enable—or at least not significantly impede—value-production. As Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez has pointed out, Indigenous people’s specific understandings of indigeneity existed “prior to its global articulations,” but the term

---

56 Annharte, *Indigena Awry*, 16, 5, 41.

57 Bonita Lawrence, “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview.” *Hypatia*. 18, no. 2 (2003): 3-31. The Indigenous Foundations information resource site, run from the University of British Columbia, led me to this essay by Lawrence. This particular line is quoted at http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act.html


“Indigenous” has been (re)produced in an era of neoliberal state policies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and countless NGOs, as an assertion of nationood—one which has helped Indigenous peoples to assert land rights and articulate Indigenous identities trans-nationally. While Altamirano-Jiménez’s study points to those living in Canada and Mexico in particular, she also notes “Indigenous” as a term strategically adopted by some peoples as a route to economic survival (for example, by specific groups in Latin America and Southeast Asia, who until recent decades were subjectivized as peasants), and we can see how the concept of “indigeneity”—next to its non-synonymous relatives, “native,” “aboriginal,” and “Indian”—functions in addition as a globally-recognized and racializing category that stands in negative dialectical relation to the many heterogeneous and place-specific meanings the term holds for subjects who actually identify as Indigenous. As Altamirano-Jiménez explains:

Indigenous peoples construct their identities based on meanings and social practices situated in place. Under neoliberalism, these meanings are disarticulated to establish new cultural meanings that depoliticize Indigenous peoples’ claims. Articulation theory is useful in understanding how cultural assemblages are produced to mediate economic formations. Thus articulation of meanings does not always involve radical contingency; rather, its possibilities are historically constrained by structural relations of domination (Clifford 2001, 472). Although Indigenous peoples are agents shaping the articulation of indigeneity, the sites involved create a complex field in which Indigenous peoples negotiate a balance between local needs and global wants.  

Altamirano-Jiménez emphasizes that political relations between global, state, and local levels are “neither natural nor inevitable,” but rather, “result from people’s agency and occur in specific contexts.” But as the antihumanist Marx and subsequent commentators have argued, the subjectivizing force of capital takes on a life of its own, a “set of impersonal

60 Altamirano-Jiménez, Indigenous Encounters, 4. In a time when the “tyranny of the local” (Jeff Derksen’s phrase)—in the form of local-brewed craft beer, organic locally-grown vegetables, “local independent” restaurants owned by a propertied urban elite class—dominates Western cultural landscape of those who can afford it, “local needs” and the distinction between global and local become even fuzzier, as the recent opening in Vancouver’s quickly-gentrifying Downtown East Side of the Capilano Tea House, a Coast Salish owned and operated business, would indicate.

61 Ibid., 5.
compulsions churning forward autonomous of anyone’s will.” This analysis requires careful consideration in the place-specific contexts of settler-colonial relations. Unlike the peasantry in Europe, whose proletarianization involved the internalization of their labour, integrating them into the wage and making them subject to the impersonal rule of abstractions (as opposed to the direct force of feudal relations), Indigenous peoples in North America are subjected to a form of settler-colonial expansion fundamentally based on the acquisition of territory.

Coulthard’s corrective to Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation stresses the significance of this concept for understanding the violent dispossession of noncapitalist producers in the so-called “New World,” and at the same time underlines the evident persistence of primitive accumulation as a mode of reproducing colonial and capitalist social relations, a fact which clearly overturns Marx’s framing of this process as an initial stage of accumulation now consigned to the past. In the spirit of preserving this useful aspect of Marx’s analysis for our settler-colonial present while shedding the racism and inaccuracy of its application by Marx, Coulthard proposes that shifting the framework of analysis from capitalist relation to colonial relation means that “the inherent injustice of colonial rule is posited on its own terms and in its own right.” Making this shift is a way of displacing a series of assumptions common to liberal or Left theory and politics that ignore the conceptual-philosophical ground of Indigenous thought and practice, an omission made especially stark by arguments for “the return of the commons” as a redistributive counterstrategy which fail to recognize that, as Coulthard puts it:

in liberal states such as Canada, the “commons” not only belong to somebody—the First Peoples of this land—they also deeply inform and sustain Indigenous modes of thought and behaviour that harbour profound insights into the maintenance of

---


63 See Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 9-11. Importantly, Coulthard also notes the predictable racism and shortsightedness of the early Marx’s normative developmentalism – the ranking of variations in cultural formations across a scale of teleological progression that casts non-Western societies as “backward” and without history, leading Marx to declare that “Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history.”

64 Ibid., 11. (original emphasis).
relationships within and between human beings and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity, nonexploitation and respectful coexistence.\textsuperscript{65}

What Marx forgets, argues Coulthard, is that land is exploitable, as well as people. From this starting point, and building on Fanon, his argument demonstrates how the politics of recognition is itself a mediation-based mode of primitive accumulation, one dependent on both official policies and unofficial cultural practices of “acknowledging” and affirming acceptable versions of Indigenous identity, in a transformation of settler-colonial relations that through indirect, covert force successfully manages to sidestep struggles over Indigenous “sovereignty” (a troubled term in itself) and noncapitalist modes of production by transforming the ground on which opposition is likely, or even possible, to take place.\textsuperscript{66}

Thus, in Coulthard’s own Dene community, antagonism increasingly arrives in the form of “narrowly conceived cultural claims” that do little to change material conditions.\textsuperscript{67}

I want to note an important point of divergence, however, between Coulthard’s analysis and the theoretical framework that underpins my own contentions about the salience of the political and emotional antagonisms of feminist poetry. Coulthard’s proposal that the colonial relation be understood “not as a primary locus or ‘base’ from which these other forms of oppression flow, but rather as an ‘inherited background field’ within which market, racist, patriarchal and state relations converge\textsuperscript{68} comes to rest on a “radical intersectional analysis,” where capital is figured “in relation to or in concert with axes of exploitation and domination configured along racial, gender, and state lines,”\textsuperscript{69} and thus makes a broadly abolitionist argument that insists on the interconnectivity of various structures of domination. But this multi-systems approach, which echoes the outdated dual systems theories of second-wave feminism, resorts to a Foucauldian framework of power relations distinct from the economic, and in doing so serves—despite all assertions to the contrary—to separate the political and the economic in much the same way as the liberal

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[65]{Ibid., 12.}
\footnotetext[67]{Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks, 19-20.}
\footnotetext[68]{Ibid., 14.}
\footnotetext[69]{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
politics of recognition, the object of Coulthard’s critique, necessarily do. It leads Coulthard make a dubious assertion in passing when he claims that, “neither ‘blood and fire’ nor the ‘silent compulsion’ of capitalist economies can adequately account for the reproduction of colonial hierarchies in liberal democratic contexts.”

Coulthard asks us simply to accept his conceptual separation of the political and economic, without providing an argument for why the combined domination of “blood and fire” (Marx’s characterization of the process of primitive accumulation, which we can add, continues today) and the “silent compulsion” of capital (the impersonal domination of the value form, the workings of which I lay out in Chapter Four) cannot account for the reproduction of these hierarchies.

Rejecting this particular use of intersectionality—a polysemous and controversial concept vigorously debated in black feminist theory in particular—does not entail doing away with the important argument Coulthard makes for prioritizing and asserting the unique position of the colonial relation. Indeed, accumulation by dispossession and the production of race and gender are the very ground on which capitalism has built itself. But, as I think Annharte’s poetry shows, present-day Indigenous subjectivities are often—though importantly, as Audra Simpson has argued, not always—internalized by capital in such a way that would only confirm the inadequacy of an intersectional, multi-systems approach. This makes the overriding impetus of Coulthard’s analysis all the more crucial: in his oppositional framing of politically-potent Indigenous antagonisms against the “structural and psycho-affective” contours of recognition politics, and his demonstration of the conceptual limits of an argument made by Dale Turner (briefly, a claim that the discursive practices of Indigenous “word warriors” can, through an “ethics of participation,” engage with and effectively transform the legal and political discourses of the state), Coulthard’s attention to the coercive structure of recognition optics, and to what he calls “the risks of interpellation” for Indigenous peoples, is tied to his support for more uncompromising—abolitionist and...

70 Ibid., 15.

71 For an up-to-date summary of intersectionality debates and a critique of intersectionality’s conceptual limits—especially its internal logics and implied temporalities—that nonetheless argues for the continued relevance of this concept, see Jennifer C. Nash, “Institutionalizing the Margins,” Social Text 118 32, no. 1 (Spring 2014) 45-65.


73 Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks, 45-6.
transformative—antagonisms. Commenting on the Manichean relations Fanon identifies in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he explains:

> In the context of internalized colonialism, the material conditions of poverty and violence that condition the colonial situation appear muted to the colonized because they are understood to be the product of one’s own cultural deficiencies. In such a context, the formation of a colonial “enemy”—that is, a source external to ourselves that we come to associate with “our misfortunes”—signifies a collapse of this internalized colonial structure.  

The question of how to identify the “enemy”—of who or what that enemy is—is of course central to critique itself, and *Red Skin, White Masks*, along with Simpson’s *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, are key interventions in Indigenous/Native Studies insofar as they shift the focus of Indigenous critique—which, as both authors argue, has too often approached the politics of cultural recognition uncritically—to espouse a politics of refusal and collective self-determination.

Bearing in mind Coulthard’s convincing claim that the liberal politics of recognition constitute a continuation of colonial systemic violence by less overt means, alongside his less convincing claim that this violence is enacted via converging axes of exploitation and domination, I want to point to the suggestion, in Annharte’s work, that the insidious effects of capitalist accumulation appear in the form of *value differentials* in Indigenous contexts, and are inseparable from—indeed, make their appearance as—the production of Indigeneity as raced, gendered, and classed. In this way, Annharte’s critique provides an alternative to the psychoanalytic models employed by Coulthard and Fanon, one which not only demonstrates a profound understanding of how, in Coulthard’s terms, “negative emotions […] mark an important turning point in the individual and collective coming-to-consciousness of the colonized,” but also proposes a clear enemy: capital. As we have seen, the antagonisms of Annharte’s poetry are directed at objective structures (the Indian Act, or the racial paranoia of anti-terrorist rhetoric) and at emotional and affective aspects of white settler culture (the benevolence of academic appraisals of Indigenous writing, or the cultural investments of Eurocentric modernism). While it is difficult to convey the catholicity of Annharte’s eye in

---

74 Ibid., 114.
75 Ibid.
Indigena Awry, which seems to betray a desire to kaleidoscopically soak in all aspects of life at once, and often has the mildly self-deprecating effect of making her poems read like a series of inventive and ruminatory anecdotes, it is in the perpetual confluence of these temporal and spatial scales, and the deliberative ambiguities of their subjective-objective relations, that her work shows how the “impersonal compulsions” of capital subjectivize Indigenous subjects. “Indigenous Verse Ability,” for example, suggests in its title the contradictory imposition on Indigenous subjects to be flexible in their “performance” of Indigeneity. The poem then begins:

Right off, ingenious character needs to apply
any part-time genius rez identity on or off

Right on, dress accordingly use convenient
Scalp wig or beaver hat trap appendage bag

Always, fuk wid Indin expert tease please
even if disabled walk with crutch is not even

Never, forget internal voice represents eternal
Injuniaity croak sing songs of constant repetition76

The first couplet here invokes the legalities of “rez identity,” and the attempts of both the Canadian state and First Nations band council governments to control and manage nationhood and “reserve” status – a particularly contentious issue because until 1985, the patrilineal bias of the Indian Act meant that only women lost their status upon marriage to non-Indian men, and not the reverse.77 The paradoxically threatening and flippant tone of these lines, as they poke fun at the idea—perhaps the seeming ubiquity—of “genius” as requirement, as well as the (disturbingly accurate) notion that “identity” could be switched on or off, by “dress[ing] accordingly,” for example, is clearly a stab at the hypocritical

76 Annharte, Indigena Awry, 119.

77 As Simpson notes in reference to the Mohawk Nation of Kahnawà:ke, the European model of patrilineal descent imposed by the Indian Act supplanted the traditional means for defining kinship and determining community belonging through the mother's clan. See Audra Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 56.
demands of state-driven identity politics. But more interesting is how Annharte conflates such matters with the language of work, and especially, *flexible* work: “needs to apply,” a riff on phrases such as “X need apply,” or “X need not apply” commonly found on job advertisements sits next to the request, or demand, for “any part-time genius,” mirroring the absurd hyperbole of twenty-first century job advertisements for part-time, passionate geniuses to work checkout lanes or serve milkshakes. Annharte’s strategy of conflating by connotation the affective, feminized, performative aspects of flexible labour with the affective, feminized, performative identity-based demands of a politics of recognition suggests the inseparability of these forms of domination and points to a troubled reality for Indigenous feminized people that, once again, calls into question the conceptual separation of “gender” and (liberal-capitalist reproductions of) “Indigeneity” as axes of oppression that could be considered in isolation from each other and not, as I have been arguing, as modes of appearance in a global system made up of hierarchies of difference and uneven relations of value.

This is not to imply that the category of Indigeneity cannot also denote a noncapitalist mode of radical insurgency. But as the concepts of “Indigeneity” and “sovereignty” appear nominally within the parameters of a hermeneutics of settler-colonialism, they are reproductions borne from the logics of liberal multiculturalism, or as Simpson has troublingly put it in the language of compromise, they are “a critical language game in the conditions of settlement.” Thus, the last line of the section of “Indigenous Verse Ability” excerpted here has a curious double-meaning in that it not only evokes the self-determining practice, among First Nations communities in Canada, of oral history handed down through generations via songs and stories, but also carries in its weary irony and disaffected language—since “croak” and “constant repetition” do not exactly sound appealing—an understated but devastating sense of ongoing Indigenous dispossession.

These practices too have been, or can be, colonized—in a sense, filled by the real abstractions of an incessantly-affirmative and colonizing liberalism—to the point where the sovereignty of their meaning can be lost.

---

78 Ibid., 105.
Material antagonisms

Melamed’s study, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, examines the production of “official anti-racisms” as normative modes of power and an organizing structure of liberal-capitalist modernity:

The power of racialization lies in its constituting differential relations of value and valuelessness according to reigning orders while appearing to be (and being) a normative system that merely sorts human beings according to categories of difference. Racialization converts the effects of differential value-making processes into categories of difference that make it possible to order, analyze, describe and evaluate what emerges out of force relations as the permissible content of other domains of US modernity (e.g. law, politics, and economy).⁷⁹

As this passage presents racialization as a value-making process and an ascription of difference that works, in effect, to make relations of force intelligible—and, crucially, “permissible”—it points to how liberal conceptions of racialized difference are actually, as Melamed shows, productions of difference, with material effects, and, in turn, materially constituted by geohistorical conditions. This feedback loop of materially-produced discourse is not so much the subject as the moving target of much recent poetry by women in the United States and Canada, and, in this sense, we might read Annharte’s work as occupying a position of antagonism that overlaps, often in troubled ways, not only with the feminist antagonisms of Martin’s work, but that of poetry by writers as diverse as Bhanu Kapil, M. NourbeSe Philip, Juliana Spahr, Myung Mi Kim, and, indeed, a younger generation of writers including Eunsong Kim, Oki Sogumi, Syd Staiti, Jackie Wang and Liz Howard. Insofar as all of these poets explicitly anchor lived experience to structural determinants—often by linking references to identity categories and differentials to objects such as State policies and institutions, commodities in their materiality, the global space of flows, and that automatic subject, Capital itself—their work marks a return after post-structuralism to an analysis that affirms the necessity of categories of identification pertaining to race, gender and class at the

---

⁷⁹ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 11 (original emphasis).
same time as it calls for their abolition as markers of structural subordination. In other words, the language and formal techniques employed by Annharte and Martin suggest the kind of paradigmatic analysis that was once castigated by post-structuralist thinking for relying on categories such as “black” or “native.”

To be sure, the abstract category of blackness is the very framework through which Life in a Box is a Pretty Life speaks. The history of ongoing and endemic state-sanctioned brutality against African Americans is a structure of domination made especially stark, and especially public, by the waves of protests and riots provoked by the spate of unarmed black men killed by the police in the United States in recent years. But in contrast to Rankine’s much-celebrated Citizen: An American Lyric, with which Life in a Box shares many thematic concerns and arguably an ontological investigation, these events are not an explicit focus of Martin’s book, even as they cannot be disarticulated from its project. Life in a Box documents an experience shaped among objects—clothes, combs, blankets, “huffing landscapes of junked cars and computer keyboards”—and intellectual chatter, which the speaker describes in weary tones, noting how “Žižek fantasizes about Capitalism’s inevitable end. Reviewers want these poems to be more hopeful. Love is obvious.” But these objects and citations actually serve to shore up the book’s emphatic turn inwards, where it is focalized almost exclusively at the level of private psychological experience, or where its mode is, to cite C. S. Giscombe’s back-cover praise, to “call and call on the storied lower frequencies.” At the same time, the psychic life of the speaker is figured through the historicity of the black female body, as the subtitle of the book’s opening section suggests:

MO[DERN] [FRAME] OR A PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE ON WHAT REMAINS BETWEEN HISTORY AND THE LIVING BREATHING BLACK HUMAN FEMALE

After Carrie Mae Weems’s Framed by Modernism (1996)

This long section title could be read as an announcement of the book as a social project that takes as its analytical object an undercurrent of deep sociality, since the grammatical positioning of “HISTORY” suggests an antagonistic relationship between History and

---

80 See Chris Chen, “The Limit Point,” and Endnotes 3 more generally on all three of these categories as frameworks for analysis and the objects of a politics of negation.

81 Martin, Life in a Box, 11, 24.
“THE LIVING BREATHING BLACK HUMAN FEMALE,” a subject who, as we have seen, History—or, the epistemological structure of Enlightenment thought—would not have live, breathe, or be counted as human. The antagonism that asserts humanness, stressed here in capital letters and evidenced by physical “living breathing” embodiment, cuts to the heart of the constituted-constitutive relations of racial capitalism explored in Chapter One, and possibly hints at Martin’s own approach towards the concept of social death and the ontological status of black subjectivity.

But a more explicitly diachronic mode of theorizing takes place in the semantics of Martin’s subtitle, too. Because the square brackets instruct a redaction of the syllables, “[DERN]” and “[FRAME]”—they notably leave the word “MO OR.” While we can also hear “more” here, suggesting, tongue-in-cheek, that the coming pages comprise “more or less” a “philosophical treatise,” this tonal layer of nonchalance slides disconcertingly around the complex historical etymology—at once striking and fuzzy—of the word, “Moor.” In most contexts a racist term, “Moor” is referentially expansive and could refer, for example, to the Muslim population of the Greater Maghreb region of Northwest Africa during the Middle Ages, or today’s Tamil Muslim Moors in Sri Lanka (where “Moor” is a religious, rather than ethnic, designation). But the sixteenth-century invention of the term “blackamoor” to describe a servant-class of black North Africans, and the ambiguous representations of the Islamic Other, the “barbarous [or was it brave?] Moor” in Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, in Othello, and in Othello’s precursor, George Peele’s Muly Mahamet in The Battle of Alcazar, were reinscribed and further clouded in the proliferation of writings by colonialist “explorers” and authors, most famously Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling. “Moor,” in Michael Neill’s still-troubling language from 1998, “might be extended to refer to Africans generally (whether ‘white,’ ‘black,” or ‘tawny’ Moors), or, by an even more promiscuous extension, might be applied (like ‘Indian’) to almost any darker-skinned peoples—even, on occasion, those of the New World.”

Always an act of racial ascription, even if simultaneously other things too, the term “Moor” has become one of “notorious indeterminacy.”

---


83 Bartels, Speaking of the Moor, 4.
For what could be a more disturbingly abstract and loaded word than this opaque proper noun? In its proliferation of transformations and applications, its historical malleability as a tool of racist differentiation, and the weight of its present-day offensiveness, the word “Moor” is convincing proof, if we needed it, of the “abstractness of the black subject” that Reed underlines in relation to Rankine’s and Kearney’s investigations of contemporary media. As Emily C. Bartels notes: “in speaking of the Moor we have always had to ferret the subject out from a seemingly endless set of diverse, divergent, and sometimes overdetermined images, to decide who our Moors will be [. . .] as a signifier, “Moor” is unstable and unreadable.”

The salience of blackness as a conceptual abstraction is redoubled, then, given that the “MO[DERN] [FRAME]” or “MO OR” that opens Life in a Box is set after Carrie Mae Weems’s Framed by Modernism: a photo series depicting a black female model leaning, perhaps indifferently or in a faux-casual mode, against a wall at the back of an artist’s studio, while an older white male artist stands emotively in the foreground, facing the camera with his back to the model, twice clutching his head in his hand. Weems’s portraits do some heavy conceptual work, enabling Martin to frame Life in a Box not only within an ongoing history of racism in the modernist avant-garde, but also, and more to the point, within a long history of feminist aesthetic challenges to that history. Through the figure of the black life model, Martin also sets the tone of her prose lyric:

In standing repose, the
object lures us into a
belief that she is indeed human. We know this from her sun-draped eyes, her capacity for deceit. We see no absolute proof, however, against the artist’s outstretched

84 Ibid., 4-5.
85 This photo series can be viewed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/framed.html.
Here, the speaker ventriloquizes white racist vernacular—a mode often ironically adopted in Martin’s poems, and with similar effects to those we have seen in Annharte’s work. The calmly conventional syntax and short sentences, the measured speech that seems convinced of itself and the righteousness of its empiricist concern with “proof,” with how “We know this,” sit outrageously next to the violently racist implications of the logic presented here, which, taken literally, argues that a black woman may look human (especially thanks to “her capacity for deceit”), but we cannot be absolutely sure, given the racist iconography of white popular culture (which “we” presumably believe). The declarative “We know this” and “We see no” are forcefully driven home by Martin’s sharp line breaks and the enforced rhetorical inclusivity of the first-person plural. The figure of Al Jolson, the beloved American Broadway entertainer famously known for his performances in blackface, is then a fitting embodiment of the obscene contradictions Martin means to trace.

The repulsion one might feel at these lines—that, indeed, Martin’s ironic presentation of “rational thought” encourages us to feel—is a visceral response to a baldly racist logic mimetically echoed several times across the book, which ends with a note that the work

incorporates some borrowed and/or manipulated and/or erased language from late 19th-century ideologies and texts including Frederick Starr’s “The Degeneracy of the American Negro”; J.L.M. Curry’s “The Negro Question”; and Fredrick L. Hoffman’s Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro.87

These reframed fragments read as classic contributions to what Fred Moten calls “a cultural and political discourse on black pathology . . . so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black

---

86 Martin, Life in a Box, 2.
87 Ibid., 91.
take place.”

But, as may be clear to anyone familiar with the potent debates between Moten and Afro-pessimist thinkers such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, Moten is almost certainly referring, in addition, to Afro-pessimist formulations of the concept of “social death,” especially in his subsequent note that “blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality.”

I move to discuss these debates in more detail in Chapter Three, but the centrality the discourse on black pathology for Martin’s project is clear, especially as they are linked to her long-term investigation of the abstraction(s) of black subjectivity. The inherently abstract nature of the Lyric “I” is a preoccupation of Martin’s critical writing, where she is interested in the unspeakable nature of black grief (unspeakable, she explains, “in that its source is not accessible”) and the pathologizing melancholia of blackness as “the conditions of race itself,” where “we find in the attempt to speak subjectivity not walls but ghosts, delusions and perceptions.”

The language of haunting, and the relation between agency and grief, link Martin’s work to theorists such as Achille Mbembe, whose philosophy of history based on “the negated subject deprived of power, pushed … out of the world” is simultaneously concerned with how this subject “takes on himself or herself the act of his or her own destruction and prolongs his/her own crucifixion,” leading to colossal questions:

But what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing? Or what does is mean for one who has been enwrapped, or has enwrapped himself/herself, in the pure terror of the negative, been consigned to the work of a slave, to give himself/herself a premature death, a death without apparent meaning – whether that death be suicide, or homicide, or genocide? What is the relationship between these two gestures? It is hardly possible to answer these two questions without returning to the starting point: what does it mean to partake of human existence? Who is a human being and who is not, and by what authority is such a distinction made? If one is not a human being, what is one? And what is the relationship human beings should or can have with that on which it has not been possible to confer the attribute of humanity, or to which it

---

88 Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 177.
89 Ibid.
has been denied? Finally, how do these matters relate to the birth of the subject, and the relation between freedom and bondage?91

It should be impossible to defer or put aside such questions in any discussion of poetry exploring the category of blackness today, and I want to point to some of the ways I see Martin answering these questions in poetry, especially in terms of how her writing presents blackness as a malleable abstraction, and how it insists on the permanence—that is, the historical consistency—of the conditions of blackness in spite of, and because of, the advent of liberal multiculturalism and the politics of recognition that affirm and produce race.

While the scientific racism of the following lines has become a type of information frequently circulated in popular culture, where ideologies of eugenicist racism are perceived as firmly situated in the past, Martin’s short lines have a slow-motion effect that cannot but show up the hypocrisy of their logical syntax at the same time as it places their citational content within the present context of structural violence against black bodies explored by the book at large:

The Irish, the Iberian, and the Negro are of low prognathous type. Less petting and more disciplining is needed; fewer academies and more work benches.92

---


92 Martin, *Life in a Box*, 60.
As Martin’s citation technique sets nineteenth-century racisms against a contemporary US backdrop of a racial capitalism marked by mass incarceration, neoliberal multiculturalism, and economic ghettoization and immiseration, it constitutes a form of aesthetic argument: one that shows how what Wayde Compton has called the “pheneticizing” aspect of racialization remains intact in multiculturalism, where racializing taxonomies are made to appear “real” or natural, rather than part of a social system that, as Melamed argues, sorts human beings according to categories of difference. Multiculturalism’s method of identification is thus itself rooted in a divisive logic that catalogues groups of people by naming them as other—as, in this particularly invidious example by the exact same logic, the “prognathous / type” with its projecting lower jaw or chin—thereby reproducing the logics of racialization that it purportedly aims to appease or mitigate in the first place. In Martin’s poems, the deeply violent nature of racializing ascriptive processes is documented most excruciatingly by way of its simultaneously gendering and sexualizing modes, when for example, Martin evokes the hyperbolically sexualized image of the “Black Venus”:

After a vaginal
examination they
determined that her
uterus was enlarged,
hers vagina over-
abundantly moist, but
her long and “tumid”
clitoris was the tell tale
sign of nymphomania.94

We read this in the context of the following line a few pages earlier in the book: “When they said they’d split me in two, I was overjoyed, wanting to / get at the rip of things. / How to inhabit the sensation of living.”95 The real abstraction of the relation between white supremacist discursive forms of racial ascription and lived psychological experiences of blackness, of being both “black” and “woman”—as well as the character of this abstraction

94 Martin, Life in a Box, 56.
95 Ibid., 47.
as a relation—is figured and felt through Martin’s work on a visceral level, particularly in this instance, where the speaker’s state of being “overjoyed” registers as a racialized emotional and sexual excessiveness set within a context of pornotroping and the pathologizing sexualization of the black female body and its genitalia.

In framing things this way, Martin points to the palpability of real abstractions, especially when she reminds us, just a couple of lines later, that “When the ‘I’ speaks, it speaks into another’s speech. This is a labor.” This line suggests the literal (and inevitable) abstraction of the Lyric “I,” as it “speaks into” and is therefore abstracted by “another’s speech,” and its implication of a shift from noun to verb—from an abstract “I,” to the process or act of abstracting—foregrounds the tricky issue of who is doing the abstracting: while the “I” is the subject here, Martin’s grammar implies that whenever the “I” speaks it is forced to speak into another’s utterance, especially since the word “speaks” appears first as a action verb, and second as a stative verb signalling the absence of a subject. Such a strategy not only traces a linguistic violence that grammatically leaves open the suspicious and difficult question of who really does the abstracting within a white supremacist epistemological framework—where, detached from individual actors, the structure of speech itself assumes and depends upon the non-existence of a black lyric “I”—but in the same movement gestures beyond the linguistic realm of deconstructive theory to make “real,” or visceral, the conceptual abstraction of “another’s speech.” Indeed, as Martin makes explicit: “This is a labor.”

The verb constructions set up within the book’s opening pages result in similar effects: “Was ‘low,’ they say, ‘fastened in place by violence.’ Was ‘ritualized’ was ‘debased’ was ‘grotesque’ was ‘black flesh’ or ‘swathed’ in ‘blackness,’ and ‘finality’ and ‘nature,’ was ‘sensualized’.” The passive voice, which tends to de-emphasize the agent in the sentence and is often used by journalists to create the effect of objectivity, is syntactically dramatized here, while quotation marks draw attention to the appellations being wielded by an agent we can only identify as an intangible “they.”

“Life in a box” also refers us, of course, to the linguistic violence and discursive enclosures of so-called rational, enlightened, objective thought: the ideological limit-points

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 2.
that Martin’s poetry traces. All at once, the “box” invokes the slave hold of the Middle Passage and the prison cell of the carceral security state, the fetishizing picture frame of European modernism and the taxonomies of multicultural tickboxes. In this way, *Life in a Box* seems to move through language as an aesthetic record of the processes of racial ascription and assignations of valuelessness, frequently positing these things in relation to the question of ownership of one’s own life and death. “Structure” is invoked at every turn:

Life inside grid object, replace faces with armored ducks, drive off fucking cliff, get all damaged after raging. What holds the structure:
giant ministries, giant everything! They don’t want you to hang yourself. Instead you survive. Spring is here!98

Set within the emotional intensity of coinciding humour and rage, and the weight of the concrete that “holds” the abstract structure, Martin’s consistent use of the second-person “you” and her frequent withholding of a speaking “I” creates a similar tenor to what Reed has identified in Rankine’s 2001 book *PLOT*, where “the floating ‘here’ generates a peculiar sense of feeling without subject, rather like anxiety understood as a generalized fear that does not come precisely from particular situations but from the fact of situations, from plots.”99

Perhaps it is helpful to think of it this way: after a shift in twentieth-century discourse from the paradigmatic “fact of blackness” to the post-structuralist “experience of blackness,” what we are seeing in Martin’s poetry (and arguably in poetry by Rankine, Moten and David Marriott, among others) is a return to the fact of blackness mediated by the experience of it. Or in Martin’s own words:

“Death space,” I want to say when Frankie asks where in my body
does writing begin its habitation. “I do not know,” I say instead.100

Similarly, the most recent spate of murders of black men by the police in the US can be read as an experience of blackness, but one fundamentally determined by the fact of it.

---

98 Ibid., 23.
99 Reed, *Freedom Time*, 109. Across the entirety of the *Life in a Box*, the first-person “I” appears only in moments when it is explicitly troubled.
100 Martin, *Life in a Box*, 86.
Captive genders

The infamous Moynihan report, written by Assistant Secretary of Labor and later US senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965, concluded that the troubling increase of African American single-parent households was the result of the matriarchal structure of black culture. The “problem” of “The Negro Family” was actively hindering the authority and potential of black men, and thus the social and economic uplift of black communities, making it a matter of national importance and a challenge for Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty.”

One of the many responses to the this report is Hortense Spillers’ famous 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which takes the document as provocation for its argument that the “African female subject” is not only the target of rape, but also the topic of externalized acts of torture that we imagine as the province of male-on-male brutality. Spillers argues that since conventional patriarchal gendering takes place within the domestic—the patronymic sphere of proper names—this process was suspended in the “nowhere” of the middle passage, where the African female body was quantifiable only as an amount of flesh, stripped of familial relations and proper names. As a result, “the African-American female’s ‘dominance’ and ‘strength’ [have] come to be interpreted by later generations—both black and white, oddly enough—as a ‘pathology,’ as an instrument of castration.” Spillers’ historical account of this racialized, yet de-gendered captive body emphasizes the severance of consanguineal ties by a patriarchal order of slave ownership where any new child’s human and familial status remained undefined—an “enforced state of breach” and a “vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the [sic] property relations.”

Perhaps as crucial for black feminist aesthetics as for black feminism, Spillers’

---

103 Ibid. (original emphasis).
104 As Jared Sexton writes, “for Spillers, that narrative is fragile and endangered, but also deeply grafted and irreducible. Whatever else there may be in black culture or cultures—in the most capacious, differentiated, global sense—a narrative of antagonism is inscribed there, powerfully and profoundly. And yet, as Spillers also demonstrates, that narrative is inscribed obliquely or obscurely, even and perhaps especially when addressing itself to intramural affairs, owing perhaps to an incommensurability between antagonism and narrative form itself. How, then, to derive a discourse from an engagement with and against the experience that Spillers
intervention here is to suggest that the process of kinship dispossession and the permanence of the antechamber of the middle passage also lead to “certain representational potentialities for African-Americans” and radical possibilities for transforming gender relations:

This problematizing of gender places [the African-American female], in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject.105

The strand of philosophical discourse on black ontology springing from Fanon’s overturning of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic of freedom and bondage—a discourse that brings with it vivid assertions and profound disagreements about the “non-relation” of the black subject, the objectification of black flesh marked by the system of chattel slavery and made quantifiable, and the (im)possibilities of black social life and social death—is shown in both Spiller’s and Martin’s work to pose equally fundamental questions about how gender has been conceived and supposedly exploded in (mostly white) feminist theory. As Martin writes, “It’s not the word ‘body’ that’s the problem. It’s the physical thingness / of it, the hump,”106 and it is no stretch to read this as a refusal of the proliferation of feminist writings on the body that conveniently pass over the specific history of the black female body. “In the female form the writing comes from what femaleness?”107 Martin asks. Then, “what is the body but a leaking form? No room for leaking. A form so tight around my form it cannot seep or gesture.”108 This pressure on the black body, we are reminded elsewhere, is an objectifying force. The line, “A dead fawn under machinery. I am the machinery,”109 might trouble a reader in its resonance with the poet’s first name, and evokes Fanon’s famous reflection on entering the world “imbued with the will to find a meaning in things” of

indicates and inhabits in the historic instance? How to sustain the language and, moreover, make it speak in theoretical terms? How to theorize for battle, to go to war in theory, to fight without experiencing a breakdown or detour in language? How to stay within the anxiety of antagonism (and the narrative crisis it precipitates), to be guided by it, and, again, even to will it?” See Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism.”

105 Spillers, 80.
106 Martin, Life in a Box, 55.
107 Ibid., 87.
108 Ibid., 72.
109 Ibid.,75.
discovering “that I was an object in the midst of other objects.” When, as Martin writes, “representation falls away,” when “my status is ruptured,” “obscured by the hammer of whiteness,” the only option is, in Spillers’ words, “to make a [new] place for this different social subject.” If Martin’s poetry unfolds upon the insurgent ground quite magnificently theorized by Spillers, it does so by tracing the set of contradictions required to produce the category “black women,” pointing to the ways the black female body is always already de-gendered and thus perpetually “requires” re-gendering through particularly violent methods. This process is made explicit in the curated movement between Martin’s questions and statements about femaleness, objectification, and representation noted above, and her citational references to genitalia-obsessed and pathologizing accounts of supposedly nymphomaniacal black women. But it is also presented from within an affective field of unspoken (and unspeakable) psychological damage implicit in the tonal mixture of melancholy and antagonism carried by the short, matter-of-fact sentences and terse simplicity of her questions and statements: a set of transformative antagonisms that literally takes the impossibility of the black female body as its foundation.

*Life in a Box* shows how the racist pathologizing and patriarchal paternalism of “Great Society” liberalism is logically commensurate with the affirmation of structural identities encouraged by liberal multiculturalism. But piece by piece, I think the antagonisms of Martin’s work also show how a fight against the systematic theft of social life by white colonizers is an abolitionist project that develops through a painful contradiction—painful because its initiation involves an identification with a structural role determined by capital (importantly in this case, both gendered and de-gendered), and paradoxical because a totally different individual would have to emerge on the other side of self-abolition. “I lie down in the ditch myself, stretch my body alongside the dead myself,” Martin writes, in words that imply the impossibilities of being black, of black *being*, and return us to Mbembe’s question of how the black subject “takes on himself or herself the act of his or her own destruction.”

---

110 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 77.
111 Martin, *Life in a Box*, 5, 12, 76.
Indigena Awry and Life in a Box is a Pretty Life both highlight the ways that the liberal politics of recognition actually serve to reproduce colonialist, racist and patriarchal social relations, pointing to what Chen calls the “limit point of capitalist equality.” They undermine the narrative of progression that structures the ostensibly “post-racial” security state—a fabricated account that situates colonial violence in the past—by demonstrating the continuation of those very same orders of systemic violence. But apart from the obvious fact that Annharte’s and Martin’s poems are visually and thematically unalike, which in a better world would be completely unremarkable, the closest we could come to aligning them, perhaps, would be to suggest that they share a lateral solidarity, one that becomes visible in moments of feminist antagonism towards racializing recognition optics. In other words, the similarity—the imposition of equivalence—belongs to capital, and not to these poets. Their poems attest to the profound complexities and incommensurabilities to which we must attend in any account of the relationships between race, Indigeneity, and capital. They certainly imply that we should “think capital” through race and Indigeneity, rather than the reverse. That Annharte and Martin manage to so persuasively imply such a thing using aesthetic tactics and strategies that call affectively on readers to rethink—or simply notice—the unspoken social relations otherwise hidden by liberal logics is testament both to the dialectical capacities of non-narrative writing for describing non-conceptual experience, and to the perceptive skill of the poets themselves in making the abstract social relations of racial capitalism somehow palpable, “feel”-able.

Reading transformative antagonisms through Annharte’s and Martin’s work also shows up the inadequacy of Marxist concepts which, moral chastisements aside, are only just beginning—despite the longstanding contributions of theorists such as Cedric Robinson, Angela Davis, Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, and the efforts of new Marxist-feminist critiques—to consider “race” as a system of differentials across which value flows. Marxism has, moreover, hardly touched upon the economic history of capitalist expansion that in true dialectical fashion, seems to have produced new vectors of Indigeneity precisely through attempts to erase First Peoples. This makes recourse to aesthetic critique such as Annharte’s even more necessary in thinking about Indigeneity, gender, and capital. Like Martin, she presents the racialized female body and its historicity as a fundamental site of aesthetic and
political struggle. The wider horizon of these poets’ projects, set against histories of slavery and genocide, set up fundamental questions about the nature of the relationship between cognitive abstractions and the material world, since the material antagonisms structuring contemporary social relations emerge aesthetically in Annharte’s and Martin’s work not as a struggle over frames of representation, figured in terms of “recognition” or optics, but as the very terrain on which representation can be staged in the first place.
In “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten confronts an onto-epistemological problem that in the twenty-first century remains as animated and violent as ever:

How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality? Deeper still, what are we to make of the fact of a sociality that emerges when lived experience is distinguished from fact, in the fact of life that is implied in the very phenomenological gesture/analysis within which Fanon asserts black social life as, in all but the most minor ways, impossible?1

Moten’s resolutely provisional answer to this problem posits blackness and “the black” as stolen life, as both a disruptive para-ontology and fugitive movement. In this way, Moten holds black social life “in the break,” drawing on and departing from Frantz Fanon’s assertion that “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”2 Elsewhere in his work, Moten provides other entry points to this philosophy of history, but here we are led to it via the difference and slippage between “things” and “objects,” famously dramatized in Charles Lam Markmann’s mistranslation of the title of the fifth chapter of Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks as “The Fact of Blackness” (more accurately, as Moten notes, it is “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”).3

Pointing to Martin Heidegger’s discourse on “The Thing,” Moten borrows Heidegger’s example of an earthen jug, used to distinguish between two German words meaning “thing,” Ding (the objective existence of “a [legal, political, or discursive] gathering to deliberate”) and Sache (the “(subject)-matter, affair,” or “contented matter” under

---

1 Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 188.
2 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 90.
discussion). For Heidegger, objects exist in relation to a subject perceiving them and can be figured in representational terms, but “things” exist in and of themselves, independent of our perception of them. Heidegger stresses that the jug exists as a “thing” by virtue of its self-supporting, independent qualities as a vessel—qualities which have come about through the fact of the jug’s being made—yet that, despite its thingliness, the jug is thought of as an object, or in Heidegger’s words, “the self-support is still thought of in terms of objectness, even though the over-againstness of what has been put forth is no longer grounded in mere representation, the mere putting it before our minds.” For Moten, one important assertion follows another here. Firstly, quoting Heidegger, Moten repeats that the “jug remains a vessel whether we represent it in our minds or not,” and secondly, that “its thingliness does not inhere in its being made or produced or represented. For Heidegger, the thingliness of the thing, the jug, is precisely that which prompts its making.”

Here Moten is thinking blackness “off to the side of what lies between subjects and objects.” For Moten, “the thing of it is, the case of blackness,” blackness as a thing that precedes its own making as well as its subsequent (mis)representations as an object. Such an idealist claim is surely of interest both to those who want to “read” the aesthetics of the black radical tradition—whose motivations and disruptions may confirm or challenge this invocation of Platonic pure form—and to Marxists who may notice, in Moten’s Heideggerian deployment of the slippage between “thing” and “object,” between existence and representation, a proximate yet opposite position in Georg Lukács’ description of abstract labour in The Ontology of Social Being:

We must take note of the fact that this process of abstraction is a real process in the real social world. [The emergence of] the average character of labour . . . is not a matter of mere knowledge . . . but rather the emergence of a new ontological category of labour itself in the course of its increasing socialization, which only much later is brought into consciousness. Socially necessary (and therefore ipso facto abstract) labour is also a reality, an aspect of the ontology of social being, an achieved

---

4 Here Moten quotes Michael Inwood’s delineation of Heidegger’s distinction. See “The Case of Blackness,” 182.
5 Ibid., 183.
6 Ibid., 186.
7 Ibid., 182.
real abstraction in real objects, quite independent of whether this is achieved by consciousness or not. In the nineteenth century, millions of independent artisans experienced the effects of this abstraction of socially necessary labour as their own ruin … without having any suspicion that what they were facing was an achieved abstraction of the social process; this abstraction has the same ontological rigor of facticity as a car that runs you over.⁸

Lukács’ interpretation of the ontological implications of Marxism leaves aside the case of blackness in its exclusive focus on abstract (“free”) labour as an ontology-forming category. But his understanding of abstract labour—“an aspect of the ontology of social being”—as a “real abstraction in real objects” that exists independent of consciousness nonetheless complicates Moten’s theory of ontological stolen life, the self-supporting “thing” that, similarly, remains a thing “whether we represent it in our minds or not.” This is because real abstractions are also objects, as real as a car in Lukács’ example. Not only do they emerge from and shape material relations to dialectically acquire an objectivity all of their own, collapsing the Heideggerian distance between the object and the thing, they also take on forms that extend well beyond abstract labour.⁹ Can black social being be thought of as a set of real abstractions, or as Lukács puts it, “the practical social function of certain forms of consciousness, irrespective of whether they are true or false in a general ontological sense”? Or again, is it that Marxist frameworks are irreparably missing an element, one famously accounted for in Black Skin, White Masks in psychoanalytic terms—terms that Moten rejects as an oppressive discourse on black pathology, “an epistemological consensus broad enough to include Fanon, on the one hand, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, on the other.”¹⁰

I note the fundamental incommensurability of these theories of ontology in order to get at the depths of a question that animates much thinking about racial blackness in poetry, a tension that also surfaces, in one aspect at least, as the notoriously paradoxical obviousness and invisibility of blackness and black social life. In this chapter, I read Claudia Rankine’s hugely successful 2014 book, Citizen: An American Lyric, as an ambiguous and troubling

---


⁹ See also, Marina Vishmidt’s response to Ray Brassier’s speculative realism for underestimating the realness of ruling abstractions precisely in Marxian terms. “Procedures of Abolition,” talk, December 5, 2014, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2H_3DmwuJo.

¹⁰ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 188.
navigation of this philosophical question—literally, a question of what it is to be black—whose modes of antagonism suggest a set of paradigmatic and oppositional categories: Black and non-Black, social death and social life, fleshliness and Humanity. Though these are categories taken up by thinkers as various as W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Orlando Patterson, Stuart Hall, Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, I am interested in how their appearance in *Citizen* seems to invoke the absolutist Afro-pessimist positions of Frank B. Wilderson and Jared Sexton touched on in Chapter Two while simultaneously appearing to depart from this analysis. On closer inspection, Rankine’s “American Lyric” shares a more intimate space of enquiry with Hartman’s investigation, in *Scenes of Subjection*, into the modes of subjectivizing violence that have accompanied the liberal project of formal equality: in Hartman’s words, “the dispossession inseparable from becoming a ‘propertied person’.”

What does the fact that *Citizen* is, above all, a work of poetry mean for my claim that it occupies a political-theoretical position that can be situated within “theory”? My argument in this chapter is ultimately concerned with how Rankine’s most compelling commentary on the subject-forming continuities between slavery and freedom emerges in her writing as a *tone* more than an identifiable formal strategy of the kind we have perhaps come to expect from contemporary experimental or avant-garde poetry. In attending to tone, I mean to leave behind the conservatism of New Critical assessments in which tone is conceived in terms of an isolated relationship between speaker and listener. Instead I draw on Sianne Ngai’s nimble revision of this category as the dimension of a literary work that allows us to understand it “as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations.” Tone’s generalizing and abstracting tendencies, as well as its formlessness and immanence to the literary work, allow Rankine to develop an attitude or disposition toward the world (outside) of the poem.

Ultimately, I will be arguing that what I call Rankine’s “tone of continuity” is not only linked to her representations of blackness as a form of fleshliness and an experience in which the conventional relation—and distinction between—subject and world is collapsed,

---

but also that tone’s abstract qualities provide a particularly apt aesthetic strategy when we read *Citizen* through a Marxian frame of analysis in which “race” figures as a real abstraction, and as a moment of appearance in a system of differentials (a system across which value unevenly flows). We might thus read the abstract-temporal implications of *Citizen*’s tone as an attempt to meet racializing ascriptions of blackness head on, as it were, as real abstractions that are continually and systematically reinscribed in automatic, rather than premeditated, ways.

This is not to say that the difference between Afro-pessimism, Moten’s black thingliness, or a Marxian theory of race as an ascriptive process is a point of inquiry for *Citizen*: but it does hold relevance for how we read—and attribute cause to—the social and psychic patterning of the book’s documentation of the forms of violence that exert force on, or respond to, black life. Added to this, *Citizen*’s instant popularity upon its publication in late 2014 makes it an ideal test case for examining how poetic antagonism registers—or does not register—in the literary press, in what can be read as variously “acceptable” and “unacceptable” ways that are keyed to the stratified inequities of the creative economy and liberal multiculturalism more broadly.14 As I note in the coda to this chapter, the critical acclaim surrounding this book can reveal important truths about the operative social mores of a mainly white, politically liberal literary industry, and its relation to a centuries-old phenomenon specific to capitalism that Karen Fields and Barbara Fields have adeptly theorized as racecraft: “one among a complex system of beliefs, […] with combined moral and cognitive content, that presuppose invisible, spiritual qualities underlying, and continually acting upon, the material realm of beings and events.”15

In the meantime, recognizing the difficulties we encounter in any attempt to define the social relations that make up “the real content of the category of racialized people in capitalism,”16—a question at the heart of the black radical tradition—may help us to understand how *Citizen*’s blackness, like all appearances of blackness, is subject to processes

14 For a nuanced account of contemporary literature’s role in a creative economy fostered by neoliberal governance, and the ways literary texts come to serve as ambivalent proxies for neoliberal diversity agendas, see Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*.


16 FTC Manning, “Closing the Conceptual Gap.”
of abstraction, understood in the sense that Dawn Lundy Martin suggests when she writes that “when the ‘I’ speaks, it speaks into another’s speech.”

Citizen and Pessimism

Citizen begins with an anecdotal series of events described in the second person: at school, a nun deliberately overlooks as a white schoolgirl cheats from “your” exam, later presuming to thank you with the words, “you smell good and have features more like a white person”; a close friend keeps accidentally calling you by the name of her black housekeeper, eventually stopping but never acknowledging her mistake; your neighbour calls the police on the “menacing black guy casing both your homes,” who turns out to be your friend who is babysitting and taking a phone call outside; a mother and daughter arrive at your row on a United Airlines flight, see you in the window seat and are visibly perturbed, murmuring, “this is not what I expected,” or:

A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the cafe you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmative action or minority something—she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren’t they supposed to get rid of it?—her son wasn’t accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater’s legacy program; instead you ask where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn’t seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive.

The “you” of Citizen is both an address and an implicit “I”: as much as it conversationally invites the reader to imagine an experience, it also underlines the durational, cumulative, reliably familiar—in short, permanent—qualities of this experience for a particular, racialized “you” or “I”. The experiences invoked here are specifically not shared; they are often illegible to the individuals they are caused by or involve. Recalling Citizen’s subtitle, An American Lyric,

---

17 Martin, Life In A Box, 47.
we might note that Rankine’s implied Lyric “I” is distinctly anti-universalist, and signals a different order of lyric isolation, one that is imposed rather than exploratory, that registers privately and sometimes in disbelief—“what did you say?” the speaker asks at one point— at the racist logics it encounters. In the passage above, for example, the conditions under which lunch happens seem to close in on the speaker, whose agency only emerges negatively as the annulment of the event of lunch: “This overlap is not the beginning of anything,” and “This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch.”

While a privately noted refusal such as this affords the speaker little relief from a situation which continues to unfold regardless of their investment in it, it nevertheless suggests a cognitive withdrawal on their part, and a detached, isolated mode of thought that seems to split the situation along two scales that play out simultaneously. As the woman’s overbearing sense of access to the social space of the conversation is accompanied by an apparent failure to understand both the structural implications of her hereditary privilege and the insult her comments carry, Rankine’s own commentary on the situation is implicit in the speaker’s tone as they describe the conversation. While the arrogance of the woman’s obliviousness is already clear in her language—we can guess that her dismissal of the “minority something” plays into predictable reactionary criticisms of affirmative action as politically-correct faddishness—Rankine’s narration brings out the more generalizable overtones of this depressing situation. The speaker’s distance from “the woman you do not know,” and their uncertainty about the absurd possibility that an apology might even be expected from them, is compounded by the woman’s childish sense of entitlement: “the prestigious school she mentions doesn’t seem to assuage her irritation.” As in much of Citizen, the affective dynamics of the exchange are marked by a tonal evenness disturbingly imbued with the quotidian currents of structural racism, which in this case serve to emphasize the space of mediation—and its palpable distance—between the speaker’s inner psychological processes and the events unfolding in front of her.

*Citizen* has quickly gained a reputation as an anecdotal poetics of “microagressions.” But while the book opens on this arresting tack, much of its content enlists other aesthetic techniques and supplementary materials. In the second of *Citizen*’s seven sections, Rankine begins a meditative commentary on blackness by turning to the comic video artist Jayson

19 Ibid., 14.
Musson aka Hennessy Youngman’s *Art Thoughtz* series, and a video in which the character of Youngman ironically performs advice for black artists on how to cultivate and sell an “angry nigger exterior.”\(^{20}\) The faintly ridiculous echoes of Youngman’s performance resonate through Rankine’s prose. Yet they are also transformed as they meld into the poet’s commentary on his apparently painless abstractions: “The commodified anger his video advocates rests lightly on the surface for spectacle’s sake. It can be engaged or played like the race card and is tied solely to the performance of blackness,” the speaker observes, before dryly noting another type of anger—“actual anger”—this time derived from “the quotidian struggles every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color.” Commenting that, “Youngman doesn’t address this type of anger,” the arc of this passage serves to highlight the underside of his joke, which plays up the stereotype of the angry black person as a stereotype, and walks an ambiguous line between repudiating and confirming the post-racial view that black anger no longer holds real content or cause. In a reminder of how, within the same rubric, black anger is routinely pathologized to look like madness, Rankine riffs on the colloquial use of the word “insane” as Youngman’s character might employ it to note, “he doesn’t say that witnessing the expression of this more ordinary and daily anger might make the witness believe that a person is ‘insane’.”\(^{21}\) Of course, to be black and perceived as “insane” can be a death sentence. But in Musson’s video, black anger—and by historically-pointed extension, blackness—is satirized as a malleable performance and an abstract commodity, produced for a globalized art market that can package black anger into socially-acceptable forms convenient to liberal multiculturalism. The question of why Youngman declines to address “actual anger” is a question Rankine leaves suggestively open; his choice is neither admonished nor condoned.

As if to cement the distinction between “sellable” and “actual” anger, Rankine moves quickly to the spectacle of Serena Williams’ outburst in the 2009 US Open final, in what becomes one of *Citizen*’s overriding motifs. “And insane is what you think,” Rankine repeats, before moving over several pages to collage the cumulative discrimination Williams has suffered as a result of the racially prejudiced decisions made by umpires and line judges, the racist slurs and jokes from audiences, other players, and the media, and the unwitting

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 24.
hypocrisies of TV commentators. The figure of Williams’ body set within the context of a venerably white tennis world offers a fitting analogue to Rankine’s reproduction, in the following section, of Glenn Ligon’s 1990 painting, “Untitled: I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background.” These famous words from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” appear in inky-black stencil type, repeated down the right side of Ligon’s painting, while “I Do Not Always Feel Colored” is repeated down the left-hand side.

The mark of officialdom so often bestowed on questionable sporting decisions can make the racist calls of tennis umpires look like incidental microaggressions too. But Rankine’s testimony to Williams’s endurance, citing numerous injustices at tennis competitions spanning from 2004 to 2012, is part of Citizen’s insistence on the durational qualities of low-level racism, moving us towards the poet’s understanding of blackness as another order of experience, or what might be called ontology. Thus, even before Citizen moves to focus on the number of black men killed with impunity by white men and white police, the meaning of “microaggression” subtly shifts, from an insensitive and often unconscious instance of racism arising from the body of an individual subject, to the structural persistence of an affective economy that regulates and reinscribes “race relations.” As Rankine puts it in an interview with Lauren Berlant:

It seems obvious, but I don’t think we connect micro-aggressions that indicate the lack of recognition of the black body as a body to the creation and enforcement of laws. Everyone is cool with seeing micro-aggressions as misunderstandings until the same misunderstood person ends up on a jury or running national response teams after a hurricane.22

As Loïc Wacquant methodically demonstrates, the supposedly “post-racial” United States is in fact marked by the endemic unemployment, mass incarceration, and racially-motivated and state-sanctioned police murder of black men and women, so much so that Wacquant refers to this “novel institutional complex,” dominant since 1968, as the fourth “peculiar institution” in US history to define, confine and control African-Americans (following

---

chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system, and industrial ghettoization).\(^{23}\) And yet, perhaps because Rankine’s critique and its emphatically factual aesthetics (enough to provoke criticisms that *Citizen* is not poetry, but sociology\(^{24}\)) are keyed to a moment of acceptance—one in which the forms of systemic racism mapped by Wacquant’s analysis have come to be acknowledged by most liberals, including Barack Obama, as structural aspects of the United States—^\(^{25}\) the task of “revealing” this complex over again in poetry is not quite her objective. Rather, *Citizen*’s project might better be understood as an attempt to convey the psychological and historical depth of a structure, as Rankine implicitly draws connections not only between the local, individualized incidence of microagressions and a social fabric threaded with systemic racism, but also towards a long history of black aesthetic production critically attuned to the brutalizing and subjectivizing forces of these “peculiar [antiblack] institutions.”

In part, this is achieved through the poet’s suggestive positioning of her text’s historicity through a collage of striking visuals. The image of the white, blond Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki, with towels stuffed in her top and shorts in a racist imitation of Williams’ figure, appears in the book alongside images of contemporary work exploring blackness and representation by the Kenyan-New York artist Wangechi Mutu, young Nigerian artist Toyin Odutola, and Carrie Mae Weems, as well as two Glenn Ligon paintings and JMW Turner’s 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*. These images—as well as citations drawn from Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Patricia Smith, Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*—not only serve to situate Rankine’s text within an illustrious tradition of Black thought that cumulatively pulls into view a systematically obscured totality, but serve as a reminder of the enduring complexities of black representationality as it responds to or actually precedes a persistent, world-historical antiblackness.

---


25 George Ciccariello-Maher, for example, notes how “everyone is talking about structure these days. Even President Obama—who the Fields critique—speaks of deep-seated racism while ordering Federal investigations and commissioning national reports on policing.” See “Yes, Philando Castile Was Killed for the Colour of His Skin,” *Jacobin*, July 19, 2016, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/philando-castile-police-brutality-fields-white-supremacy/
Indeed, *Citizen’s* concern with representation *per se* is clear, as a book composed in part by scripts for situation videos produced in collaboration with the artist John Lucas. Three of these are dedicated to the memory of Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson and Mark Duggan, while others respond—usually through intimate language—to racially-determined, topical events. Hurricane Katrina, the 2006 World Cup, or the Jena Six assault comprise topics for discrete sections, the latter of which Rankine finishes by alluding to the pressure of the seemingly inevitable fate of the young black male, who is shown, in this particular sequence, to experience “the position of positioning which is a position for only one kind of boy face it” and for whom “the fists the feet criminalized already are weapons already exploding the landscape and then the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned.” Here, Rankine’s assertion that to be young, black, and male is to be automatically criminalized recalls Moten and Stefano Harney’s depiction, in *The Undercommons*, of the settler-fort and the surround, insofar as the circular grammar of “the position of positioning which is a position” suggests what Moten and Harney call “the black before” of the surround, black life as that which precedes civil society and the systematic violence—including recognition-based politics—necessary to preserve it, and which therefore means “we cannot represent ourselves. We can’t be represented.” Indeed, Sexton’s analysis of this configuration, in the fifth chapter of his 2008 book *Amalgamation Schemes*, as an emergent global apartheid set to exclude domestic black populations via the prison-industrial complex, ghettoization and displacement, provides a foundation for his later writing on social death.

But there are much more specific suggestions in *Citizen* of a philosophical attitude that seems to waver between something like Moten’s black optimist conception of ontological stolen life—the “open collective being” of blackness—and the theory of social

---

26 Six black students at Jena High School in Louisiana were arrested in December 2006, after a school fight in which a white student suffered a concussion and multiple bruises. The six black students were initially charged with attempted murder and conspiracy, in a case which drew national attention.


28 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, 18, 20. Moten often re-formulates this idea across his poetic and critical work. For example, in a conversation with Robin Kelley, he says: “what’s at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure.” (“Do Black Lives Matter: Robin D.G. Kelly and Fred Moten in Conversation,” Vimeo video, 1:35:26, posted by Critical Resistance, January 15, 2015, https://vimeo.com/116111740)


death put forward most unequivocally by Sexton and Wilderson to describe the ontological preclusion of subjecthood within a global history of antiblack structural violence. Afro-pessimist discourse has, in the last decade, become an influential and contentious element of black radical politics and theory. Yet the term “social death” is (perhaps counterintuitively) a capacious one, ambiguous in its range of applications: while its original theorization by Orlando Patterson, in his influential 1982 study, *Slavery and Social Death*, outlines a structurally embedded and non-negotiable state of “natal alienation” and “total powerlessness”—a position maintained and developed in Sexton’s and Wilderson’s psychoanalytic theories—“social death” seems to easily migrate into different conceptual frameworks. Joshua M. Price, writing on the state of social death imposed by the US carceral system, invokes simultaneous and countering affirmations of social life in the forms of mutual care and agency (among both prisoners and volunteers) which help to mitigate the effects of imprisonment; Joshua Clover, writing on the 2015 Baltimore riots, refers to a political economy of social death in Marxist terms, underlining the combined effects of “automation, weakening profits, and the Last Hired/First Fired policies that ejected vast numbers of African-Americans from the urban industrial jobs which had drawn them during the great migrations.”31 These terms, while not unrelated, are resolutely incompatible with Patterson’s formulation of the concept of social death.

There is a sense, then, that the idea of social death could be isolated to its denotation as a political-economic category that is itself a form of racial—or perhaps gendered—ascriptive, that it is not beholden to its antidialectical origins as an Afro-pessimist limit-concept, especially when positioned in relation to affirmations of black social life. But in the following section, I will argue that social death’s ambiguous appearance in *Citizen* taps into all of these frameworks. While Rankine repeatedly invokes specific Afro-pessimist language and ideas—and indeed, while *Citizen* often feels unrelentingly pessimistic—her emphasis on a set of isolating, individual experiences implies an encountering subject, the second-person

---

“you” both removing and implying the Lyric “I.” As I will later suggest, a closer, more telling critical analogue to *Citizen* might be found in the work of Saidiya Hartman, whose focus on “the antagonistic production of abstract equality and black subjugation” explores Reconstruction-era manipulations of notions of agency and free will, of rights and freedoms, that were used to subject and control the formerly enslaved in the nineteenth-century. But while I am ultimately interested in how we might move through these (discursive, ideological, abstract) mediations towards a materialist reading of *Citizen*, I think it is important to acknowledge the ways in which an Afro-pessimist analysis, antidialectical and paradigmatic, seems key to this book, as well as to the theory of race as a real abstraction to which I will turn in the latter part of this chapter.

In Sexton’s words, Afro-pessimism posits “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way,” a divide necessitating, in opposition to Moten’s affirmation of insurgent black life, an ontological status of social death for the black subject. Notably, Wilderson mounts this argument against Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which comes to stand in for workerist Marxism more generally:

Firstly, the black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse. In other words, s/he implies a scandal. Secondly, the black subject reveals marxism’s inability to think white supremacy as the base and, in so doing, calls into question marxism’s claim to elaborate a comprehensive, or in the words of Antonio Gramsci, “decisive” antagonism. Stated another way: Gramscian marxism is able to imagine the subject which transforms her/himself into a mass of antagonistic identity formations, formations which can precipitate a crisis in wage slavery, exploitation, and/or hegemony, but it is asleep at the wheel when asked to provide enabling antagonisms toward unwaged slavery, despotism, and/or terror.

Finally, we begin to see how marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety: a desire […] to democratise work and thus help keep in place, ensure the coherence of, the Reformation and Enlightenment “foundational” values of

---

productivity and progress. This is a crowding-out scenario for other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness.\textsuperscript{34}

Wilderson’s leap, in which Gramsci becomes representative of Marxism \textit{tout court}, means that his analysis hinges on Marxism conforming to a form of humanism. Thus, he suggests that in its focus on the wage, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony fails to account for gratuitous violence against black bodies. This is what Wilderson calls “a relation of terror” in contrast to the rational/symbolic wage-relation that defines the subject of Gramscian Marxism.\textsuperscript{35} If we were to read \textit{Citizen}’s critique along these lines, we might see in Rankine’s text a similar suggestion that that which is excluded ontologically from the premises of linguistic or symbolic meaning makes no sense in the language of structure.\textsuperscript{36} Describing the incomprehensible bad calls of distinguished tennis umpire Mariana Alves against Williams at the US Open semifinal in 2004, Rankine narrates a story of illegibility:

The serves and returns Alves called out were landing, stunningly unreturned by Capriati, inside the lines, no discerning eyesight needed. Commentators, spectators, television viewers, line judges, everyone could see the balls were good, everyone, apparently, except Alves. No one could understand what was happening. Serena, in her denim skirt, black sneaker boots, and dark mascara, began wagging her finger and saying “no, no, no,” as if by negating the moment she could propel us back into a legible world.\textsuperscript{37}

Rankine’s measured, normative syntax and enigmatically neutral tone in this passage echoes the pragmatic, descriptive style of her description of Youngman’s \textit{Art Thoughtz}.\textsuperscript{38} Here, the note that “no one could understand what was happening” sits at odds with the stark racial optics of the scene she describes: Serena, with her “denim skirt, black sneaker boots, and dark mascara,” and in her resolute physical and verbal refusal, is literally “thrown against a sharp white background,” her appearance contrasted with the “commentators, spectators,

\textsuperscript{34} Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 225-6.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{36} Thanks to David Marriott for his formulation of this useful phrase.

\textsuperscript{37} Rankine, \textit{Citizen}, 27.

\textsuperscript{38} The gravitas of Rankine’s tone is nevertheless understated and matter-of-fact, pushing back against what Saidiya Hartman calls the “spectacular character of black suffering,” often through flat description that reads, rather, as testimony: a choice which could be read as a sardonic meta-commentary on a culture that reads “identity” poetries in terms of the social and not the literary.
television viewers, line judges, everyone” – the implicitly-white “everyone” of tennis. The simultaneously transparent and incomprehensible unfolding of this scene in *Citizen* would almost stand in for evidence of Wilderson’s account of what he calls the aporia between black being and political ontology:

Humanist discourse, whose epistemological machinations provide our conceptual framework for thinking political ontology, is diverse and contrary. But for all its diversity and contrariness it is sutured by an implicit rhetorical consensus that violence accrues to the Human body as a result of transgressions, whether real or imagined, within the symbolic order. That is to say, Humanist discourse can only think a subject’s relation to violence as a contingency and not as a matrix that positions the subject.  

It is easy, if we are looking for it, to trace the distinction Wilderson draws between contingent and constitutive violence in Rankine’s language too, especially in the suggestion that Serena does *not* live in a legible world, where the words “as if” imply that a world of rational legibility is off-limits to the black subject. Serena wags her finger, “as if” by negating the moment she could propel us back.” The point is that she can’t.

Later, in an even starker invocation of the idea of lived social death, Rankine kaleidoscopically conflates and re-defines the optics of subjects and objects in a script for a situation video about the racially motivated murder of James Craig Anderson, caught on closed-circuit television. Here, the lifeless, machinic murder weapon—a pickup truck—seems to possess more subjective agency than Anderson, who is depicted as the passive recipient of racist violence:

In the next frame the pickup truck is in motion. Its motion activates its darkness.  
The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object.  

As these lines throw other parts of the book into relief, it begins to become clear that *Citizen* is above all interested in the relation between subjectivity and “an American Lyric” for a subject who has not, historically, been guaranteed. As the pick-up truck “makes a dark

---

40 Rankine, *Citizen*, 93.
subject,” then a “black object,” Rankine’s language of conditionality and activation in these lines would contest Hegel’s conception of universality—the “universal content everyone must activate within himself”41—as well as his framing of the problem of how philosophy must activate itself too: the Hegelian assertion that philosophy cannot take account of its own movement in a way that is separate from, or prior to, that very movement itself.42

For Wilderson, Rankine’s allusions to activation, motion, and conditionality might render the pickup truck scene an especially apt metonym for a socially-dead blackness that constitutes “a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity,”43 a structural position of non-relation external to Hegel’s theory of the subject. In Afro-pessimism’s psychoanalytic framework, black social death is necessary in order for the Human—and its Enlightenment notions of freedom—to maintain its libidinal safety in the realm of the symbolic. As Sexton puts it, black ontology presents a problem for “the thought of being itself” 44 and thus for critique, since we can no longer presuppose “the system in which subordination takes place.”45

Of course, these assertions are built on Fanon’s famous challenge to Hegel’s concept of recognition in the master-slave dialectic—in which he notes that the subject cannot be fully realized when it is denied its status by an other—and Fanon appears towards the end of Citizen as if on cue. In a script for a situation video about the 2006 World Cup, in which Zinedine Zidane responded to a racist insult from another footballer with a headbutt, earning himself a red card in the final match of his professional career, Rankine cites phrases


42 In this context, we can appreciate how such questions are tied to the philosophical inquiry of Afro-pessimist thought, especially Jared Sexton’s assertion that blackness poses a problem for thought itself. For a discussion of beginnings and the aporias surrounding “the role of the absolute” in Hegel’s work, see Paul Ashton, “The Beginning Before the Beginning: Hegel and the Activation of Philosophy,” Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy 3, no. 2-3 (2007): 328-56.

43 Wilderson, Red, White and Black, 11.


45 Ibid., 10. Here Sexton is following Nahum Chandler’s argument, in The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought, that the constitution of a general system or structure must be accounted for in addition to its operational dynamics. See Nahum Chandler, The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 261.
from *The Wretched of the Earth* and *A Dying Colonialism* alongside other short excerpts from James Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Homi K. Bhabha, Ralph Ellison, Frederick Douglass, and Maurice Blanchot. Here, literary and philosophical language is mixed in with film roll-style stills from the football match, along with the words, “Big Algerian Shit, dirty terrorist, nigger,” drawn from “accounts of lip readers responding to the transcript of the world cup,” as well as Zidane’s own bitter reflection on the incident: “Do you think two minutes from the end of a World Cup final, two minutes from the end of my career, I wanted to do that?” While Rankine’s citations from Fanon serve as commentary on the spectacle of Zidane’s rage and the media controversy it caused, they also function to represent the body of Fanon’s work more broadly:

> For all that he is, people will say he remains for us an Arab. Frantz Fanon
> “You can’t get away from nature.”

As with the other famous thinkers invoked here, Fanon’s name appears on the recto, facing the quotation of his words on the verso page. Indeed, it is the *figure* of Fanon that is called into view, as a philosophical authority whose words make legible the events on the sports field.

As Sexton and Wilderson point out, Fanon’s claim that “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,”\(^46\) provides crucial if contested footing for a “small but growing coterie of Black theorists” whose “fidelity to a shared set of assumptions” involves the contention that modernity’s condition of possibility is the denial of black humanity and subjectivity within the onto-epistemological framework of civil society. For Wilderson, the work of this group of thinkers—in which he includes Sexton, Hartman, Hortense Spillers, David Marriott, Joy James and Achille Mbembe—resonates in varying ways with Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*. But it is not always clear that those Wilderson aligns under the moniker of Afro-pessimism would support his most fundamental and astonishing claim:

> Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so fashionable today, Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the

---

\(^{46}\) Rankine, *Citizen*, 124-5.

\(^{47}\) Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 77-8. This is the premise with which Fanon famously challenges Hegel’s concept of recognition in the master-slave dialectic: the subject cannot be fully realized when it is denied its status by an other.
first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.48

Both Sexton and Wilderson have been criticized for their collapsing of all other racial and Indigenous groups under the sign of non-black people of colour, as well as their reductive assumptions about the liberalism of Indigenous politics—which ignore the more radical antagonisms of anti-recognition and blockade-based Indigenous struggles—underpinning their exceptionalist view that the slave’s noncommunicability (or selflessness) precedes any other body’s relation to the land.49

The premise of a paradigmatic structure based on the natal alienation of the Black is taken up with a different emphasis, however, in the work of Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers. Hartman certainly shares Wilderson’s pessimism as a politics and theoretical base, commenting in an interview with him that, “I think there’s a certain integrationist rights agenda that subjects who are variously positioned on the color line can take up. And that project is something I consider obscene...” For Hartman, the affirmation of “race” in terms of cultural identity requires a substantial disavowal: “ultimately, it bled into this celebration, as if there was a space you could carve out of the terrorizing state apparatus in order to exist outside its clutches and forge some autonomy.”50 Yet Hartman’s writing on black subjectivity’s relation to the “travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of

48 Wilderson, Red, White and Black, 58. My emphasis.

49 See Iyko Day’s careful Marxist analysis of the antidialectical, paradigmatic binarisms (i.e. black/non-black, settler/non-settler) of Afro-pessimism on the one hand, and settler-colonial studies on the other. Day argues that underpinning Wilderson’s and Sexton’s exceptionalist view of the slave’s nonrelationality is an assumption that all Indigenous politics are rooted in sovereignty claims. Andrea Smith also highlights that “Jared Sexton, in his otherwise brilliant analysis in Amalgamation Schemes, also presumes the continuance of settler colonialism. He describes Native peoples as a ‘racial group’ to be collapsed into all non-black peoples of colour. Sexton goes so far as to argue for a black/non-black paradigm that is parallel to a ‘black/immigrant’ paradigm, rhetorically collapsing indigenous peoples into the category of immigrants, in effect erasing their relationship to this land and hence reifying the settler colonial project.” Iyko Day, “Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and the Settler Colonial Critique,” Critical Ethnic Studies 1:2 (2015): 102-121, and Andrea Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” Global Dialogue 12:2 (Summer 2010).

the free individual” during the Reconstruction era would also appear to qualify the
exceptionalist view of black nonrelationality put forward by Wilderson. Her major work,
Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America, advances an
account of the discursive and policy-based modes of postbellum black subjugation, figuring
these structures in relation to an antagonistic subject who is nevertheless entangled within
them, rather than positioned in excess or outside of them. For Hartman, even the everyday
conditions of slavery could include vexed, ambivalent pleasures and socialities to live for –
often made possible only by the so-called concessions of slave owners seeking to maintain
pacific relations with slaves. Thus, for the enslaved, “pleasure was ensnared in a web of
domination, accumulation, abjection, resignation and possibility.”

In this sense, Hartman’s rendering of antagonism is politically and affectively in key
with the fundamentally negationist forms of refusal that I theorize in Chapter Two as
transformative antagonisms. Her analysis of the continuities and entanglements between
slavery and freedom—including the ambivalence and selectiveness of rights discourse, the
“extended servitude of the emancipated,” and the moralizing, calculated manipulations of
the paternalistic liberalism of the postbellum period, which aimed to subjugate and constitute
black identity in the service of both an Enlightenment project of freedom and capitalist
accumulation—shares much insight with (indeed, has informed) recent critiques, poetic and
theoretical, of the contemporary politics of recognition and multiculturalism. Moreover, if
the transformative antagonisms of poetry by Marie Annharte Baker and Dawn Lundy Martin
are a performative type of “anti-poiesis,” a refusal to be (re)productive—of babies, workers,
positive forms of representation, capitalist social relations, or a “poetry of uplift,” for
example—Hartman’s anti-affirmative account of the various forms of subjective resistance
enacted by slaves suggests commonalities in this regard too. Highlighting the distinction
between consensual acts, and the pragmatic simulation of them, in response to slaveholders’
demands for the performance of jollity, singing, and dancing during “leisure” time, Hartman
notes how subjective acts of refusal unfolded as a negative dynamic within relations of

51 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 6.
52 Ibid., 49.
53 Ibid., 9.
The reliance on masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection also obscured the small acts of resistance conducted by the enslaved. After all, how does one determine the difference between “puttin’ on ole massa”—the simulation of compliance for covert aims—and the grins and gesticulations of Sambo indicating the repressive construction of contented subjection? At the level of appearance, these contending performances often differed little. At the level of effect, however, they diverged radically. One performance aimed to reproduce and secure the relations of domination and the other to manipulate appearances in order to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available. However, since acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa.\(^{54}\)

Hartman’s emphasis across the second half of her study on the everyday, oft-undetected forms of domination that helped define racial hierarchies after the legal abolition of slavery is thus balanced against her reminder of the subjective resistance at work amid scenes of subjection, and her critique can productively illuminate our reading of *Citizen*. Indeed, both writers focus on the unrelenting persistence of “legitimized and naturalized” modes of subordination, whether installed through the formalized segregationist policies of the Reconstruction Amendments, the brutality and impunity of twenty-first-century policing, or the informal codes of the social. Both document subjective antagonisms set within these structures and processes too.

Especially instructive in this regard is the link Hartman underlines between gendered property relations during slavery, on the one hand, and the role of racial subjugation in the constitution of gender and sexuality post-emancipation, on the other. The disregard of sexual injury to enslaved women, Hartman argues, reveals the role of property relations:

In this case, possession occurs not via the protections of the patriarchal family and its control of female sexuality but via absolute rights of property. Therefore terms like “protection,” “domesticity,” and “honor” need to be recognized as specific articulations of racial and class location. The captive female does not possess gender

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 8.
so much as she is possessed by gender—that is, by way of a particular investment in and use of the body.\textsuperscript{55}

As Angela Davis notes, control of female sexuality via the absolute rights of property was a “pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse […] so strongly established that it survived the abolition of slavery,”\textsuperscript{56} and emancipation did not significantly alter the distinctive differences between black and white women’s experience of the gendering process. Indeed, Hartman’s sustained critique of the “double bind of freedom,” whereby freed slaves were \textit{ipso facto} dispossessed of resources, cast as socially inferior, segregated by government policy, and often indebted to their masters, attests to the endurance of the binary structure of chattel slavery. Yet, while rape and sexual abuse were a routine part of a type of freedom “characterized by forms of constraint that, resembling those experienced under slavery, relied primarily on force, compulsion, and terror,” Hartman also shows how such terror was made possible by, and arrived hand-in-hand with, new strategies of subordination: modes of emotional control that “fettered, restricted, and confined the subject precisely through the stipulation of will, reason, and consent.”\textsuperscript{57}

While we would be right to imagine a demanding husband, a gaslighting employer with wandering hands, or some other abusive patriarch as the agent of such manipulation, it is a more “friendly,” more indirect form of emotional coercion that Hartman emphasizes in her study of various practical handbooks and morality tales written for the newly-emancipated in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Helen E. Brown’s sentimental novel/guidebook, \textit{John Freeman and His Family}, the fastidious Miss Horton, a white Northern teacher, sets out to purge the “old, lazy, filthy habits of the slave quarters” from the domestic situations of black women. Hartman underlines the equation, in such narratives, of neatness and cleanliness with moral uplift, and ultimately with whiteness. But she also points

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 100. In the same section, Hartman underlines how Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, As Written By Herself}, helps to show how feminized modes of disguised antagonism involved a different set of risks: “\textit{Incidents}, by utilizing seduction and inquiring into its dangers, suggests the possible gains to be had by ‘making do’ with or ‘using’ seduction. Such an effort is fraught with perils precisely because there is no secure or autonomous exteriority from which the enslaved can operate or to which they can retreat. The double-edged nature of this gaming with power threatens to intensify constraints, rend the body, or result in inevitable losses since within this domain the chances of safeguarding gains are already foreclosed.” See Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 102-3.


\textsuperscript{57} Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 121.
to how the shared cultivation of domestic know-how was encouraged among women: in John Freeman, Miss Horton’s advice to her new acquaintance, Clarissa, is in turn passed on by Clarissa to Prudence, the mother of an imprisoned man. Prudence’s subsequent housekeeping improvements inspire her son, arriving home after his release from jail, to “do better.”

Sentimental, paternal- or maternalistic in tone, not only does Hartman show how freedmen’s handbooks provide telling evidence of how self-discipline and policing were imposed—indeed, “the whip was not to be abandoned; rather, it was to be internalized” — but her example of the tale of a white, female philanthropist’s efforts demonstrates how the postbellum project of black subjection took the clean and organized family home as the essential foundation for the cultivation of moral dignity, lawful behaviour, hygiene and public health, and crucially, the successful reproduction of a labouring unit: “accordingly, the home is in the service of the market, as its proper management stabilizes and indices good habits in the laboring classes.”

The “invasive forms of disciplining” pursued by nineteenth-century social reformers like Miss Horton, the so-called “friends of the race” on home visits, helped to establish a powerful hermeneutic circle associating blackness with an animalistic lack of hygiene, a lack of hygiene with criminality, and criminality with blackness. These attitudes were part of a language of rights and freedoms that, as Hartman explains, established a “liberal discourse of possessive individualism,” both in law and in quotidian social codes, in such a way that naturalized racial subjugation and befitted the regulatory manoeuvres of a racist state. Hartman’s most emphatic and simple point, however, is that whatever progressive legal measures were instantiated or repealed during the civil rights legislation of 1865-1875, “sentiment sanctions black subordination because affinity and desire ultimately eclipse equality.” Is this not Rankine’s point, too?

---

58 Ibid., 159-60.
59 Ibid., 140.
60 Ibid., 159.
61 Ibid., especially 157-163.
62 Ibid., 10.
Abstraction and Tone

Of course, the immediate postbellum period is a very different time to our own. Yet Hartman’s persuasive and thorough account of the dire continuities between slavery and emancipation quite obviously suggests how many of these (formal and informal) continuities survive today in the United States, within the novel institutional complex—the fourth peculiar institution—periodized by Wacquant. Folding Hartman’s analysis of nineteenth-century forms of invasive disciplining and “stipulation of the will” as modes of continuity back into Rankine’s writing, I would argue that there is a sense in which continuity itself, as a tone more than a readily identifiable formal strategy or mode, emerges holistically as Citizen’s defining Weltanschauung, to use that term in Mikel Dufrenne’s and Sianne Ngai’s sense of a worldview as a unified or coherent atmosphere.63

Here, I am also borrowing Ngai’s definition of tone—both an antidote to and acknowledgement of depoliticizing New Critical prescriptions—as “a global and hyper-relational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world.” As Ngai explains, not only can the affective or emotive qualities of an artwork serve as “compressed assessments of complex ‘situations’,” but talking about tone is a way of generalizing, totalizing, and abstracting the “world” of the literary object, an approach particularly conducive to the analysis of ideological, abstract relations.64 Tone appears to be immanent to the artwork, rather than a feature of it. And it is tone’s formlessness that makes it such an apt aesthetic strategy for a book that seems in many ways to be “feeling out” the mutability, adaptability, and endurance of structural racism. Like Rankine’s previous book, Don’t Let Me Be Lonely (with which Citizen shares its subtitle, An American Lyric), Citizen gives rise to an almost pulsating tone of continuity engendered by—but crucially, not reducible to—its sustained syntactical repetition, its series of returns and replays, and its durational mood of predictability, depression, and exhaustion. Kevin Bell, discussing Don’t Let Me Be Lonely, describes “an

---


64 Ibid., 42, 43.
endless broadcast of tedium that carries the familiar echo of another, more ancient and
elemental droning,"65 and the tonal similarities between the two books are perhaps especially
interesting given the (by comparison) more muted nature of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*’s
attention to race.

Thus, a tone of continuity comes from everywhere and nowhere, as an affective
bearing arising from *Citizen*’s thematic content, serial form, syntax, artistic and photographic
images, introspective interiorities, and observational modes of detached commentary: a
bearing that seems to pool into one pessimistic, aeonian ongoingness. If Lauren Berlant’s
concept of cruel optimism entails a misplaced sense of agency over one’s future, and
attachments to various objects and scenes of desire that, in “the continuity of [their] form
provide something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living
on and to look forward to being in the world,”66 *Citizen* inverts this temporal relation to
futurity by collapsing the space between subject and world in which such attachments might
form. Thus, in *Citizen* we find a speaker who describes the inevitability of sighing by
reference to a spatial continuity and a field of impact between her body and the world where,
“truth be told, you could no more control these sighs than that which brings the sighs
about.”67 Far from a futurity promised in the reliable form of an optimistic relation, in *Citizen*
a temporal sense of unending stasis is implied in a spatial lack of relation—indeed, an
identity—between subject and world. This space-time axis of stalled continuity becomes
especially resonant in the figure of the sigh, which at times seems forcibly extracted:
“Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows.” A new section
continues:

The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing.

That’s just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You
sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing
is a worrying exhale of ache. You wouldn’t call it an
illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else

---

to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind\textsuperscript{68}

Indeed, the monologue of the fourth section of \textit{Citizen} centrifugally spins from this involuntary sigh. It constitutes a scene of somatic negativity that resonates across the book, as if the worrying, aching mood of the sigh were carried in the consistently frequent “you”s of the book’s second-person address, a mode to which much of this prose poetry is firmly confined.

Rankine’s symbolic use of the sigh as “just self-preservation,” a sense of going nowhere, a site of continuum between body and world, and “not the iteration of a free being” rings loudly with Fanon’s description of entering the world “imbued with the will to find a meaning in things,” only to discover “that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”\textsuperscript{69} Her short, measured sentences, and the introspective or “ruminant” character of her observations, also play subversively on the modernist trope—most famously put to work by white writers like Herman Melville, Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein—of a cognitive-aesthetic disconnection with the world and other people. Yet in \textit{Citizen}, the speaker’s lethargy toward the outside world and its impositions and instructions takes on less of the cold, bored language of Melville’s Bartleby or Hemingway’s self-coined “iceberg theory” style, and appears more as a coping mechanism. Take the succeeding part of the fourth section of \textit{Citizen}:

\begin{quote}
You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. [. . . ]

Don’t wear sunglasses in the house, the world says, though they soothe, soothe sight, soothe you.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

By describing \textit{Citizen’s} continuity—or equally, its continuousness—as a tone, I mean to make two connections, not to Hartman’s arguments in \textit{Scenes of Subjection} per se, as if to

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 60. The self-deprecating adjective, “ruminant” shares its etymological root with “ruminate” and refers to animals who regurgitate and re-chew their food, hence the phrase, “chewing the cud.”

\textsuperscript{69} Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, 77. It bears noting, in this context, that the alienating experience here famously described by Fanon stands in stark contrast to that classic grounding of the postmodern American avant-garde just as famously represented by Charles Olson’s desire, in “Projective Verse,” to participate in the world of objects, to become privy to the “secrets objects share.” See Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69406

\textsuperscript{70} Rankine, \textit{Citizen}, 61.
The melancholia permeating certain texts by Black, Latinx, and Asian-American and Asian-Canadian writers indexes deep histories of structural racism in North America, I want to underline the way that *Citizen*’s tone of continuity, as an aesthetic of immanence and formlessness, manages to characterize a long, continuous history of antiblackness across a spectrum of legibility to illegibility. It manages to elicit a “global concept of feeling,” a kind of collective and affective understanding that, as Ngai notes, has been underwhelmingly theorized by critics of literature and ideology, with some obvious exceptions. Hartman’s argument that “emancipation […] by no means marked the end of bondage,” that “the free(d) individual was nothing if not burdened, responsible, and obligated,” is, I would argue, the content at the heart of that global feeling as it appears in *Citizen*.

Secondly, we can note that *Citizen*’s tone of continuity, rhetorically inclusive yet tricky to formally describe, also points to a set of gendered relations often overlooked in reviews, if not academic scholarship. Given that the anecdotal sections of *Citizen* focusing on microaggressions are compiled by a collection of anonymous accounts, it may seem off-base to suggest that *Citizen*’s overall tone is a feminized one. But as good dialectical readers, “seeing what we know,” to invoke Carolyn Lesjak’s dictum for reading dialectically, would not only mean appreciating how Rankine depicts Serena Williams’s subjection to the hyper-sexualizing projections of the tennis world and media, but also noticing how the speaker’s feelings of depression, stasis, and inability to move—especially as it is contrasted with the highly sentient feeling of “being moved”—have a gendered dimension. Moreover, that they are gendered not only in the empirical sense of the high depression rates among women, and

---

71 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 44. Ngai also notes on “the perceived threat of a ‘soft’ impressionism which has always haunted feeling’s role in any analytic endeavour”(42), but of course, Raymond Williams’ development of the concept of “structures of feeling” stands out as an exception here, as does Lauren Berlant’s writing—not yet available when *Ugly Feelings* was published in 2005—on “intimate publcs” and “cruel optimism.” See Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135, and Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), especially 1-32, and *Cruel Optimism*.

72 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 125.

especially black women, in the United States, but also insofar as depression and detachment are rendered unromantically in *Citizen* as a form of continuity, with a matter-of-factness that sits discordantly against a masculine poetic history that, from John Keats to Charles Olson, has been highly prone to auratic, romantic, or fatalistic approaches to states of melancholia.\(^74\)

Perhaps most importantly of all, however, *Citizen*'s tone is fundamentally linked to the question about black ontology that began this chapter. This question can perhaps be understood most clearly, if a little reductively, as an incommensurability between a theory of ontology operating at the level of the libidinal economy (for example, Wilderson’s analysis of the gratuitous and symbolic violence separating the human and the non-human), and a theory of ontology as a product of material processes and real abstractions (for example, Lukács understanding of the ontology of social being as the achieved real abstraction of socially necessary labour). Drawing on Silvan Tomkins, Ngai notes that “tone’s generality and abstractness should not distract us from the fact that it is always ‘about’ something.”\(^75\) If, following Ngai’s approximation of tone as “a hyper-relational concept of feeling,” we can take *Citizen*’s tone of continuity—the sense of endlessness, depression, recursion and factuality that suffuses the book—as its *Weltanschauung*, its affective worldview, then can we also infer from it a certain disposition towards the recurring question of the “real content” of black ontology?

**Flesh and Visceral Abstractions**

It is easy to see how Afro-pessimism’s account of blackness as a paradigmatic category—especially as it emerges from the political-juridical-economic system Sexton so thoroughly articulates in *Amalgamation Schemes*—remains relevant to an account of race and racialization based on a theory of real abstraction, even if such an analytical framework remains fundamentally at odds with Afro-pessimism proper. In fact, allowing for such monumental disagreements to sit awkwardly by the wayside seems necessary, given how little consensus


exists concerning the processes hidden by the formula, “race is a social construction,” and given Marxism’s notorious historical shortfalls on the question of race.

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to propose an alternative to the Afro-pessimist reading of *Citizen* rehearsed above, while at the same time suggesting how certain dimensions of the paradigmatic categories asserted by Afro-pessimism’s critique remain pertinent. Beginning with Spillers’ writing on the distinction between “body” and “flesh,” and casting her analysis—which, despite its poststructuralist language, throws up surprisingly materialist moments—next to Ngai’s recent, and Marxian, theorization of “visceral abstractions” (a concept that has much to do with her earlier writing on tone), we can productively read *Citizen* through a materialist or Marxian lens. More specifically, we can read the definitive events and quotidian situations presented by the book as processes of racial ascription that (re)produce blackness as a real abstraction. As I want to show, the value of this approach is underscored by the Fields’s theory of racecraft—an account of the “various mechanisms by which an ideology takes on the appearance of uncontroversial everyday reality”\(^\text{76}\)—and perhaps too, by its base concern with what Alberto Toscano calls “the properly ontological character of capitalist abstractions.” At the same time, as we will see in the coda to this chapter, reading race as a real abstraction provides a way of reading *Citizen* as a work that contests the racializing reviews that followed its initial publication.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Spillers’ account of the de-gendered captive body involves an “enforced state of breach” and a “vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the [sic] property relations.”\(^\text{77}\) Crucially, her emphasis on the “bitter Americanizing” dimensions of enslavement points to how the violent loss of Indigenous name and land in the Middle Passage and the New World functions additionally as metaphor for a range of human and cultural displacements, which she describes as a process of catastrophic disruption:

But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological forces join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1)

---

76 Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 111.
77 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 74.
the captive body becomes a source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centres of human and social meaning.\textsuperscript{78}

Objectified by a comprehensive set of “externally imposed meanings and uses,” the captive body is a site of subjugation on a variety of (biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological) levels, and these differences lead Spillers to posit a more fundamental distinction between body and flesh as “the central one between captive and liberated subject positions.” Flesh, Spillers notes, is “that zero degree of social conceptualization,” an assertion that leads her to characterize the captive body through the notion of a fleshy hieroglyph:

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?\textsuperscript{79}

Note Spillers’ invocation of “cultural seeing” as a hermeneutics of historical understanding prevented by the barrier of skin colour, where skin colour is literally the hieroglyph behind which hides the history that cultural seeing would access.

A “hieroglyphics of the flesh” arises here from a poststructuralist sense of the body as text—in Spillers’ words, “the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside”\textsuperscript{80}—but this striking iconograph suggests a host of other analytical possibilities too. We might say, for example, that fleshliness as an ontological category of objecthood fulfils a constitutive or oppositional function for Moten’s Heideggerian invocation of thingliness, or we could note how the idea of flesh (as opposed to the body) has been taken up in

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
contemporary black poetics, for example in Akilah Oliver’s concept of “flesh memory.” But I want to draw attention instead to the striking resemblance between the conceptual shape of Spillers’ “hieroglyphics of the flesh” and Marx’s description of the social hieroglyph: the inscrutable appearance of a commodity (or, social product) whose economic history cannot be apprehended at first sight and whose value relative to other commodities appears “merely accidental.” In Marx’s words,

> Value … does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product into a social hieroglyph. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product; for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language.

Given that Marx applies this analysis not only to commodities in the spheres of circulation and exchange, but to any social product that holds use-value, including the commodity labour-power, Spillers’ designation of flesh as “that zero degree of social conceptualization” aptly suggests another Marxian category, this time for a body that has been dispossessed of the commodity labour power. Like Marx’s social hieroglyph, flesh both signifies and hides a highly abstract process whereby value is inscribed or withheld.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, fleshliness has also come to signify a position of abjection within recent Marxian theory. Here, the presence or absence of “the commodity labour power” in its subject-forming capacity becomes a defining category of racial formation:

> When the commodity labour power no longer exists, the human container that would have possessed this labour power endures as an empty shell. All that is left is a physical residuum, an inert fleshy materiality that marks the lack of labour power, a purely physical existence without a subjectivity. The human container is desocialised, or in other words, a thing that is without any social utility. […] Consequently,

---


83 Ibid., 167.
“blackness” appears as a representation of the lack of labour power, its positive instantiation. The phenotypical attribute “blackness” comes to naturalise this lack as an inherent attribute of the human container itself whereas it is merely the social representation of the absence of labour power.\textsuperscript{84}

Published in \textit{Mute} magazine in 2014, this anonymous essay by “R.L.” compellingly retains the Afro-pessimist argument that a position outside of the wage relation is a position of social death, while transposing its libidinal terms onto the terrain of political economy. We might also note an interesting framing of blackness as a movement of negative dialectics: as the “positive instantiation” of “the lack of labour power.” The imagistic language of this passage is disturbing, perhaps even offensive, in its uncompromising antihumanism. But it aims to convey the idea of a lived experience of a real abstraction, and the notion of a “desocialised” human container, “a thing without any social utility,” suggests another reading of Rankine’s situation-scripts about the disposability of black life – one that seems particularly instructive when put next to another recent formulation in Marxian theory: a claim by the communicization collective, \textit{SIC}, that “the essence of a category cannot but be apprehended through its forms of appearance.”\textsuperscript{85}

Because of course, “forms of appearance” are crucial. \textit{SIC}’s particularly crystalline formulation of the relation between the “essence” of an economic category and the form in which it becomes visible is inflected by Marx’s inquiry, in Chapter One of \textit{Capital}, into the “form of appearance” of the value of the commodity. Furthermore, it directly draws on Daniel Zamora’s observation that the categories of “the unemployed,” “the poor,” or the “precarious,” are apprehended at the moment of their appearance—“in terms of relative (monetary, social, or psychological) deprivation, filed under the general rubrics of ‘exclusion,’ ‘discrimination,’ or forms of [Foucauldian] domination”\textsuperscript{86}—and are thus swiftly disconnected from the capitalist economic relations from which they emerge.

We have moved speedily from Spiller’s fleshy hieroglyph, to Marx’s analysis of the commodity as social hieroglyph, to recent Marxian formulations of a desocialised human

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Zamora, “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
container that can only be apprehended through its racialized appearance. But in glossing these connections, it is possible to see how their collective insights about the movement of capital and its forms of appearance clearly suggest a Marxian theory of race, abstraction, and value that seems crucial to any examination of (poetic) form itself. Indeed, in its focus on enigmatic “forms of appearance” and real-world racial formations governed by abstract processes of domination, such an analysis would also suggest the special role that aesthetic “forms of appearance”—in their capacity to both reflect and contest their social counterparts87—have to play in critiques of value-driven social relations (though as we saw in Chapter One, the precise relations between social forms and aesthetic forms are extremely hard, if not impossible, to pin down).

These concerns are intimately connected to Ngai’s theorization of visceral abstractions as the aesthetic, palpable, or embodied experiences of abstract capitalist categories. Ngai argues that visceral abstractions, especially as they appear metaphorically in both Marx’s writing and in the poet Rob Halpern’s work as congealing substances, “underscore the socially binding or plasticizing action of capitalist abstractions”:

And more specifically, they do so to emphasize the synthetic action of an abstraction-like value—the way it palpably shapes the empirical world of collective activity to which it belongs and in which it acts. This view stands in vivid contrast to both the idea of value as an inert substance residing in the individual commodity after its production and forming one of its natural properties (as in the embodied-labor value theory of Smith and Ricardo, who as Marx notes neglect “the form of value which in fact turns value into exchange-value”) and also the idea of value as a “void” or ontologically empty form constituted entirely in the exchange process.88

In making this claim, Ngai draws on Marx’s description of value as a social hieroglyph, Halpern’s depiction of the soldier’s body as a “hieroglyph of [capitalist] value,” and Lukács’ theory of abstract labour as an ontology-forming category. In Halpern’s poetry, Ngai argues, “the imagery of congealing […] is catachrestically applied to abstractions, and especially

---

87 A useful formulation for thinking aesthetics as active forces might be found in Jeff Derksen’s observation, in an essay on aesthetic representations of Vancouver, that “no representational act merely approaches a city—rather such an act is more actively generative of the city.” See Jeff Derksen, “‘The Flaneur Could Not Take the Monorail: Representing Vancouver in Three Temporalities,” After Euphoria, 104.
capitalist abstractions.” As we will see in Chapter Four, Ngai is not alone in her efforts to characterize the social mechanisms of capitalist abstractions, as she tracks the ways abstract value viscerally “presses” (binds, plasticizes, or congeals) into a material world that dialectically reproduces value. Indeed, this approach to thinking about the palpable effects of capitalist abstractions provides a powerful—and totalizing—hermeneutic for understanding all kinds of monetary, social, and psychological deprivations.

But Ngai’s analysis is particularly helpful in showing how the simultaneously spectral and exertive character of capitalist abstractions, and specifically, of value, may be illuminated by poetic language and the evocation of sensuous forms. She argues that Halpern’s and Marx’s catachrestic use of congealing metaphors to describe the abstract concept of “value” is a necessary strategy for “objectively capturing the contradictions of value and the world that it and other abstractions bring into being,” and her critique leads to an understanding of value as “neither an inert ‘crystal’ created in a production process isolated from circulation nor a pure form constituted in an exchange process isolated from production and operating on an entirely separate plane from everyday practical activity.” Instead, Ngai presents value as a “suprasensible or social” relation whose representation requires a constant mediation between abstract and concrete realms. Commenting on the way value appears in Halpern’s poetry to “cling to what will eventually be sacrificed in its name” as it congeals around the patriotic figure of the soldier’s dead body—“the space left empty by a withdrawn corpse”—Ngai posits a reminder that while value-form theorists may accurately refer to “the inherent emptiness of the value form,” and while value may often appear to cohere or congeal around nothing (the fictitious capital of high finance being the obvious exemplar here), the void represented in Halpern’s poetry by the soldier’s body, which, live or dead, “seems available to stand in for virtually anything,” is not simply an empty space. Rather, it is “a space that Halpern is careful to show as having been rendered empty, by the agency of social actors, from something in it having been actively withdrawn” (thus reminding us of the etymological root of the verb, to abstract). This is perhaps Ngai’s most important point as she highlights the simultaneously abstract and visceral movement of value across the social. But

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 52.
91 Ibid., 46.
in her focus, via Halpern, on the American Soldier—a figure both iconized and made disposable by the nation-state—Ngai’s analysis begs a question regarding those spaces where value never appears to accrete much in the first place. What about the places where there appears to be no value, or negative value?

This brings us back to Zamora’s categories of “the unemployed,” “the poor,” or the “precarious,” as they are apprehended in their appearance as monetary, social, and psychological deprivations. To put the question in Moten’s words, what about the black subprime debtor, or in terms Zamora shares with critics such as Mike Davis and Michael Denning, the wageless or the surplus population? Insofar as Ngai’s analysis underscores the fact that value is an intangible social relation and a form-determining, moving force, it discourages us from perceiving contemporary sociological categories of identity (whether “black,” or “poor,” or “soldier”) as anything other than moments of appearance in the reproduction of the value-relation, which, as I. I. Rubin notes, “is based on a grandiose system of spontaneous social accounting and comparison of the products of labor of various types and performed by different individuals as parts of the total social abstract labor.”

This system of value is hidden, going on behind the backs of producers, to recycle Marx’s oft-quoted phrase. But it is intimately tied to what Stuart Hall et al. highlighted in 1978 as the structurally segmentary positions occupied by women and black people. For Hall, it is not a question of whether these groups receive a wage or not, since at any time a proportion of each group is waged while the rest are wageless, but of “capital’s control over the movement into and out of the reserve army of labour.”

Those spaces that seem to actively repel value—or value-relations, to be more specific—are spaces of contingency, then. Black youth unemployment is not a property of blackness, but a process of racial ascription. An unemployed black youth’s blackness is a moment of appearance in the reproduction of the value-relation and its tendency toward what Joshua Clover identifies as “the production of non-production,” which is to say, unemployment. And here is where the concept of a “visceral abstraction” seems most

---


94 Stuart Hall et al., Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), 369.
salient, especially if we concede that the lived experience of the *abstraction fleshliness*—not a body, but an economic unit, a “desocialised human container” or a “hieroglyphics of the flesh”—cannot even be captured by the discourses of embodiment so central to much feminist and queer theory. Perhaps this is why the concept of a visceral abstraction works so well to describe the forms of appearance that blackness takes in *Citizen*. These forms emerge negatively, as the invisibility of the speaker who is talked *at*, rather than *to*, or the disappearance of the racist logic of a tennis umpire, made illegible within the “rational” social rules of the tennis world, or as the boy with “the fists the feet criminalized already,” or of course, as the state-sanctioned murder of Trayvon Martin, Mark Duggan, or James Craig Anderson. But they are felt, and as Ngai shows using Halpern’s poetry, catachrestically represented, as visceral abstractions: an involuntary sigh, or a lethargic, detached sense of endless continuity, or the feeling as “your fingers cover your eyes, press them deep into their sockets.”95 In this way, visceral abstractions are felt as a form of social death that at some times seems merely to touch the speaker—who, albeit a composite speaker, persistently signifies as middle class—and at other times seems to envelop that speaker in a way that appears to affirm the category of blackness as a paradigmatic category that stretches across the differentiated social field. Indeed, the visceral abstractions in *Citizen* appear as condensations of single, isolated psychological experiences and events whose resonances are expanded again via the curatorial accumulation of a particular *order* of experience, giving each episode of the book a synecdochal intensity that epitomizes Ngai’s simplest conceptualization of a visceral abstraction: a singular physical experience felt with the weight, or conversely, the unspecific weightlessness, of an abstract totality.

This is where *Citizen* suggests a close, almost immanent, relationship between visceral abstractions and tone. If, for Ngai, both tone and visceral abstractions function as poetic strategies which generalize, totalize, and abstract the world of the poem in order to capture some objective truth about “governing” abstractions, tone achieves this task by eliciting a “global concept of feeling” that encompasses the poem’s affective bearing, attitude, or “set toward” its audience and world, while visceral abstractions do it by emphasizing the synthetic, palpable actions of capitalist abstractions. Indeed, we might say that these strategies go to work in opposite directions: one moving from subject to world, the other

---

95 Rankine, *Citizen*, 66.
from world to subject. Thus, the difference between tone and visceral abstractions might be figured as the contrast between the abstract, disembodied, “distant” character of tone and the “close” corporeality of the visceral abstraction. Except, tone isn’t disembodied—or at least, it is not rendered distinct from flesh—in *Citizen*.

On the contrary, tone is a central feature in Rankine’s representations of fleshliness as the collapse of the space between subject and world; the space in which attachments, affective bearings, attitudes—in a word, tone—would form. How can one have a “set toward” a world one is insufficiently separated from, where “truth be told, you could no more control these sighs than that which brings the sighs about”? Yet, this seems distinctly possible, since the most arresting feature of the visceral abstractions we encounter in *Citizen* is their ability to incorporate tone into the social hieroglyph of black flesh. As such, the introspective, feeling-based, yet generalizing tonalities that seem to emanate from Rankine’s speaker simultaneously suggest a sense of being “acted upon”—or more precisely, subjectivized—by the same totalizing and indiscriminate abstractions that produce blackness for those more intensely dispossessed segments of the category of blackness that Rankine seems to write on behalf of or about (epitomized or made to “appear,” for instance, as the dead body of Trayvon Martin). This dialectical mediation can be seen clearly, for example, in the script for a situation video about Hurricane Katrina, introduced in a section header as a script “comprised of quotes collected from CNN.” Rankine’s anecdotal strategy in this section moves between hawkish sentimentalisms, presumably the words of news reporters or the so-called general public—“Faith, not fear, she said,” or “You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals”—and demonstrations par excellence of the process Zamora points to, whereby economic categories such as “the unemployed,” “the poor,” and the “precarious” make their appearance as relative deprivations, “filed under the general rubrics of ‘exclusion,’ ‘discrimination,’ or forms of ‘domination’.”

96 Zamora, “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation.”

97 Rankine, *Citizen*, 83.
the blacks” was precisely that: a self-evident difference, and therefore a cause of social inequality rather than its consequence, as if “black” was the equivalent of “poor.” Rankine’s repetition, in this section, of “the difficulty of that,” then “the difficulty of all that,” and later, “still in the difficulty” draws attention to the logical aporias left open by such language, which in its trite vacuity cannot but make its avoidance of the question of where poverty comes from abundantly clear. The victim-blaming implications of these forms of rationality are taken to their logical conclusion when Rankine quotes a particularly revealing line: “and so many of the people in the arena here, you know, she said, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

Here and elsewhere in Citizen, Rankine documents a lived experience of the abstraction fleshliness, while her tone of continuity—that “endless broadcast of tedium” in its immanence and formlessness—not only suggests that blackness is apprehended as so many forms-of-appearance which, to use SIC’s terms, serve to obscure the essence of the category of blackness, but also hints at how these enigmatic abstract and material forms hide the capitalist economic relations that they emerge from: namely, through the kinds of legitimized and naturalized modes of indirect emotional coercion that, as Hartman so painstakingly shows, were one of the primary modes of ideological subordination in the postbellum era. In other words, if the stipulation of the will complimented other, more explicitly economic strategies of dispossession and debt-bondage in the nineteenth century, it still does. Indeed, it now seems obvious to read Citizen as a twenty-first century critique of the enduring social dynamic that Hartman describes when she writes that “the whip was not to be abandoned; rather, it was to be internalized.” Ironically, as we will see in a moment, there are other ways to read Rankine’s book. But the powerful hermeneutic circle outlined by Hartman’s study of freedmen’s handbooks is surely what a dialectical reading of Citizen would break, at the same time showing us how the double bind of freedom—the rise of legal equality alongside a liberal discourse of individualism and new modes of coercive subjectivization, as well as terror—persists today. “Drag that first person out of the social death of history, / then we’re kin,”Rankine writes, in a passage of the book more directly

---

98 Ibid., 83.
99 Ibid., 72.
confrontational than other, ostensibly documentary and descriptive sections, and in words that simultaneously reverberate with Spillers’ writing on kinlessness and enslavement.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, an account of blackness as a real abstraction collapses the differentiation between the “object” and the Heideggerian “thing,” since, like thingliness, real abstractions are “quite independent” of consciousness, acquiring the “same ontological rigor of facticity as a car that runs you over,” as Lukács memorably puts it. The Marxian theorist of abstraction Alfred Sohn-Rethel makes a similar point when he notes that the exchange abstraction arises not through thought but through people’s actions, thus arising “behind their backs.” Sohn-Rethel’s 1977 study, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, has come to renewed attention as a result of recent efforts to provide an adequate theory of abstraction at an advanced moment of a capitalism which, as Enzo Paci notes, is fundamentally defined by its tendency to make abstract categories live as though they were concrete, meaning that in a certain sense, “categories become subjects.”\(^{100}\) Sohn-Rethel’s argument that “not only analogy but true identity exists between the formal elements of the social synthesis and the formal components of cognition,”\(^{101}\) is instructive, then, not only for thinking about the molecular quotidian operations of racialization that happen automatically, rather than in premeditated ways, but also in terms of how real abstractions become a question of ontology.

Perhaps this is why tone, in its comprehensive imprecision as a mode of aesthetic abstraction, is so important not just for Rankine but for a number of poets whose work takes aim at a totality of social relations. Tone, like a visceral abstraction, makes a lived experience of blackness legible in its historicity. But crucially, Rankine’s turn to tone as a critical-poetic strategy enables this by maintaining a level of *critical abstraction* that, I would argue, can help us to avoid deploying categories such as “black,” “poor,” or “unemployed” in a manner that emphasizes their identitarian dimensions—a tendency which, as Zamora warns, encourages an “all-too-often subjective adjudication of who is “the most” dominated, discriminated against, or excluded”\(^{102}\)—and instead to view these paradigmatic categories in their impersonal dimension as the formal determinations of abstract structures. Not only

---


102 Zamora, “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation.”
does this entail an assertion that abjection (or, the socially-mediated category of relative surplus population) is not meted out to individual subjects, but mediates a diverse set of relationships to the wage across populations; it is also to understand value as the ultimate real abstraction, the one that propels capital in its moving contradiction and consequently, as the real abstraction that shapes all others. How this “set of impersonal compulsions”\textsuperscript{103} and capital’s imperative to preserve differentials across the social provides a better way to read feminized poetry is the topic of Chapter Four. Emotional coercion, or stipulation of the will, can be understood as a mode of subjugation to abstraction, not least in the way it recalls Marx’s note in the \textit{Grundrisse} that “individuals are now ruled by \textit{abstractions}, whereas earlier they depended on one another.”\textsuperscript{104}

It may seem counterintuitive to single out a surface-level aesthetic such as tone and posit it, above \textit{Citizen}’s more clearly argumentative strategies (such as the dialectical work of the book’s striking imagery, or the violent semantic content of the pick-up truck scene), as a particularly appropriate mode of response to the structurally-embedded character of antiblackness that I am arguing is \textit{Citizen}’s chief concern. But, recalling Ngai’s note that “tone’s generality and abstractness should not distract us from the fact that it is always ‘about’ something,”\textsuperscript{105} it seems clear that Rankine’s use of tone is not only unnerving and powerfully holistic, almost pansophical, in its stance towards a) the \textit{affective texture}, and b) the \textit{political-economic fact} of contemporary antiblackness; it also plays a key role in \textit{Citizen}’s tendency to elicit telling responses from reviewers – something that, it might not be too conspiratorial to suggest, may even be a conscious strategy on Rankine’s part as she engages with a reliably white-dominated literary industry. As such, we might count tone’s very vagueness as its best critical wrench, if by “critique” we can include such amorphous and feeling-based categories as tone.

Coda

The review essays published in leading literary magazines in the months following \textit{Citizen}’s publication are not intended to be in-depth, scholarly essays. Instead, reviewers from the

\textsuperscript{103} Spahr and Clover, “Gender Abolition,” 292.
\textsuperscript{104} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 164.
\textsuperscript{105} Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings}, 88.
Observer, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, the Independent, and the LA Review of Books give first impressions, summarize the book’s topics, comment on its methods and assess its poetic and sociological “effectiveness” from various degrees of self-declared subjective or objective opinion. While it is difficult to capture their political breadth and variety in character, a number of patterns emerge: in particular, moral evaluations that praise what is read as Rankine’s dispassionate objectivity and a markedly white anxiety about the likely veracity of Citizen’s implicit claims of racism could be contrasted with a complaint that, on the contrary, Rankine’s genre-blurring book is too “structural,” not “specific” enough, or worse, not poetic enough. As one troubled reviewer writes,

Where the poetry is replaced by a structuralist critique that simply names and equates, it can feel like the renunciation of a responsibility that Rankine elsewhere brilliantly articulates and assumes. She refers to Robert Lowell in Citizen, and one thinks of his view of poetic function: ‘We are poor passing facts,/warned by that to give/each figure in the photograph/his living name.’

As if poetry and structural analysis were mutually exclusive, the implication seems to be that the poet is chiefly responsible not for critique or analysis, but for the merely cultural, for the experiential and for servicing readers with detailed description. Thus, we might gather that she is perceived to be neglecting her proper role at those points “where the book is complicit in abridging,” where “abridging” seems to function as another word for “totalizing.”

In Kate Kellaway’s review in the Observer, this anxiety about genre manifests not as an implicit assertion that a poet should write what is immediately recognizable as poetry, but

---


107 For Kenneth Warren in the LA Review of Books, on the other hand, Rankine is all too “cultural.” Warren, along with other critics such as Adolph Reed and Cedric Johnson—with whom he has shared a platform on Nonsite.org—argues that the antiracism of movements such as Black Lives Matter tends to be about neoliberal diversity agendas at the expense of a critique of wealth distribution. For Warren class politics amounts to the redistribution of wealth—a position which arguably misses an opportunity to think race and class dialectically, and leaves categories of use-value and exchange-value intact. I mention this here because I think this position, though not stated outright, informs his reading of Citizen. See Kenneth Warren, “Reconsidering Claudia Rankine’s Citizen: An American Lyric. A Symposium, Part II,” LA Review of Books, January 7, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/reconsidering-claudia-rankines-citizen-an-american-lyric-a-symposium-part-ii/ and Kenneth Warren, Adolph Reed Jr., Cedric Johnson, Toure F. Reed, Preston Smith II and Willie Legette, “On the End(s) of Black Politics,” Nonsite, September 16, 2016, http://nonsite.org/editorial/on-the-ends-of-black-politics
as a demand for detail that seems closely related to the previous idea of poetry’s oppositional relation to structural critiques: “I am conscious of the friction between my wish to pin things down and Rankine’s to pull towards universality. … But a need for specificity is satisfied in the horrific stories she tells of the racism suffered by tennis champion Serena Williams.”

Kellaway’s implication, of course, is that Rankine must provide proof (or, “specificity”) of the racism she claims is all-pervasive. Almost perversely, Kellaway subsequently praises Rankine for her ability not to get bitterly bogged down in detail. “She never loses her wide-angle reach,” Kellaway adds, preceding this comment with an observation that Rankine “encounters her subject full-on and rises above it”; approving tones that cannot fail to imply, as their logical opposition, the stereotypical image of the angry black woman. A satisfaction with Rankine’s fair-mindedness appears again in Dan Chiasson’s similarly approving note in The New Yorker, which compares Citizen to Whitman’s Song of Myself as a pedagogical poetics that “teaches us to ‘no longer take things at second and third hand,’ as Whitman wrote, to ‘listen to all sides and filter them from your self.’”

The broad moral framework implied by these commentaries—in which liberal modes of “show-don’t-tell” pedagogies accompany a regard for evidence-based empiricism—is also clear in Marjorie Perloff’s praise on the back cover of the first printing of Citizen, where she observes that, “Rankine is never didactic: she merely presents, her eye for the telling detail and the documentary image allowing you to draw your own conclusions.” Interestingly, Perloff’s remark is highly discordant with Hilton Als’ uncompromising assessment on the same back cover: “Claudia Rankine’s Citizen comes at you like doom. It’s the best note in the wrong song that is America.”

Insofar as many sections of the book are formally and grammatically arranged as testimony (as Chiasson accurately observes, Citizen’s justified blocks of prose instead resemble the non-literary form of the police log, or pro se representation, the act of defending oneself in court), do they invite certain modes of sympathetic yet judgmental evaluation?


110 Ibid. The pertinence of Rankine’s formal strategy in this regard is better underlined by Wilderson’s note that, “there is a way in which all Black speech is always coerced speech, in that you’re always in what Saidiya Hartman would call a context of slavery: anything that you say, you always have to think, ‘what are the consequences of me speaking my mind going to be?’” Wilderson, “‘We’re trying to destroy the world’: Anti-
The appearance of blackness as an ontological category in *Citizen* certainly evokes strange comment from reviewers, and *Citizen* appears to be taken up in ways that give rise to the very modes of racializing thought that I have been arguing are the object of the book’s critique. At the same time, Rankine’s comment regarding Kara Walker’s much-discussed exhibition, “A Subtlety,” might reflect back onto her own practice: “I sometimes wonder if Walker’s intention is to redirect the black gaze away from the pieces themselves and onto their white consumption?”111 Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Rankine anticipates or even preemptively curates her work’s reception in the literary press. Consider Chiasson’s astounding revelations in the following passage:

The inside of a person is finite; if it fills up with these kinds of questions, there is no room for the kinds of material—the moods, the ups and downs of the heart—that are also the domain of lyric poetry. In “Citizen,” the tank into which past moments empty has started to back up and overflow. This is a problem for the person just trying to get things done, but it is a special kind of problem, and an especially profound one, for a lyric poet, who got into this business partly to talk about rain, trees, moons, skies, dejection, and joy.112

Putting aside the deep conservatism of Chiasson’s approximation of lyric poetry, the more depressing claim here boils down to a racist assumption that black poets—and black people—have too many grievances arising from their identity as black people to consider the more lofty preserves of the Lyric.113 Surely this is peak racialized reading, or what Anthony Reed describes from the writer’s perspective as the “Du Boisian question of speaking in a

---

111 Interview with Rankine by Berlant.
113 While this idea endures countless iterations in popular culture, an instructive comparison can be found in Ron Silliman’s troubling formulations regarding the history of Language writing as an aesthetic form tied to white, male identities “excluded” from the presently more (merely) cultural struggles of feminized, racialized, and queer people. For an analysis of Silliman’s arguments, see Timothy Yu, “Ron Silliman and the Ethnicization of the Avant-Garde,” *Jacket* 39 (2009), http://jacketmagazine.com/39/silliman-yu.shtml.
socially-stratified context where what one says is always already mediated by a set of racial scripts and norms.”

Without holding Rankine responsible for the content of the reviews her book has prompted, *Citizen* can be a reminder, in times of new formalist imperatives to “return to the text,” of the ways texts prosthetically operate outside of themselves. Perhaps because *Citizen* is a poetry book open to interpretation, and perhaps because it prompts issue-based discursive engagement with three highly recognizable topics—racist “microaggressions,” anti-black racism in professional sport, and police murder of young black men—critical responses to the book tend to approach “race” rather unguardedly, and can be revealing of the racializing aspects of liberal thought that Rankine both writes against and at times seems to end up appealing to. The reviews perform a particular type of shorthand and thus serve as quintessential examples of racecraft. As the Fieldses explain:

> The shorthand transforms *racism*, something an aggressor *does*, into *race*, something the target *is*, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss. Consider the statement “black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color”—a perfectly natural sentence to the ears of most Americans, who tend to overlook its weird causality. But in that sentence, segregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then, in a puff of smoke—*paff*—reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole. In similar fashion, enslavers disappear only to reappear, disguised, in stories that append physical traits defined as slave-like to those enslaved.  

Indeed, the reviews of *Citizen* are full of circular reasoning and tautological understandings of race, separations of poetry and politics, and confused evaluations regarding the character and the purpose of the Lyric. Nick Laird’s note, in the *New York Review of Books*, for example, perfectly demonstrates the logical disappearance, the puff of smoke, that the Fieldses underline: writing that, “*Citizen* suggests that racial harmony is superficial—skin-deep—and Americans revert readily and easily to their respective racial camps,” Laird automatically assumes the existence of racial camps, figuring race as a kind of essence or essentialism that persists below the surface of politically correct “race relations.” This tautological expression

---

116 Laird, “A New Way.”
finds its weird inverse in an anonymous editorial feature within the well-known British poet Craig Raine’s magazine, *Areté*. Commenting on Rankine’s representations of microaggressions, the author writes, “Is this racism? We are invited to think so. Or is it a mistake many of us have made … there is always more than one way to read the signs. Here, apparently, there is only one way.” The author subsequently complains that Rankine’s invocation of the murders of Rodney King, James Craig Anderson, and Trayvon Martin only serve to underline “the moral narcissism of the relatively trivial and over-promoted examples raised by Claudia Rankine,” arguing that:

The erasure of the self [...] isn’t a problem limited to black people. It applies to the poor, white and black … It applies to the Willie Lomans, the little people to whom “attention must be paid.” This is Auden in *The Sea and the Mirror*, complaining on everyone’s behalf: “the gross insult of being one among many.” It applies to those who want to see their words quoted, next to their name, on the back of the paperback reprint.¹¹⁷

Pointing to the murder of young black men to argue that other forms of racism do not exist, and reinscribing race according to the binary of white and black, this highly recognizable form of racism even contradicts its own ostensible logic, claiming that the “erasure of the self” applies specifically to poor white populations too, but also—by implication—that it applies to white middle-class scholars and journalists reviewing the book. As one Twitter response put it, a short “actually, *all lives matter*” would have sufficed in place of this think piece.¹¹⁸

But most telling, in this context, are the dynamics through which *Citizen* consistently and explicitly invokes something like the idea of ontological “thingliness” that Moten theorizes, or what might be understood in Afro-pessimist terms as social death, only for these suggestions to be poorly understood and misconstrued by critics whose reviews not only assume the objective—biological—reality of race, but tautologically reinscribe the “givens” of racial blackness upon which white supremacy is built, despite the sympathetic critic’s best intentions. How do these dynamics map onto the philosophical

---


¹¹⁸ R.A. Villaneuva, Twitter Post, October 9, 2015, 8:50 a.m., https://twitter.com/caesura. The tweet reads, “Why waste that space when a winking, ‘Actually,’ and an italicized ‘all lives matter’ would have sufficed?”
incommensurabilities between what we might read as *Citizen*’s invocations of black thingliness or social death, on the one hand, and the usually Marxist critique of race as an ascriptive process (a critique on which my own analysis relies), on the other?

I would venture that it is precisely because *Citizen*’s philosophical register is ambiguous that the concept of racial blackness emerges so clearly *as a real abstraction* in the review essays, and racialized readings, of a predominantly white literary press. In *Citizen*’s case, the movements of this process—the disappearances and tautologies of racecraft, and the dissolutions or emptying logics of real abstraction—often appear hand-in-hand with a sense of confusion about the poet’s intended “message,” as critics find themselves faced by a text that never makes clear its own motives or analysis of antiblackness, leaving them to surmise what they can from *Citizen*’s tone, or Weltanschauung. This confusion is linked in turn to the uneasy guilt of a white reader unsure of the appropriate parameters of that guilt, or indeed, whether disingenuously or not, how to *act* on it. The abstracting work of such racialized readings is also strongly inflected by the book’s legibility (indeed, announcement of itself) as a document of a certain category of blackness— one in which the speaker draws attention to her “elite status from a year’s worth of travel,” visits a college campus as a graduate of a prestigious university, is familiar with avant-garde visual art and film, and most contentiously for reviewers, it seems, watches tennis.\(^\text{119}\) But most illuminatingly, the reviews demonstrate the active process of a real—or what Ngai calls visceral—abstraction: the ascriptive processes that constitute “race,” just what *Citizen* so forcefully critiques.

\(^{119}\) Rankine, *Citizen*, 12, 13.
Chapter Four
Open Secrets: Value and Abjection in Feminized Poetry

What can’t women—or should we call them reproductive workers—say? Understood in bad faith, this question seems to evoke the kind of obtuse myth that Nick Marshall, Mel Gibson’s character in What Women Want, finds so perpetually confounding: if only (heteronormative, white) women did not keep their desires, annoyances, and cynicisms to themselves, then we could please them at last! If that millennial film now seems comedically outdated, the attitudes it portrays—not least the question of “why [women] do those … cuckoo things they do”¹—persist, and seem to morph ever-more insidiously (most recently, into the election of well-known misogynist Donald Trump as US President). While the complex question of what women can and cannot say could be posed in myriad ways, through many analytical frameworks, this chapter explores how an analysis of the value-form specific to capitalism—insofar as it opens onto a broad analysis of all social relations, the world over, in all their temporal and spatial moments—suggests a new, Marxian theory through which to read not only gender, but a whole totality of real abstractions and moments of appearance in feminized poetry. As I will go on to argue, this theory can in turn be read through, extended and elaborated, by a poetics that articulates feminized experiences at the level of form.

Let us recall Diane Elson’s note that “those who experience capitalist exploitation do not need a theory to tell that something is wrong,” but that “the experience of capitalist exploitation is fragmentary and disconnected, so that it is difficult to tell exactly what is wrong, and what can be done to change it.”² In this surprising way, Elson’s “Value Theory of Labour”—and the emerging value-theoretical critiques of gender it informs—shares a common aspiration with feminized poetry in its desire to “overcome the fragmentation of the experience of […] exploitation.”³ But there is more to this relationship. Unlike epistemological and empiricist theories of cognitive abstractions, the objects of value-form

² Elson, “Value,” 171.
³ Ibid.
theory are not cognitive but real abstractions. Here we find a pointed similarity: feminized poetry uses aesthetic abstractions in a similar manner to how value-form theory uses analytical abstractions to tell us something of the social whole. And while value-form theory always recognizes abstractions for what they are—abstract concepts that “can never exist other than as an abstract one-sided relation within an already given concrete living whole”—much feminized poetry suggests a similar understanding of capitalist abstractions as palpable forces that lack concrete existence but are nevertheless real.

Of course, my suggestion that women cannot speak certain aspects of their experience is not to be taken too literally: women can and do articulate many of the myriad ways structural violence goes undercover, assuming different forms of appearance, often rendering itself difficult to articulate or represent. But in the heated, often painful cacophony of voices that swirl around feminist struggles from all sides of the political spectrum—from Men’s Rights activists to pro-capitalist “lean in” feminisms to the Federician politics of commonizing care work—the often counterintuitive, hard-won insights of systematic analyses can be lost because some fresh horror is always around the corner. As much as women might endeavour to articulate gendered forms of domination, there are material limits that prevent them from fully doing so. Indeed, this is in part because some of these limits involve a requirement that women voice their complaints within liberal, rights-based frameworks (whose ideological parameters extend into many more unofficial spheres of discourse concerning gender relations), not to mention the fact that experiences of gendered domination can be just too humiliating, too embarrassing, too nebulous, too petty seeming, or too traumatic—in a word, too abject—to be spoken of. Added to this, of course, are the daily assaults on women on a mass scale: the social agendas of fundamentalist Sharia law in the Middle East, for example, or the recent decriminalization of domestic abuse in Russia, forms of politics which do not even aspire to liberal forms of rights discourse, or the ideal of gender equality, in the first place.5

In this chapter, I pursue a rather unholy alliance of poetry- and value theory-based critiques. Following Marx’s argument, in the Grundrisse, that thinking about capital requires

4 Marx, Grundrisse, 101.
moving counterintuitively from the abstract to the concrete—to the many diverse, perceptible particulars— I begin with a detailed reading of Elson’s essay, “The Value Theory of Labour,” which itself performs an illuminating reading of Marx’s theory of value in order to show how value exerts a form-determining force over labour. While Elson leaves the category of concrete labour intact—granting it a transhistorical legitimacy (a contentious position in contemporary value-form theory debates)—her analysis is nevertheless highly illuminating for its insight into how value socially fixes labour, and for its suggestion, albeit merely implicit, that the domination of the value-form extends to the sphere of social reproduction. In order to bring this analysis back into the realm of aesthetic theory, I refer to Alberto Toscano’s comprehensive account of real abstractions, using his focus on Louis Althusser’s review of an exhibition by the Italian painter Leonardo Cremonini to explore the relation between value’s abstract, form-determining capacities on the one hand, and aesthetic abstractions on the other.

But none of these analyses provide any account of the forms of capitalist domination particular to gender. To do so, I turn to the systematic analysis put forth in an essay by the UK and US-based communization journal *Endnotes*, “The Logic of Gender” – one of the strongest examples of gender analysis to emerge from a constellation of value-theoretical advances in recent Marxian theory. I take as my point of departure Endnotes’ theory of the abject as a capitalist category, which provides a useful starting point for thinking about the kinds of feminized and racialized abjection documented in poetry. And it is in recent poetry, I argue, that we can find more satisfactory investigations of how abjection is form-determined by value. I turn to the British-Punjabi (but since 1990, US-based) poet Bhanu Kapil’s recent book, *Ban en Banlieue*, to demonstrate how Endnotes’ analysis might be fleshed out by what I call a counter-reproductive negativity—a doubly-invisible, non-verbal violence traced by Kapil’s poetics of the global banlieue—before turning, finally, to show how a

---

6 Marx also acknowledges that the concrete is “the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception.” The key passage is as follows: “It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. […] if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [Vorstellung] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [Begriff], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.” See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100-1.
renewed understanding of value’s form-determining capacity is, at the very least laterally or approximately, understood in a poem by Alli Warren, whose poems can be read as attempts to “write” real abstractions in order to bring them into the realm of perception as abstractions.

Endnotes’ concept of the abject places a discussion of feminized abjection squarely on the terrain of political economy, taking it out of its historical trajectory within psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction. But while the unlikely usefulness of feminized poetry to Marxian theory and vice versa may be underlined by the awkwardness with which a concept like abjection, accompanied by a complex genealogy of its own, is transposed into systematic analyses, my hope is that feminized poetry—and the dialectics of aesthetic experience it engenders—also suggests the unrealized capaciousness of new Marxian analyses. Indeed, the poetry studied here confirms the political stakes of theories of value and gender by encouraging a more holistic sense of doing theory, one in which aesthetic works do what Marxist-feminist theory cannot and make real abstractions perceptible by tracing the obscured lineaments of their formal determinations (in poetry’s case, through modes of formal, linguistic, or semantic articulation).

This chapter thus endeavours to provide a detailed examination of the pertinence of value-form theory—a philosophically radical, under-translated and under-studied strand of Marxian analysis—to the study of poetry (and implicitly, to aesthetics in a broader sense). While it would be impossible to do justice here to the long history of value-debates that stretches back to at least the 1960s, I am keen to avoid vaguely appropriating the remarkable insights we can draw from value-form theory without tracing the analytical steps of at least one leading example. The necessity of such a pause should not only become clear when we turn back to poetry at the end of this chapter, but should further help to illuminate the arguments about antagonism, abstraction, and capital that I have been making throughout this dissertation. For these reasons, what follows is a selective reading of Elson’s recently re-published 1979 essay, “The Value Theory of Labour,” which despite its occasional idiosyncrasies and long-windedness, insists on meticulous detail, and on declaring its own co-ordinates within a wider context of value debates, only in the name of clarity.
The Value Theory of Labour

While the umbrella term “value-form theory” might include the German-language school of Wertkritik (value-critique), the more broadly defined neue marx-lektüre (“new reading of Marx”), and an Anglophone strand of value-form theory that tends to be linked to the theories of systematic dialectics explored in Chapter One, I will focus here on those aspects—mainly found in the work of Wertkritik critics such as Norbert Trenkle and Robert Kurz, as well as British critics including Elson and Christopher Arthur—that take value (as distinct from exchange-value, or the money form) as their point of departure, and labour as their object of study. At the centre of this value-form theory is a critique of the labour theory of value: the classical view, left unquestioned by traditional and orthodox Marxisms, that labour is the substance of value, and that value is embodied by the commodity. As Trenkle, one of Wertkritik’s key advocates, introduces its inquiry: “is ‘labor’ an anthropological constant? Can we use it as such to make it unproblematically into a point of departure for an analysis of commodity society? My answer is an unambiguous ‘no’.”

Indeed, value-theoretical accounts involve what Ingo Elba describes as a threefold abandonment of traditional Marxism: a move away from substantialist theories of value as the labour congealed in commodities, away from reformist conceptions of the state in favour of a view of the state as a structural component of capitalist domination, and away from “labour-movement-centric” interpretations of the critique of political economy, or the idea of a “labor-ontological’ revolutionary theory.” Yet despite the departures of such critical gestures, turning to Elson’s essay as an entry-point to these value-debates makes it easy to see how the Marxian critique of value is often characterized as a “return to Marx,” since her analysis seeks to correct and clarify many aspects of Marx’s theory of value as it appears in Capital, which, as she notes, is “the culmination of work on the social determination of labour that began many years before, and went through various phases.” Elson’s major intervention, however, is to point out that the object of Marx’s theory of value is not price—

---

9 Elson, “Value,” 130.
as various theorists of the “transformation problem” would contend— but labour. Hence, we are not dealing with a labour theory of value here, but a value theory of labour. Elson’s aim is nothing less than “an understanding of why labour takes the forms it does, and what the political consequences are.”

It is a mistake, Elson explains, to misread “value” as “exchange value” or “price,” and to posit a relation between a dependent and an independent variable in a labour theory of value. Thus, she rejects the tendency she identifies in Paul Sweezy’s and I.I. Rubin’s theories of value, as well as in Louis Althusser’s “technicist” reading of Marx, to posit the production process as a pre-given structure across which individuals are distributed and assigned to specific tasks, or “pre-given places or functions.” In these interpretations,

Not only is labour-time seen as the determinant of exchange value; exchange-value is also seen as the determinant of labour-time. That is, exchange-values are in equilibrium equal to socially-necessary labour time embodied in commodities; and the distribution of total labour-time between different commodities is regulated by the difference between market-price and relative labour-time requirements of different commodities.

Without reiterating the various wrong turns Elson attributes to Sweezy, Rubin, Althusser et. al., the key import of her critique is that in one way or another, these theorists make an analytical error when they reduce three discrete categories offered by Marx—labour-time, value, and exchange-value—to two. Sweezy and others posit value and labour-time as identical, affirming traditional Marxism’s claim that the commodity’s value is equivalent to

---

10 This discussion is most often attributed to Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk. As Joshua Clover summarizes: “In its simplest form, [the transformation problem] involves the argument that the value derived in Volume I of Capital—that is, determined according to given amounts of socially necessary abstract labor time—could not be made to match up with prices of production developed in Volume III. Their total magnitudes are different, and commodities cannot be found to exchange according to their values. The treble effect of this claim seems devastating. Immediately, it renders value inadequate for explaining price, calling into question its usefulness as an economic category. Following from that, it undermines the claim that profit’s source is in exploitation of labor, as it then becomes possible to make the argument that profit is the play of prices rather than some secret and unverifiable extraction, thus dispensing with labor theories of value. Further, the abstract argument holding that it is embodied labor which is the common element found in all commodities that renders them exchangeable also fails. All of this contra-Marxology effects to bolster the account found in marginal utility theory, with its need only of price to explain price, and the need or desire of different people for differing uses to explain profit.” See Joshua Clover, “Value in the Expanded Field,” Mediations 29, no. 2 (2016): 161-8.

11 Ibid., 123.

12 Ibid., 126.
the total socially-necessary labour time needed to produce it.\textsuperscript{13} Rubin, on the other hand, reverses this argument by arguing that value—by which he means exchange-value—determines the distribution of labour across various branches of production. But he cannot account for the form that the labour process takes because his reduction of value to exchange-value positions his critique at the level of circulation and therefore presupposes a set of already existing independent variables brought together in production: labour power, the means of production, the owners of production, and the commodity.

Elson turns all of these readings on their heads. Her new reading of Marx insists on a vital distinction—between the value-form, which in its dual character as value and use-value lacks independence, and the value-form’s appearance as exchange-value, which gives it an illusory independence—as the key to understanding how value form determines the structure of the labour process. In the course of this reading, Elson demonstrates that the object of Marx’s theory of value is not value, nor exchange-value, but the labour process; or as she puts it as simply as possible, his object is “the determination of the structure of production as well as the distribution of labour in that structure.” But this does not quite capture it: noting the clunkiness of this formulation, she cites Marx’s famous description of labour, in the Grundrisse, as “the living form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time,” before offering the following elaboration:

[Labour] is a fluidity, a potential, which in any society has to be socially “fixed” or objectified in the production of particular goods, by particular people in particular ways. Human beings are not pre-programmed biologically to perform particular tasks. Unlike ants or bees, there is a potentially vast range in the tasks that any human being can undertake.\textsuperscript{14}

Elson calls this the indeterminateness of human labour; a fluidity common to all states of society. The question then, for Elson and for Elson’s Marx, is how human labour comes to be determined, how it comes to be fixed as objectified abstract labour. In order to show how Marx’s concept of determination is not “deterministic”—not a concept of a regulative law—Elson cites a key moment in The German Ideology: a passage where Marx asserts that “the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 124-9.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 128.
social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals,” but

of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will.\(^{15}\)

This is—not incidentally—another presentation of the basis in Marx’s writing for the theory of real abstraction developed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, whose *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, as we have seen, argues that the very form of thought is determined by practice (and specifically, by the action of commodity exchange which is governed not by value but by *exchange-value* – in this sense, the abstraction of exchange-value becomes a reality, a real force). In a reminder of the stakes of Marx’s sober observation, Elson notes:

> to speak of “determination” here does not, of course, mean the denial of *any* choice on the part of individuals about their work. Rather, it is to point to the fact that individuals can’t just choose *anything*, are unable to re-invent the world from scratch, but must choose from the alternatives presented to them.\(^{16}\)

It is possible already to imagine how Elson’s point about the fluidity of labour, and the necessity for it to become socially fixed in order for valorization (the production of surplus-value) to take place, might extend to the feminized and racialized sphere of social reproduction.

But first, a summary of the nuts and bolts of Elson’s reading of Marx—following his basic “concern to locate the substance of value,”\(^{17}\) and putting the socio-political ramifications of a value theory of labour aside for a moment—might run as follows: beginning with the commodity, Marx distinguishes between the *equivalent form* as the commodity which serves as the bearer of value, and the *relative form* as the commodity whose value is being reflected. From this, Marx deduces that the equivalent form must be directly exchangeable. As Elson puts it, “its exchangeability (the possibility of exchanging it) must

---

\(^{15}\) Marx, *German Ideology*, 47, quoted in Elson, “Value,” 129.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 130.
not depend on its own use-value … in this it must differ from all other commodities, where, as we have already seen, their use-value and the private characteristics of their owners play a role in their exchangeability.” But direct exchangeability will be limited to an “embryonic form” unless this equivalent form is a universal equivalent, “in which all other commodities have their abstract labour objectified, their value reflected.” Further, the full establishment of direct exchangeability demands a unique universal equivalent, a commodity whose “specific social function, and consequently its social monopoly (is) to play the part of universal equivalent in the world of commodities.”\(^{18}\) The apparent conventionality of Elson’s next observation to anyone remotely familiar with the workings of capital might even seem a little quaint: “On inspection we do find such a commodity: gold-money” (which can be replaced by symbols of itself in paper money). But Elson’s point is partly to demonstrate how, for Marx, capitalism is not established by convention at all: “rather, he takes the view that ‘money necessarily crystallises out of the process of exchange’ and that it certainly cannot be treated ‘as if’ established ‘by a convention’.”\(^{19}\)

This is the first step in Elson’s reading. Pausing to note the misleading confusion that arises from Marx’s failure to distinguish between money as a medium of exchange and the money form of value—since “money is not specific to the capitalist mode of production, and the fact that money is functioning as a medium of exchange does not mean that it is functioning as an expression of value”\(^{20}\)—Elson stresses that while gold-money always has the characteristics required for being a universal equivalent, it is only in capitalist societies, where the objectification of abstract labour requires a universal equivalent, that it actually becomes so. With these points established, Elson proceeds to the next step of her reading, and it is here that we really start to get an inkling of how the value-form dominates the social, how labour becomes socially fixed in capitalist societies, and what that could possibly mean beyond labour itself.

---

\(^{18}\) Elson, 162 (quoting Marx, *Capital*, 162).

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 163 (quoting Marx, *Capital*, 181). Elson casts a useful aside on the limits of empiricism here, when she notes that the fact that we do find money—a commodity with “the social monopoly of direct exchangeability”—does not prove Marx’s argument, but that it does not disprove it either; it allows it to proceed, and “this is all an empirical check on the argument can ever do. The question of when we have sufficiently grasped the real relations under investigation, when we know enough about them to proceed to practical action, is not one that can ever be finally decided by an empirical test. It must always be a matter of judgement” (163).

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
Elson leads with a question: does not the proposition that the objectification of abstract labour (value) entails an expression in the determinate form of the money commodity, and thus has an independent expression of its own, undermine Marx’s claim that value is not an absolute entity – that it is not an independent, free-standing convention? Not at all, if we take heed of “a little-noticed distinction drawn by Marx, that between ‘internal independence’ and ‘external independence’”:

Value lacks the “internal independence” necessary for it to be an entity because it is always one side of a unity of value and use-value, i.e. the commodity. But the value side of the commodity can be given “external independence” if the commodity is bought into a relation with another commodity which serves only to reflect value. This produces the illusory appearance that value in its money form is an independent entity; but the autonomy it confers on value is only relative. It is this externally independent expression, in objectified form, of a one-sided abstraction, the abstract aspect of labour, which is the fetishism of commodities.\(^\text{21}\)

Value, as a one-sided (“externally independent”) abstraction, appears only in exchange. As such, it is not an ideological form but—though Elson does not employ the term in this passage—a real abstraction. For Elson, two key observations follow from this. First, that “in the form of the universal equivalent, abstract labour is not only objectified: it is established as the dominant aspect of labour.”\(^\text{22}\) As such, the concrete dimension of labour is subservient to the abstract, because its purpose is to “[make] a physical object which we at once recognise as value.”\(^\text{23}\) In a similar way, Elson notes how the private aspect of labour (“the isolated processes of production operating independently of one another”) ultimately serves its social aspect, through the social mode of recognition known as commodity-exchange. She is careful to note that this does not mean that the private, concrete, and social dimensions of labour are obliterated; rather, it means that they are subsumed as expressions of abstract labour. Abstract labour is the only form of labour reflected in the universal equivalent, money.\(^\text{24}\)

And here follows the most crucial point in Elson’s reading of Marx:

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 165.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Marx, Capital, 150, quoted in Elson, “Value,” 165.

\(^{24}\) Elson, “Value,” 165.
The argument of *Capital*, I, goes on to show the dominance of the universal equivalent, the money form of value, over other commodities, and how this domination is expressed in the self-expansion of the money form of value i.e. in the capital form of value. Further it shows that the domination of the capital form of value is not confined to labour “fixed” in products, *it extends to the immediate process of production itself, and to the reproduction of that process.*

This assertion about the domination of value over the process of production names the process of real subsumption. Importantly, in Elson’s account, this process begins with the universal equivalent—the money form of value—and moves inwards to the labour process, showing how the abstract dominates the concrete. Indeed, as Elson points out, “Marx’s argument is not that the abstract aspect of labour is the product of capitalist social relations, but that the latter are characterised by the dominance of the abstract aspect over other aspects of labour.” But what does Elson mean when she refers to “the reproduction of that process” in the longer passage quoted above? While it might be fair to assume that what is being envisioned here is a more limited notion of the changing form of the production process (within the walls of the factory plant, for example), the dynamics of social reproduction—as Marxist-feminism has taught us—reach far beyond the labour process into the most hidden recesses of social life.

From this vista, a methodical and totalizing theory of value comes into view. As Elson and Marx both note, value appears as the subject of a process, “endowed with a life its own” (and of course, much has been written about the mysterious, occult character of commodities). Add to this Marx’s oft-cited insight about how value is naturalized as a property of commodities—“the social characteristics of men’s own labour [are reflected in commodities] as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things”—and we are reminded of the social power of value’s illusory appearance as an independent entity. In sum, Elson’s analysis provides us with three key insights: first, that real abstractions arise from the life process of individuals “as

---

25 Ibid. (my italics).
26 Ibid., 150.
27 Ibid., 166.
they *really* are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will”; second, that the capital form of value *appears* to take on a life of its own in its external independence, and this fetishistic result allows for the domination of value to extend beyond the commodity, to the production process and to the sphere of social reproduction; and third, that a value theory of labour analyzing these relations “enables us to analyse capitalist exploitation in a way that overcomes the fragmentation of the experience of that exploitation.”

**Aesthetic Abstractions**

What would it mean to return this analysis to poetry? How might a value theory of labour shape the practice of reading contemporary feminized poetry dialectically? These questions require a step back, initially. If the domination of value over labour involves the real subsumption of labour—an increasing ratio of constant to variable capital (and increased productivity)—then how, precisely, does the domination of value extend over the *reproduction* of labour in the Marxist-feminist sense of that term? This inquiry could be put differently to ask, what does a theory that overcomes the fragmentation of the experience of exploitation actually mean once we move beyond the sphere of waged exploitation, to consider other Marxian categories like reproduction and expropriation?

Many Marxian theorists have attempted to theorize capital’s relation to the social whole by advancing the concept of real subsumption as a process that enfolds the social into its capitalist logic. For Italian autonomists like Antonio Negri, real subsumption denotes a period in history marked by technological advances, and is thus analogous to postmodernity and akin to post-Fordism. In this way, *Operaismo* suggests that the life process itself has become productive of value. But if we adhere—as Elson does—to Marx’s definition of real subsumption as the social reorganization of the labour process and its reproduction in anticipation of increased relative surplus value, this argument begins to look like a category error: while real subsumption gives rise to a number of effects, “real subsumption” is not

---

29 It should be noted that Negri periodizes subsumption from the point of view of the worker’s resistance—through the chronological figures of the “professional worker,” the “mass worker,” and the “social worker”—rather than from the point of view of production or the domination of the value-form. See Antonio Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx, Interpretation of the Class Situation Today,” *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, S. Makdisi, C. Casarino, and R. Karl (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1996), 151.
necessarily the name of those effects. As Endnotes argue: “though massively significant
to society as a whole—and to the relation between capitalism and the worker—may
result from the real subsumption of the labour process under capital, it does not follow that
these changes can themselves be theorised in terms of the concepts of subsumption.”\textsuperscript{30}

I follow Elson, therefore, in suggesting that theoretical modes based on form-
determination provide a better way of understanding how value dominates as a one-sided,
“externally independent” abstraction able to obscure its immanent structural relationships.
But if the concept of real subsumption is unhelpful beyond its original use by Marx, how
does the domination of value—as an abstract, apparently independent form—give rise to
further abstractions? If, as Endnotes argue, “the indirectly market-mediated sphere has a
different temporal character,”\textsuperscript{31} then how might feminized poetry help to represent that
caracter, given that its economic status is quite conceivably its dominant, but certainly not
its only, characteristic? In many ways, the questions posed above characterize the inquiry
that “The Logic of Gender” sets out to answer, pointing out how the social cost of
biological reproduction—which is a hindrance to value-production despite being absolutely
necessary to it—is reflected back onto the population through the organization of bodies as a
gendered average, an abstraction:

What the female gender signifies—that which is socially inscribed upon
“naturalised,” “sexuated” bodies—is not only an array of “feminine” or gendered
characteristics, but essentially a price tag. Biological reproduction has a social cost
which is exceptiona\textsuperscript{30} to average (male) labour-power; it becomes the burden of those
whose cost it is assigned to—regardless of whether they can or will have children. It
is in this sense that an abstraction, a \textit{gendered average}, is reflected back upon the
organisation of bodies in the same way that exchange-value, a blind market average,
is projected back upon production, molding and transforming the organisation of the
character of social production and the division of labour. In this sense, the
transformation of the condition of gender relations goes on behind the backs of

\textsuperscript{30}Endnotes, “History of Subsumption,” 149.
\textsuperscript{31}Endnotes, “Gender,” 64.
those whom it defines. And in this sense, gender is constantly re-implied and re-
naturalised.  

Note the parallel drawn here between the abstraction gender—“a gendered average”—and the abstraction exchange-value—“a blind market average.” It is not that one abstraction “leads” to another, even if we might in theory follow capitalist abstractions from their simplest to their most complex and particular forms. Rather, categories of lived experience—abstractions like gender and race—are connected as moments of appearance in the reproduction of the capital-labour relation. Indeed, the systematic dialectic I propose in Chapter One as the “context” of dialectical reading shows how there is no historical or linear movement of totality, only systematic and logical movement. To repeat Christopher Arthur’s formulation: “The task of systematic dialectic is to organize such a system of categories in a definite sequence, deriving one from another logically … making transitions from one category to another in such a way that the whole system has an architectonic.”  

Form-determination and real abstraction are two sides of the same concept, and thinking them through systematic dialectics allows an understanding, for example, of how the gendered organization of bodies today is a phenomenon intimately linked to capital’s faltering productivity levels in the wake of the post-war long boom. Amidst this crisis, not only does gender—much like race—help to provide the flexible, cheap, relative surplus labour increasingly necessary to capital’s survival; it also serves up feminized people as a sector of the population upon whom, to varying degrees, the category of the abject may be imposed. It is in this negative way, then, that “money thereby directly and simultaneously becomes the real community [Gemeinwesen], since it is the general substance of survival for all, and at the same time the social product of all.” This statement from Marx could also be read as the foundation of Sohn-Rethel’s critique of epistemology within capitalist modernity: his argument that modern thought and Western philosophy emerge, in fact, from the non-cognitive mediations of the money form in the (pre-capitalist) sphere of circulation. 

34 Marx, Grundrisse, 225.
35 In this regard, Sohn-Rethel’s understanding of exchange-value as a real abstraction is distinct from that of Elson and others, for whom value, rather than exchange-value, is the analytical starting point and form-determining force.
In his summary of Sohn-Rethel’s key intervention, Alberto Toscano puts it this way: “while the essence of capitalism is not metaphysical, the essence of metaphysics is capitalist.” He goes on to describe Sohn-Rethel’s theory of real abstraction as follows:

Money is not just real community, it is also a sensus communis. Monetised exchange structures a socially transcendental aesthetic […] The crucial thing to grasp is that [Sohn-Rethel] does not move from the density of empirically observable and palpably material social relations to the supposedly distorting and transcendent illusions of philosophy; rather, [he] takes [his] cue from Marx’s conception of value as a social form to ground ideal abstractions in real abstraction.36

Toscano’s work on the development and implications of the concept of real abstraction opens it beyond what we might think of as the simplest real abstraction, exchange-value. Indeed, Toscano’s writing on Louis Althusser’s 1966 review of Leonardo Cremonini’s exhibition at the Venice Biennale is perhaps more useful than the original essay insofar as it clarifies the contemporary pertinence of Althusser’s observations—including their poetic qualities—in order to ask a number of crucial questions about the nature of the relationship between real abstractions and aesthetic abstractions.

Brushing aside the common (mistaken) proposition of a correlation, or homonymy, “between the progressive abstraction of art and the increasing abstraction of capital,”37 Toscano characterizes the “artistic register” as a kind of “non-specular reflection,” non-specular because the painting is, importantly, also the product of the historically formed subjectivity of the painter.38 Here is Toscano reading Althusser reading Cremonini:

The stakes of the Cremonini are considerably higher, as the Italian artist’s work comes to represent not just a sectoral materialism but a kind of allegory for the materialist method as such. For Cremonini’s painting tackles, in the artistic register, the problem of a materialism without matter; in Althusser’s evocative words:

37 Ibid., 1231.
38 Ibid., 1232. Toscano elaborates on this point when he notes that Cremonini’s work, “far from any ‘reflection theory’,” in Althusser’s reading, “is caught up in a complex play of delays, misrecognitions, over-identifications, a play shaped by a definite space.” See “Materialism Without Matter,” 1234.
Cremonini “paints” the relations which bind the objects, places and times. Cremonini is a painter of abstraction. Not an abstract painter, “painting” an absent, pure possibility, but a painter of the real abstract, “painting” in a sense we have to define, real relations (as relations they are necessarily abstract) between “men” and their “things,” or rather, to give the term its stronger sense, between “things” and their “men.”

“‘Things’ and their ‘men,’” of course, evokes Marx’s insistence that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,” alongside his famous adage that men are “ruled by abstractions.” Next to this, Toscano notes Gilles Deleuze’s caution, in his book on Francis Bacon, that “if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation ‘gives’ something completely different from the forces that condition it.” To put it in Marxist terms, this is the difference between essence and appearance, between capital and ideology. Thus, in Althusser’s dialectical reading of Cremonini, Toscano tells us, it is not so much that Cremonini’s painting itself gestures to a “dialectic of the abstract and the concrete,” because Cremonini traces not a force but a series of sensations, as he “appears to unfold his plastic project in terms of an ascension, a chain of being, moving from the mineral, to the vegetable, to the animal (and the human).” Rather, it is Althusser who reads in Cremonini’s work the force of real abstractions, what he calls a “determinate absence.” As Althusser explains:

In their “finite” world which dominates them, Cremonini thus “paints” […] the history of men as a history marked […] by the abstraction of their sites, spaces, objects, i.e. in the last instance by the real abstraction which determines and sums up these first abstractions: the relations which constitute their living conditions.

39 Ibid., 1232.
It is here, writes Toscano, that Cremonini’s aesthetic problem becomes “nigh-on indistinguishable” from the aesthetic problem of Marxian theories of form-determination and real abstraction, in his words, “a materialism without matter.” The key difference in Cremonini’s artistic reply (a register which, Toscano acknowledges, is not easily cordoned off from science) is that it is an aesthetic practice of “making visible, but not making known.” Hence, Toscano explains via Althusser,

We move, at the figural level, across “the armatures and articulations, consolidated by weight and by history, of the passive body of an island, dormant in the heavy oblivion of the rocks, at the edge of an empty sea, a matter-less horizon” to “the sharp growth of a bulb, the long shriek of dumb stems” and at last […] to “dismembered animals scattered among men collecting bony carcases, men like the carcases they bear on their emaciated shoulders.” Yet the focus is elsewhere, off-screen, off-canvas – the rocks’ “difference,” which makes them the “ground” of men; the absences in the presences of the flowers, the invisible “time of their growth.”

These visceral descriptions of Cremonini’s paintings, or even a glance at their flattened digital images online, might make their relation to theories of value and real abstraction suddenly come to seem quite tenuous, given how substantively different Cremonini’s project is from, say, Elson’s scientific analysis of how “the domination of the capital form of value […] extends to the immediate process of production itself, and to the reproduction of that process.” But the mediating presence of Althusser the viewer, and his attention to the formal qualities of Cremonini’s painting and translation of these qualities into language, provides a compelling record of the dialectics of aesthetic experience, especially as they are read in turn by Toscano as a reading of the “real abstract.” Perhaps even more persuasive, if only because it is not bound to the kinds of logical explanation the critic is obliged to provide, is the writing of the abstract that takes place in the work of the poets I will read in the second half of this

---

43 Toscano, “Materialism Without Matter,” 1234. Toscano borrows this phrase from Etienne Balibar.
44 Ibid., 1232-3.
45 Ibid., 1233.
46 Elson, “Value,” 165.

Of course, language is a very different material to paint, as the “materialist poetics” of the Black Mountain school and of Language poetry would attest. But while the first trafficked in the fantasy of a textual “open field” of composition in which the breath composes the line kinetically, an “energy exchange where self and world meet, before the encounter is translated into the irreconcilable terms of subject and object,” and the second in a supposed subversion of the “very order of sign production,” which, as Ruth Jennison notes, “indexed a valiant denial of language as a brutal mediation of other systems and darker orders,” neither Kapil’s nor Warren’s poetry appears interested in these adventures. Instead, the work I explore in the coming pages suggests two other possibilities. The first, which I demonstrate in my reading of Kapil’s Ban en Banlieue (2014), involves the mobilization of a negative dialectic within an avowedly racialized and feminized poetics, a negativity I theorize, following Marina Vishmidt, as a form of counter-(re)productive negativity that is able to aesthetically trace—and record the violent results of—the negative dialectics of the value-form itself. Kapil, in a different register, calls this “an epidemiology of violence.” I theorize this negativity—internal to poetic form on the one hand, and to the value-form on the other—as a Marxian reconceptualization of the abject: a category of experience both cast off from, yet still a part of, racialized and feminized life in capitalist society.

The second possibility, suggested by Warren’s 2013 book Here Come the Warm Jets, especially in her poem, “Acting Out,” involves an aesthetic mode that directly challenges the idea, framed by Toscano, that “figuration, as a modality of representation, is here a condition

sine qua non for ‘alluding’ to or ‘indicating’ relations which are intangible.”\textsuperscript{51} Certainly this modality is relevant to much twentieth-century US poetry: as Christopher Nealon notes, for example, John Ashbery’s attention to capital, that “invisible form in the air,” is nonetheless figured through “things,” both concrete matter and attitudinal, rhetorical forms – and the same could be said of the poetry I have so far considered in this study.\textsuperscript{52} But at the end of this chapter, I will propose that Warren’s feminist poem aspires, instead, to collapse the distance between essence and appearance, to abolish capitalist mediation, even if it knows the total inadequacy of poetry to this task. This is not to suggest that such an endeavour—which shares some of the key investments and methodologies at work across this dissertation—is somehow a better or more insightful one for a poet, but that it poses some useful questions about poetry’s relationship to the politics of form in our current historical moment. In part, the aspiration to abolish capitalist mediation manifests in Warren’s writing as a thematic and rhetorical directness, an approach that might also be engaged to suggest why, for example, it is important not to omit the historical fact that the Althusser who made such discerning observations about Cremonini’s paintings is the same man who in 1980, suffering chronic mental health problems, murdered his wife, Hélène Rytmann, by strangulation.\textsuperscript{53}

L(a)ying Down in the Abject

“The Logic of Gender” marks an emergent line of thought in Marxist-feminist critique: influenced by German value-form theory, the analytical framework presented by Endnotes provides a compelling alternative to the inadequate binary of productive and reproductive labour for understanding gender oppression under capital. In place of these categories, “The Logic of Gender” proposes two overlapping spheres—the directly market-mediated (DMM) sphere, and the indirectly market-mediated (IMM) sphere—which prove useful categories of analysis for understanding the types of domination required to quantify and enforce different

\textsuperscript{51} Toscano is reproducing Althusser’s argument with his own valences here, before likening it to Deleuze’s notion that it is not the force that is sensed but the sensation, which is something completely different. See Toscano, “Materialism Without Matter,” 1232-3.

\textsuperscript{52} Nealon, The Matter of Capital, esp. 74-86.

kinds of productive and reproductive activities. While abstract, value-productive (including reproductive) labour is socially determined by “direct market-mediation” and hence requires “no structural necessity toward direct violence,” activities belonging to the indirectly market-mediated sphere of “non-labour” (including paid, non-value-producing work) are compelled by other mechanisms, “from direct domination and violence to hierarchical forms of cooperation, or planned allocation at best.” It is not possible to “objectively quantify, enforce or equalize ‘rationally’ the time and energy spent in these activities or to whom they are allocated.”

Central here is the relation of any activity to the market and to valorization.

The abject, in this framework, describes a particular type of denaturalized, indirectly market-mediated activity: a set of unpaid tasks that must be performed or executed by “someone” in order for the production of surplus-value to continue in the directly market-mediated sphere. The concept of the abject is linked, in “The Logic of Gender,” to the process of previously waged reproductive activities becoming unwaged as a result of neoliberal austerity measures.

---

For example, state-subsidized childcare services being withdrawn means that the previously paid work of daycare workers has been returned to parents, and disproportionately, feminized parents. Abject forms of reproduction differ from other indirectly market-mediated activities because, after becoming waged components of the welfare state, they no longer automatically appear as the natural task of women – though as Endnotes point out, “abject reproduction will in the end mainly be foisted upon women.”

Referring to the abject in this way of course invokes Julia Kristeva’s long essay, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, in which abjection is described as “the twisted braid of affects and thoughts” that has no definable object, and which draws us “toward the place where meaning collapses.” While *Endnotes*’ rendering of the abject shares key characteristics with Kristeva’s definition—*Endnotes* describe the abject as “that which is cast off, thrown away, but from something that it is part of”—Kristeva’s exploration of this category points towards another dimension in which abject social reproduction is performed, often under duress. This gendered abjection is of a kind qualitatively distinct from the definition *Endnotes* provide, and the most obvious examples of it involve dealing with trauma, mental illness, stress or anxiety related to incidents of rape, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, sexual harassment, gendered discrimination and domestic violence, including forms of racist, transphobic, homophobic and ableist physical and sexual violence and discrimination. The intellectual and affective responses—the “dealing with”—that these types of structural violence demand are a component of what Silvia Federici calls, “the psychological work necessary to reintegrate our physical and emotional balance.”

Keeping this qualitative difference in mind, let us turn to Kapil’s *Ban en Banlieue* (2015): a poetics that can help to give definition to the foggier aspects of that gendered “remainder” of reproduction—the activities produced and shaped by capital which must remain outside of market-relations—in ways that otherwise helpful Marxist-feminist categories of analysis such as the “abject” or the “non-social” do not yet seem to capture or

---

55 Ibid., 89.
57 Endnotes, “Logic of Gender,” 86.
account for fully. With this ostensibly pragmatic approach to poetry, I am not proposing that the work of feminized and racialized poets should service a gap in Marxist-feminist theory (a gap that could neither be filled by theoretically incompatible poststructuralist conceptualizations of abjection). Rather, my contention—put only briefly, perhaps speculatively, in this chapter—is that feminist poetics focusing on particular aspects of structural violence might provide an aesthetic critique of a dimension of feminized experience that cannot be adequately articulated in “theory,” but which, nonetheless, theory could do much better to articulate.

More than a question of what’s missing in a Marxist poetics and literary criticism so often obsessed with the relationship between labour and literature, or production and literature, social reproduction’s relationship to the aesthetic—and poetic language in particular—re-centres the tricky, opaque divide between aesthetic critiques and systematic critiques because it throws several key questions about this latter relation into orbit. What can be documented in feminist/feminized poetry that doesn’t get recorded elsewhere? What kinds of knowledge can be accessed through aesthetic experience? How do resulting aesthetic judgments translate to analysis? How should we conceive of feminist poetry’s bearing on “the matter of literary-theoretical ‘values’ and economic ‘value’,” and could this tell us anything useful about the lives and struggles of feminized and racialized people?

By way of making a suggestion about feminized poetry’s special powers in the sanitized world of political-aesthetic representation and so-called rationality, the main theoretical nodes I will turn to include the Marxist-feminist theory of “the abject” outlined above as a particular type of denaturalized, indirectly market-mediated activity necessary to capital’s pursuit of value-production, and Marina Vishmidt’s suggestion, drawing on Chris Arthur, of a counter-reproductive negativity. But let us first to turn to the poetry itself, which makes “negativity”—understood here as a kind of recalcitrance—more immediately visceral and affectively comprehensible than any abstract theory about reproduction or value.

In Ban en Banlieue, Kapil describes the scene of her childhood, the outskirts of London in the 1970s—“les banlieues,” as she calls them, in a pun both on her own name and

---


on the 2005 Paris race riots—and her person solidifies as a kind of outskirt too: “she’s both
dead and never living: the part, that is, of life that is never given: an existence.” “Ban,” for short, whose actions and feelings are often described in the third person, is the book’s protagonist. Ban, who is and is not Bhanu Kapil, is a British-Indian “immigrant” whose daily life is recorded via shifts between verbal registers and associative logical leaps. Often, the speaker’s mode is omniscient and philosophical, observing, for example, that “(Ban.)” is also “To be: ‘banned from the city’ and thus: en banlieues: a part of the perimeter,” or making brief remarks on the suburban landscape, noting, “A puff of diesel fumes on an orbital road,” or “The country outside London, with its old parks and labyrinths of rhododendron or azalea.” But this speaker periodically loses their opacity, becoming a more clearly defined, first-person subject: “Perhaps I should say that I grew up partly in Ruislip,” “I analyze my glimpse on the asphalt,” “In April 1979, I was ten years old,” Ban tells us, and the appearance of a Lyric “I” seems almost a surprise. Then come more explicit and complex desires and refusals: “I wanted to write a book about lying on the floor of England,” or “I hate white people. // That is another sentence.”

For Ban, the Punjabi subject of Ban en Banlieue, never-English despite being born in England, the life-shaping violence of white supremacy paradoxically resounds as a nebulous yet definitively historical tone, played out on a global and totalizing scale: a lived notation of punctuated assaults and droning background noise. This is achieved, in part, through the pragmatic and observational mode Kapil frequently employs, bolstered by factual elements such as dates, childhood ages, and geographical locations, but also through her references to other subjects whose lives are touched (though the poetry doesn’t explicitly note it) by capital’s secular tendencies toward structural unemployment and the production of surplus populations, and by the ascriptive processes that produce race. The book is dedicated, for example, to Blair Peach, an anti-racism campaigner who in 1979 was knocked unconscious and killed by the Metropolitan Police while protesting the white supremacist National Front

---

61 Kapil, Ban en Banlieue, 30.
62 Ibid., 41, 39.
63 Ibid., 34, 36-7.
64 Ibid., 42, 66.
65 The speaker asks, for instance: “What, for example, is born in England, but is never, not even on a cloudy day, English?” Kapil, Banlieue, 30.
in Southall, an immigrant suburb of west London. Later, Kapil describes a girl in New Delhi who was raped and left to die one night in December 2012, “about 10 minutes from the Indira Ghandi airport—the girl lay dying on the ground.”

Sometimes, subjects are introduced not as agents but via records of what has been done to them, as “our Gujarati and Kenyan neighbors” appear only as the victims of National Front youth league member Stephen Whitby’s racist morning pranks: “with regularity, he’d empty out the milk bottles [. . . ] filling them with an unrelenting supply of urine before putting them back on the step.” It is easy to imagine Stephen Whitby as any one of the white nationalist skinheads from the English Defence League, or the 2006 film This is England. And yet, while the anecdote directs sympathy towards the otherwise invisible recipients of Whitby’s bottled piss, Kapil pre-empts the potential condescension of (white) sympathy for these unknown-but-racialized victims by subsequently providing another painful anecdote:

Once, a man was beating his wife. Stephen Whitby climbed over the wall and banged his head on the window. He spat at the window then thumped it with his hand, screaming “You fucking Paki!” He screamed: “Go back home, you bleeding animal!” The man stopped beating his wife, then resumed.

In the fragmentary scattering of these people and events, and by complicating the conventional narratives of victimhood, Kapil spells out the ways in which the violence of a system produces—and is experientially absorbed by—the bodies of racialized and feminized individuals, and as Ban of the banlieue reaches across to other non-subjects, she is grammatically and syntactically produced as an opaque thing herself. The unstable removes between author, speaker, and subject mean that Ban frequently refers to herself in the third person, rhetorically separating her present self from what usually appears as her younger self. Often, these moments take on an air of innocent simplicity, as “Ban has tickets from the West End, and playbills,” or “Ban is lying in the dirt, all sticky from her ice,” or “Ban is nine. Ban is seven. Ban is ten. Ban is a girl walking home from school just as a protest starts to

---

66 Ibid., 25.
67 Ibid., 59.
68 Ibid.
But the speaker increasingly resembles an onlooker re-watching an inevitable tragedy unfold, especially because we learn of the affective frequencies of Ban’s marginalization before we learn many of the facts of her life. In a pivotal early moment of the book, Ban, “a brown [black] girl” is walking home from school when a race riot breaks out:

She orients to the sound of breaking glass, and understands the coming violence has begun. Is it coming from the far-off street or is it coming from her home? Knowing that either way she’s done for—she lies down to die. A novel is thus an account of a person who has already died, in advance of the death they are powerless. To prevent.\(^\text{70}\)

Contrary to the helplessness suggested by these lines, the recurring motif of the book—the “passive” act of lying down—implies something other than passive victimhood: insofar as the liberal ideal of individual agency is thrown out, so is the lie of meritocratic liberal progressivism, which never accounts for the ways gendered, racial and class violence undermine its bootstraps logic. Kapil’s reminder of this fact surfaces as another register of knowledge and a politicized reserve perhaps close to what Fred Moten—in his black optimist torquing of what Fanon calls the “impurity,” “flaw,” or deathly dimension of the colonized—characterizes as an epistemology shaped by “a certain reticence at the ongoing advent of the age of the world picture.”\(^\text{71}\)

“I am a mixture of dead and living things,” and “Almost but never quite dead,” Ban notes in a later refrain.\(^\text{72}\)

Most often, the speaker mentions that Ban is “lying down,” but sometimes—usually in what seems like the present, or recent past—it is “I lay down.” The act of lying (passively) or laying (actively) on the ground makes for an antagonism and refusal, especially given its place in the history of political protest and the recent significance of die-ins to protest the

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 44, 31.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{71}\) Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179. But Ban has a complex relationship to blackness: “She's a girl. A black girl in an era when, in solidarity, Caribbean and Asian Brits self-defined as black. A black (brown) girl encountered in the earliest hour of a race riot” (Kapil 30). As we have seen, the distinction of blackness is crucial for Afro-pessimist theorists—for whom blackness is “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way” (Sexton 23)—but also for a number of theorists, including José Muñoz, Sara Ahmed and Gayatri Spivak, who write about the specific marginalizations of brownness. See for starters: José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down,” Signs 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-688; Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; and Sara Ahmed, On Being Included (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2012).

\(^{72}\) Kapil, Ban en Banlieue, 82.
Iraq war, or the police killing of black people in the US. But lying down is also a feminized gesture, near-ubiquitous as a sign of feminine sexual passivity. In particular, the motif reflects Kapil’s longstanding concern with the normalization of rape in India, a pervasive problem deeply rooted in the country’s national history and exacerbated by colonialism. In 2013, writing of “another gang rape, on the outskirts of Gwalior” on her blog (a poetic work-in-progress in its own right, into which most of Ban en Banlieue was written before it was published in book form), Kapil describes

An epidemiology of violence. That I have written about elsewhere. The incidence of domestic/sexual violence within -- communities -- and not just: from the outside - - as race events -- violence that comes from people you do not know -- for me -- was the thing I wanted to think about for Ban. Though lately -- the violence that comes - - from nowhere -- from everywhere -- seems like the most frightening thing of all.

I wanted to write about the body -- that perceives -- the coming violence and responds to it -- before it has ever happened -- because it's going to happen -- and nothing can prevent that.

Ban lies down in the opening minutes of a riot. The aesthetics of lying or laying down, in their broad overtones of coincident meanings, begin to emerge as an affective counterposition to capital’s equally expansive systems of misogyny and racism: in Kapil’s words, “the violence that comes – from nowhere – from everywhere,” the type of subjectivizing violence that is always-already exerted such that “the body – that perceives – the coming violence and responds to it – before it has ever happened.”

In the same movement, Ban’s l(a)ying-down, as I will call it, seems to signal a desire to be close to the world, or get to know it, both in the matteral sense of land and

73 A few quintessential examples might include: the passive sexual “giving over” represented by Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita, Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, Mena Suvari’s American Beauty, the mise-en-scènes of Dolce and Gabbana advertisements, or the attitudes of Tiqqun’s Young Girl.

74 “Kali's Scream.”

75 Ibid.
landscape—the solid earth and its historicity—and in terms of the real abstractions of global capital that emerge from and determine this physical landscape. Because it can be all these things at once, l(a)ying down is a refusal and more: it is a powerful gesture of solidarity with the horizontal figures of abused and murdered women, with Blair Peach, with the child known as Ban, and with all those who bear the weight of (to quote another pointed metaphor) “the strength of the British Pound.” The gesture is only made more meaningful at the moment it is symbolically inverted, when “to lie down” becomes a euphemism for sex and the speaker asserts, “These are notes, so I don’t have to go there. I don’t have to lie down with you. And I don’t.” However plural its connotative powers, l(a)ying down is not so much a sit-in, more an emotional blockade.

There is much more to be said about Ban en Banlieue. But for the purposes of this chapter, I want to point out that because Kapil situates the intimacies of patriarchal violence on a global scale, and because rage in her work is both rooted in a subject and directed at a structure, configured through the act of l(a)ying down and the scene of the banlieue, the aesthetic experience of reading it—in Adornian terms, the mimetic process whereby the subject is drawn into the poem’s internal dynamics, in a “silent internal tracing of the work’s articulations,’ assimilating herself to the object’s form” might engender new, de-individualized ways of conceiving of patriarchal violence as intrinsic to the logic or history of capital, without losing sight of the very visceral and urgent points at which racialized and feminized people experience this physical and mental violence. Adorno’s thought is especially instructive here, because he highlights art’s capacity as a vehicle for what he calls “nature,” or “what is not human”:

With human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human. [...] Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpollated human intention. The latter is exclusively art’s vehicle. The more perfect the artwork, the more it

76 Kapil, Ban en Banlieue, 63.
77 Ibid., 62.
78 Nicholsen, quoted in Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, 99.
79 The question of “the possibility of locating gender and race as part of the abstract, logical, or ‘essential mechanisms’ of capitalism,” or pursuing, on the other hand, an analysis that aims instead “to incorporate these pervasive relations as aspects of capitalism’s historical and concrete unfolding” (Manning, n.p.) is a contentious topic of debate in Marxist-feminist theory at present, as some feminists seek to “delineate categories [of gender] that are as specific to capitalism as ‘capital’ itself.” See the discussion in Viewpoint magazine, “Gender and Capitalism: Debating Cinzia Arruzza’s Remarks on Gender.”
forsakes intentions. Mediate nature, the truth content of art, takes shape, immediately, as the opposite of nature.\(^{80}\)

At the same time, Adorno confirms the importance of the artwork’s affective bearing, noting the “disenchantment” of Brecht’s poetry. Here, disenchantment and aesthetic transcendence are both immanent to the poem’s “muteness,” a quality both attached to and disengaged from subjective expression:

In Brecht’s disenchanted poetry what is fundamentally distinct from what is simplistically stated constitutes the works’ eminent rank. [...] Aesthetic transcendence and disenchantment converge in the moment of falling mute: in Beckett’s ouvre. A language remote from all meaning is not a speaking language and this is its affinity to muteness. Perhaps all expression, which is most akin to transcendence, is as close to falling mute as in great new music nothing is so full of expression as what flickers out—that tone that disengages itself starkly from the dense musical texture—where art by virtue of its own movement converges with its natural element.\(^{81}\)

Of course, it is not that artworks have unmediated access to what Adorno here calls “nature”—“this instant is fully mediated,” he writes—but that their movement converges with nature. Elsewhere, he asserts that “one does not understand a work of art when one translates it into concepts … But rather when one is immersed in its immanent movement.”\(^{82}\) Muteness and movement, then, are forms of aesthetic abstraction that tell us something of the social whole (or in this particular formulation, nature). Recalling Jameson’s depiction of the postmodernist viewer who catches a glimpse not of Nature, but of Capital, I would suggest that we can replace “nature,” as it appears here in the German Romanticist sense, with the category of the abject, in its double-sided sense as a capitalist abstraction and a set of lived, concrete determinations. If we accept some version of the aesthetic concept of interpretive understanding that Adorno puts forward, is it possible that the movement of Kapil’s poetry, especially in its various qualities of muteness—the silences and refusals that emerge from its unfinished note-form, the gesture of lying down, or its bordering of


\(^{81}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{82}\) Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 97.
deathliness—might provide an aesthetic dimension able to deepen Marxist-feminism’s conception of “the abject,” both as a set of concrete determinations and as an abstract, capitalist category?

Before I try to answer that question, it seems relevant to note that *Ban en Banlieue* (and Kapil’s writing more broadly) does not suggest an immediate affinity with Marxist analysis. On the contrary, among the theorists named and pointedly scattered throughout the book—Henri Bergson, Elizabeth Grosz, and Melanie Klein appear prominently—Adorno is the only Marxist referenced, and then only by allusion to his work at its most abstractly philosophical, where he expounds upon ethical systems, domination, consciousness, and ontology through the trope of animals. As Kapil writes: “Adorno substituted people for animals; I feel cautious and sad reading his words in the middle of the night, studying the body for Ban. / Why? / “To reduce the living body.” [E. Grosz].”

Indeed, while Kapil’s citationally-suggestive renderings of “matter” deliberately avoid any fully-formed conceptualization, her references to Grosz’s *Becoming Undone* (2011) imply not the matter of historical materialism but of vitalist new materialism: “Here a person might BECOME not just through acts of descent or alliance (to read India through Grosz) but through the volume and scope of matter itself.”

Matter in this sense is a vital, evolutionary, transhistorical force whose agency extends beyond the human subject.

Reading literary texts in political distinction from or in opposition to the ostensible politics of their author is not a mode of reading “against the grain.” Thus it is not paramount to make an argument here about the (ir)relevance of authorial intention, or about the political and theoretical shortcomings of feminist new materialisms, which, in their accounts of the productive capacity of particulate matter, tend to make invisible the gendered subject of reproductive labour, the subject who most literally produces matter. But Kapil’s casual

---

84 Ibid., 72.
inclusion of certain proper names, standing in for decidedly anti-Marxist theoretical approaches, might be placed alongside the Buddhism prevalent across her work to highlight the marked *absence* of Marxist ideation in a book so concerned with the relations between structural, systemic violence and the experiential intimacies through which it is felt. Nevertheless, while the discursive markers of *Ban en Banlieue* might seem at odds with the value-theory influenced analysis from which this chapter takes its cues, I want to suggest that these new and substantially dialectical developments in Marxist-feminist thought could provide a more satisfying, systematic account of how and why feminized and racialized bodies are regulated, subjugated and subjectivised. The poles of antagonism and passivity, matter and abstraction, victim and aggressor, first- and third-person, spectacular and quotidian violence that *Ban en Banlieue* conflates so tellingly (and by necessity, unsystematically) in poetry are cloudy but dialectical tensions that Marxist-feminism needs to understand better. Could the analytical category of the abject help?

Recalling my earlier suggestion that the analysis set out by Endnotes might be amended to account for what I have called the foggier aspects of gendered abjection, it has become increasingly clear that Kapil’s poetry is in many ways an attempt to account for those aspects. To shift the conversation back onto the terms Endnotes advance, we might think of the abject component of social reproduction as a form of immaterial “non-labour” that must be made *doubly* invisible in order for the production of value to continue in the waged sphere. The abject is cut off from the social in a double-dissociation: not only is it deprived of social validation as waged labour, but it is also cast off from what is socially validated as non-labour, the mundane going-on of reproductive life—the time supposedly spent cooking, cleaning, washing, exercising etc.—that enables us to turn up at work each day. In proposing that we expand our definition of “the abject” as a Marxist-feminist category, I mean to include that which is not talked about openly: physical and mental activity that is relegated—as Kapil’s poetry suggests—to a feminized and/or racialized realm of secrecy, or otherwise casually framed as an illegitimate or irrational response to a social sphere of official “equality,” in a process involving, to borrow Angela McRobbie’s words, “a privatisation of grievances.”86 While Endnotes’ discussion of abject reproduction is mainly

---

limited to its existence as a gendered sphere, the category gains a crucial dimension of complexity and relevance when considered in relation to the lives and work of women of colour, and Kapil’s writing indicates exactly why this is so. Consider the following lines:

This is the snow: I think often about low-levels of racism, the very parts of a social system or institution that are hard to address, precisely because they are non-verbal—a greater trigger for schizophrenia in immigrant populations: in women, that is, than larger events, the race riot, for example, with its capacity: to be analyzed.\footnote{Kapil, \textit{Ban en Banlieue}, 48.}

This incompatibility with analysis seems a key characteristic of a racialized and gendered abject sphere. The non-verbal, as these lines imply, is a register that goes hand-in-hand not with the event, “the race riot, for example,” but with the perennial experiences of those forced to endure the volatile quotidian mix of racism, Islamophobia, sexism and misogyny emanating not only from the emasculated poverty of the white dispossessed, deindustrialized social landscape, but also downwards from the white, fearful middle-class, the very thing Westminster elites underestimated when they called the referendum that led to Brexit. Thus, Ban is repeatedly figured to the side of the race riot, not only because she is feminized (though to be sure, women who riot are often subject to discursive erasure or containment too) but also because she is brown in a world where race is often conceived in oppositional terms of black and white. It is hard to make non-events, the everyday resistances, visible to those who do not have to resist at all times. As Gayatri Spivak has shown, it is hard to make the structural violence of low-level racism visible to those who do not experience it.\footnote{See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” \textit{Diacritics}, 15, no. 4 (1985): 73-93.} It is hard to make the abject, the “dealing with,” visible to those who do not have to do it. It is hard or impossible to make these things visible, let alone understood in representational or economic terms.

In this expanded definition of “the abject,” the binary categories of naturalized and denaturalized labour that “The Logic of Gender” relies on don’t quite map the current shape and condition of abjection under capital, even as it is broadly introduced as “that which cannot be subsumed or is not worth subsuming.”\footnote{“Logic of Gender,” 86.} Nor is it easy to theorize the abject
within the parameters of economic analysis or according to a critique of the labour theory of value, given the need to be precise about what counts as labour (a need which Endnotes are quick to point out). What kind of work, or activity, is the abject, then, and how does it fit within contemporary versions of Marxist-feminist theories of social reproduction?

Perhaps it is possible, as Marina Vishmidt has suggested, to think about reproduction (and here ‘denaturalized’ and ‘abject’ activities seem particularly important) in terms of the negativity of the value-form as Chris Arthur has outlined it. Arthur points out that we might speak of waged labour not as “productive labour” but as “counterproductive labour,” given that workers are “actually or potentially recalcitrant to capital’s efforts to compel their labour.” In Arthur’s analysis, wage-labour is the only “contestable” factor in production: that is, unlike land, machinery, materials, it does not enter the production process with a given productive potential:

In its endeavour to organise production, and to maximise output, capital finds that it is confronted with a special difficulty: the residual “subjectivity” of the worker poses unique problems because it gives rise to a definite recalcitrance to being “exploited” which the other factors do not possess.

Thus, for Arthur, value is not simply a positive outcome of the production process, but the result of a process of negation whereby “capital can [only] produce value by winning the class struggle at the point of production,” or in other words, defeating workers and any subjective resistance they might have to the subsumption of their labour. This negation (by capital) of a negation (by the worker) turns the labour theory of value into a dialectic of negativity, and renders value contradictory, both positive and negative at once.

“But what happens,” asks Vishmidt, “if we think reproduction with or inside the social character of production which renders value contradictory, put reproduction into the term ‘counterproductive labour’?” In other words, what happens when we conceive of reproductive labour not as an outside or excess to the sphere of value-production (as Federici and Peter Linebaugh have optimistically proposed in terms of the commons, and as

---

91 Ibid.
Roswitha Scholz’s theory of gendered value-dissociation would hold\(^{93}\), but as a negative dialectic internal to capital and labour? In this case, would the abject constitute a doubly-invisible, non-verbal violence traced in our experience of reading certain feminist poetry? Is it possible to say that *Ban en Banlieue*, as an anti-representational document that speaks from the “non-verbal”—especially in Ban’s gesture of l(a)ying down—traces a form of activity that, while *not* labour, nevertheless still operates as counter-*reproductive* negativity within the value-form itself?

The exact nature of the relation between counterproduction and reproduction on the one hand, and activity and labour on the other, remains to be adequately theorized in Marxist-feminism. As Vishmidt—along with Endnotes, Zoe Sutherland, Kumkum Sangari, Delia D. Aguilar and others—has pointed out,\(^{94}\) the commodification of domestic labour under post-Fordism displaces this exploitation to a racialized and legalized class of low-waged women. Moreover, the complex shifts and recompositions of patriarchal relations along racial lines further complicates any theory of resistance to (or counter-reproductive negativity within) reproductive activities, since as Sangari explains:

> The market is not, after all, an unambiguous anti-traditional force that loosens familial patriarchal practices – it can also sustain, alter or resuscitate them; it may dissolve familial patriarchal practices to an extent but maintain or reinstate caste, ethnic and racial hierarchies that in turn depend on gendered subordination. The market and market-led states may not only have a stake in familial patriarchal regimes, but the market emancipation of some women may depend on the *continuation* of familial regimes elsewhere. Thus the question of location does not rest on an imperious world map of more or less patriarchal regions; rather, it is a material question of *differential and shifting patriarchal distributions*.\(^{95}\)

Moving the conversation to a global scale like this is a reminder that reproduction is inherently an affirmative process: it is the reproduction of the subject to be exploited or cast off by capital, the reproduction of gender, indeed, of the capital-labour relation in all its


\(^{95}\) Sangari, *Marxism and Feminism*, 278.
misery. And this is why Ban’s refusal, situated as it is in the global banlieue, seems such an accurate gesture of dialectical negation, one that parallels the movement of capital itself through reproduction, which is figured by Sangari in the following terms: “As the material base of patriarchies is patchily eroded or recomposed by state or market interventions, there is a concurrent mobilization and immobilization of women’s labour, a simultaneous move to defamilialize and refamilialize.” Thus, perhaps the symbolic category of the abject—as that which defies subject-object relations—can be put to more challenging dialectical work to examine more closely the forms of affective and intellectual activities that take place in the indirectly market-mediated sphere. In the process, the abject might also help us to address the limiting, historically imprecise, cis-sexist and heteronormative categories of Marxist-feminist analysis in order to think more critically about what kinds of subjects perform these types of activities. Such investigations would surely impact how we conceive of the boundaries and possibilities of dialectical reading and thinking, particularly in relation to processes of racial ascription, in a socially uneven global economy.

Audible Accumulation

Let us turn, finally, to the opening poem of Warren’s book, “Acting Out,” which attempts to bring abstract social relations into the realm of perception as real abstractions—a different project to that of the poets considered so far in this study, whose concerns about the late capitalist organization of social life—even when understood through the rubric of economic abstractions—mark poetic endeavours to trace capitalist abstractions through their palpable effects, or conversely, to trace the palpable effects of capitalist abstractions (the ambiguous overlapping of these two endeavours notwithstanding). This is not to suggest that poems are like Etch A Sketches, reducible to their ability to highlight an absent presence. While Catherine Wagner’s “My New Job” fearfully indexes the relations between constituted subject and constitutive conditions, and Dawn Lundy Martin’s attention to the box or frame of blackness suggests the real abstractions of racial ascription, both of these poets trace mediation through its sensation; they are focused ultimately on the effects of capitalist abstractions: indeed, this is a basis for their politics. On the other hand, “Acting Out” and other parts of Warren’s first full collection, Here Come the Warm Jets, enact a poetics

96 Ibid., 279.
that appears to resemble—or perhaps actually contributes to—a Marxian theory of form-determination and real abstraction in poetry. Warren approaches this task openly, often seeming to describe value’s form-determining action in direct language, yet in terms simultaneously more visceral, imaginative, and affective than the scientific analysis of *Wertkritik* or *Endnotes* (even if *Endnotes*, like Marx, purposely blur the boundary between science and the literary97). Consider the following lines, which comprise approximately the first quarter of the poem:

You begin from economic fact

You enter in overalls, a tart talisman
distinguished by what you do and how you go about doing it

You are a perceptible, finite and particular

part of the scaffolding

Your personal qualities should ideally be completely irrelevant

chains of forgetting

You arise therefore from your stomach and your imagination

You invite the little lady onstage

And run along the nerve from the base to its point in a flat arc

You are whatever you can afford and arrange,

Wherever you can imagine to appear

You are this third thing

fixed only in the variety of your manifestations

a universe of meaning, value and practice\textsuperscript{98}

Of course, “Acting Out” is not a detailed or systematic account of how value dominates and form-determines social relations. But neither does this poem adhere to the division between the aesthetic and the scientific that Toscano appears to uphold when he notes that “making the invisible visible and making the invisible known are not necessarily coterminous activities.”\textsuperscript{99}

Indeed, this split is troubled on several levels by Warren’s poem, but most immediately by the resemblance of its “argument”—put forth both through its formal articulations and referential content—to the value-form theory outlined earlier in this chapter. First, the poem’s object “begin[s] from economic fact,” where the preposition “from” conveys a direction, suggesting that we start with “economic fact”; before launching into a sarcastic imitation of the individualism of the contemporary liberal subject, “distinguished by what you do and how you go about doing it.” Interestingly, the following phrase is separated mid-clause—in the middle of a noun phrase, even—by a line break placing the words, “You are a perceptible, finite and particular” on a line of their own. Not only does this choice semantically suggest, through the shift from adjective to noun that accompanies the notion of being “a perceptible,” that the “you” of the poem is an isolable particular; it also creates a move that, in transitioning from the neatly mirrored scansion of “You are a perceptible, finite and particular” to the deliberately tacked-on phrasal finish, “part of the scaffolding,” in the following line, feels unnaturally clunky.

Insofar as this awkwardness syntactically interrupts the easy sarcasm that continues in the following line—“Your personal qualities should ideally be completely irrelevant / chains of forgetting”—its formal disruption functions in tandem with the conceptual arrangements of the poem to close the distance between essence and appearance, making the “appearance” suddenly feel somehow wrong, or unbalanced. Thus, a sense of an individual subject as a (mere) perceptible—combined with the grammatical riff on a lack of perceptibility, of simultaneously being “a-perceptible”—resonates both with a Hegelian logic of moments and with the Marxian theory of systematic dialectics explored in Chapter One:

\textsuperscript{98} Alli Warren, “Acting Out,” \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets} (San Francisco: City Lights, 2013), 1.

\textsuperscript{99} Toscano, “Materialism Without Matter,” 1236.
indeed, the image of systematic dialectics and its movement hangs over the idea of “irrelevant” personal qualities placed along “chains of forgetting” as so many a-perceptible moments of a dialectic, or the movement of capital constantly renewing itself.

No intimate knowledge of value-form theory is necessary to see how the distance of mediation—the space in which real abstractions exert their form-determining force—is perhaps the object that “Acting Out” frustratively yearns to describe. Yet as we have seen, such an inchoate thing as a real abstraction is a tough target, its internal workings notoriously difficult to characterize even in theoretical works. What can a poem possibly add to these systematic and logical critiques?

In a certain respect, “Acting Out” works to highlight poetry’s ambivalent relation to the science of a project like value-form theory: the weird asynchrony, for example, between the Fordist connotations of “overalls” (which could synecdochally suggest the commodity labour-power) on the one hand, and the magical properties of a talisman charm on the other, may bring to mind Marx’s many satirical invocations of the “magical” qualities of the commodity, its “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”100—a characterization that might also invoke the Baroque idea of poetry as an art of fantastic conceits, elevated beauty, and hyperbole. Yet at the same time, if the poem hints at a recognition of its own commodified status, this would only seem to confirm that the conceit of “Acting Out” is its attempt to name real abstraction, or rather its force, a conceit which becomes even clearer when we reach the lines,

You are whatever you can afford and arrange,

Wherever you can imagine to appear

You are this third thing

fixed only in the variety of your manifestations

Effects and sensations are arbitrary here: they are reduced to superfluous “third” things, appearances, a variety of manifestations, and to the individual’s purchasing-power, of which imagination is merely an equivalent. In “a universe of meaning, value and practice,” the last

100 Marx, Capital, Vol. I, 163.
In seeking to get at the immanent structural relations of global capital, then, does this poem not seek to make the invisible (and not only its effects) known, to some extent? The lyric strategy of “Acting Out,” its attempt to grasp the process of form-determination by poetically naming it, describing its workings, “calling it out,” perhaps, could be read as an attempt to enter the space of mediation itself. It is indeed a kind of acting out—a phrase most commonly associated, in the pharmaceutical age, with undesirable or problematic behaviour on the part of mental-health sufferers. Warren’s “you” is ontologizing and accusatory:

You are the clause built into the law

significant, fungible and durable

[…]

You are the amalgamation of your conceptions

and their consequences

You are the structures you live by

and act unfettered against anything
detrimental to your interests

You are the bean eaters
couched in productive forces
You are the humming cycle of land under your feet\textsuperscript{101}

Yet, unlike Lisa Robertson’s startling 2009 poem, “Wooden Houses”—to which “Acting Out” bears an obvious likeness insofar as many of its melodic lines are also composed as statements about an unnamed “You”\textsuperscript{102}—Warren’s “you” is not aimed at the figure of a lover, nor even necessarily a real or imagined subject. Rather, this “You” is always exchangeable. Warren’s reference to “the bean eaters” recalls Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem, from the 1960 book of the same name, about an old, poignantly ordinary (and from capital’s point of view, replicable) couple, their modest rented home and monotonous daily routine. The line, “Your desire is elemental and abundant,” invoking the idea of jouissance still so central to much feminist writing (notably, for example, in Maggie Nelson’s 2015 MacArthur prize-winning poetic memoir, \textit{The Argonauts}), is rendered here as form-determined by value, as a moment of appearance in the reproduction of capital. Even as the poet appears to turn on herself in the line, “You are accused of being a lyric poet,” the accusation holds little chastising power because its absurdity inheres partly in the implication that this lyric poet is exchangeable for any other “You” named here. As Warren assures us, when the poem folds to a close, “You are not so different as a mastiff is from a greyhound / a spaniel from a shepherd’s dog” – the point being, of course, that these are different dogs only at the level of appearance.\textsuperscript{103}

It is fair to say that Warren’s attempt to enact a more immediate engagement with the problem at hand—the problem of representing value in poetry—is somewhat successful, and refreshingly so because “Acting Out” suggests another way to theorize the value-form and its effects. In describing the abstractions arising from value and their plasticizing actions, Warren wants to feel them, as well as systematize them. In this way her poem attempts to bypass figuration—which is to say, representation—and shifts the idea of what counts as knowledge to include linguistic affect in that category. “Acting Out” thus provides a theory of a theory, deeply political in its desire to expose the non-human culprit of our unevenly-shared misery. Like a systematic dialectic, the poem’s form, content, and tone are categorial moments of a synchronic whole.

\textsuperscript{101} Warren, “Acting Out,” \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets}, 2.

\textsuperscript{102} Lisa Robertson, “Wooden Houses,” \textit{Magenta Soul Whip} (Toronto: Coach House, 2009), 39-44.

\textsuperscript{103} Warren, “Acting Out,” \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets}, 2.
Impressively, “Acting Out” strikes a careful balance between a sense of the rolling inevitability of structural relations—the “durable” “clause built into the law”—and the radical contingency implicit in the proposition that the individual “you,” while enclosed by value, is in fact only an “amalgamation” of thought, and the concrete effects of thought—“conceptions / and their consequences.” Rather than a fatalistic sense of historical determinism, this naming act seems to imply that capitalism was never the natural, inevitable form of human relations that contemporary “common-sense” would have us believe. And yet: under capital, mediation never falls away. Warren’s point, in part, is that we cannot think outside of abstractions, and she does not propose herself as an exception. Rather, “Acting Out” seems to hang suspended in this deadpan dilemma, and despite Warren’s ambition to access form-determining structures beyond the category of the experiential, her poem ultimately stages the limit to that project: if capital really does operate through real abstractions, through the life process of individuals “as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially […] independent of their will,” then we cannot think outside of it. The poem cannot see capital from outside of capital, nor from a better viewpoint, and not only because capital is too vast and complex to cognitively map, but because the consciousness required to do such a thing could only ever be produced out of a revolutionary process of material acts.

Thus, the tone of “Acting Out” captures a sense of being ruled by abstractions: the inaction of its closing line—“Your engine went by at 6 o’clock, your cab went by at 9”—is a mise-en-scène of blocked agency. Perhaps, in this way, the poem’s taciturn repetitions, detached yet depressed, index the tension between capital’s supposed “neutrality” on the one hand, and its compulsion to impose differentials across the social and to police these representations of difference, on the other. But Here Come the Warm Jets is far from joyless. Its many playful, humorous moments—a friend called Swamp-face, peppy lines like “I see that Finnish motherfucker / Shoeless Big Country / shameless i in a tree hut,” or the poker-faced sarcasm of “Astrology is real”104—are negatively bound into a variegated critical journey around the many particulars of a US-based life, where poems with titles like “Hide the Poor,” “Can I Prevent My Wages from Being Garnished,” and “My Factless Autobiography” feature a speaker both weighed down by complicity and aware of how

104 Warren, “Let Them Run in Cotton” and “Personal Poem,” in Here Come the Warm Jets, 75, 95.
boring the theme of the (usually white, heterosexual, cis-gendered) complicit individual can be. In place of another such story, Warren’s poetry might be some kind of an answer to Toscano’s question about the nature of invisible real abstractions. As Toscano puts it,

The character of that invisibility varies. Are we speaking of a form, a force, a structure? And could we not say that the problem of representing capital is much better framed as a problem about the representation of a metamorphosis, the sequence and syncopation of value forms, than it is in terms of an absent structure?  

Indeed, it is not the experience of abstract value-forms, but the active process of value-forming that a poem like “Acting Out” seeks to formally describe rather than index; and Toscano’s conception of value’s form-determining processes as a syncopated movement suggests how useful the rhythmic dimensions of poetry might be to any effort to think the “metamorphosis” of value.

As we saw in Chapter Three, the catachrestic use of congealing metaphors, astutely traced by Sianne Ngai through both Marx’s and Rob Halpern’s work, is one aesthetic strategy that attempts to capture the simultaneously spectral and plasticizing character of capitalist abstractions. But for all its compositional understatement—*Here Come the Warm Jets* features many brief, New York School-style poems, often made up of short, cute lines and littered with quotidian epithets—perhaps Warren’s work attempts a more ambitious task: it wants to name value’s systemic, form-determining process, its self-reproduction, both its internal and external workings. What to make, then, of the vague and ostentatiously-mediated sense of the pastoral that imbues several poems dotted across the book? In “Sensorium,” we find “the cesspool cleaner and the ceruse-maker,” who “market their bodies and call the return”:

They get for it their wages  
They produce corn, wine, clothes and shoes,  
and build themselves houses

[...]

---

105 Toscano, “Materialism Without Matter,” 1236. Toscano continues, “but perhaps the thorniest problems that such a materialism without matter raises, which leads us back from abstraction towards praxis, is: *whom* is this visibility for?”
For food they serve splendid cakes and loaves and sit down to feast
with their children
And they have wine to drink too

So they lead a peaceful healthy life, and die at a ripe old age
bequeathing a similar way of life to their children

And repeat the process often in the hour of the sun\textsuperscript{106}

Ceruse, an Elizabethan cosmetic used as a skin-whitener, is famous today for containing poisonous white lead. Thus the ceruse-maker stands anachronistically next to the cesspool cleaner, before the poem proceeds to move through the categories of the market, of bodies and labour-power, wages and production. The embers of feudalism seem to have not quite faded, and biblical undertones emerge through the poem’s prayer-like rhythms, its breath-lines, its “loaves,” “feast,” “wine,” and “hour of the sun.” The outdated language of terms like “splendid” or “ripe old age” nostalgically evokes the affective customs of a previous generation. More than anything else, this combination of old-fashioned commodity production and pastoral setting has the effect of creating multiple temporalities whose interference resonates both across the book and within the poem itself. “Sensorium” begins with a suggestion of the modern division of labour, as “The figure must be a professional at the call of his job.” Elsewhere, we find less supposedly wholesome things: “a variety of delicacies, scents, perfumes, call-girls, / and confectionary.”

But if this kitschy mash-up technique marks Warren’s attempt to capture the long arc of capitalism, what ultimately emerges is an achingly humanist temporality, the kind of subjective and existential historical time that Jameson, and Lesjak after him, theorize by invoking the tripartite scheme of Fernand Braudel’s history of the Mediterranean: “the longue durée of geological time, then the middle time of the waxing and waning of institutions, and finally the short durée of historical events.”\textsuperscript{107} The old-fashioned “narrative history” of events and anthropomorphic characters, Jameson explains, is “how human beings will periodize

\textsuperscript{106}Warren, “Sensorium,” Here Come the Warm Jets, 10.
\textsuperscript{107}Fredric Jameson, Valences, 532.
[...] and transform these multitudinous realities into a narrative they can remember, a narrative on the scale of their own temporal existences.”\textsuperscript{108} Crucially, as Lesjak highlights,

The incommensurability between different temporalities, between geological and subjective time, the cosmological and the existential, marks the site, or rather, lack of a site, where time itself, which is also now seen to be inseparably connected to space, is expressed. [...] These discordances also point to one of the dialectic’s basic forms: namely, “the way that success brings failure, winner loses, and good fortune brings all kinds of new problems which in the end may well prove fatal.”\textsuperscript{109}

This takes us back to the argument for dialectical reading made in Chapter One, where extending the frame of time to allow for a “holding open of negativity,”\textsuperscript{110} and a refusal to resolve the contradictions thrown up by the interference of multiple temporalities, is key to apprehending the radical unknowability of the world through spatial dialectics (in Jameson’s argument, these intersections and their discordances are what allow Time and History to appear\textsuperscript{111}). As Lesjak and Jameson argue, this way of apprehending time implies a form of knowing that “no longer relies on self-reflexivity,” which is to say, on the self-consciousness of the individual. In Jameson’s words, “to the old non-reflexive I or ordinary consciousness there is added something else, which allows us to grasp that former non-reflexive self as itself an object within a larger field.”\textsuperscript{112}

It is therefore highly significant that theories of form-determination and real abstraction point to the same possibility, explaining how social forms—which is to say, Time and History—arise from the actions of individuals “as they really are,” to repeat Marx’s formulation from the \textit{German Ideology}: “i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will.” The point is also that these abstractions arise independent of consciousness. Warren appears to know this too, not only in the frustrated undertaking of “Acting Out” but

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 541.  
\textsuperscript{109} Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” 259-60.  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 260.  
\textsuperscript{111} Jameson, \textit{Valences}, 543.  
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 69.}
in the ending of her faux-pastoral poem, which, noting its own subjective and existential limits, appears to feel the guilt (and fear) of its own humanism:

And repeat the process often in the hour of the sun

And various country dishes

And what sorts of things are to be feared

To carry arms and ride\textsuperscript{113}

\textbf{Coda}

Like many contemporary works by feminist-identified and feminized poets, \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets} is not a declaratively feminist book. Its most dramatically gendered moments are jolting in their casual arrival. In a poem surreptitiously titled “A Practice Known as Churning,” Warren writes,

\begin{quote}
There in the alley we converse
Idris his love of fresh skin
Ted his disdain for women
Their lack of banking
Terrence and Will their concern
for purity of pussy\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

Yet the sardonic understatement of these lines is perhaps in keeping with the political trajectory of a book whose feminism emerges more as part of a comprehensive and integrated effort to arrive at an enlarged historical consciousness, one able to conceive of a heterogeneous, unknowable totality; the effort, as Jameson puts it, to grasp a former non-

\textsuperscript{113} Warren, “Sensorium,” \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets}, 10.

\textsuperscript{114} Warren, “A Practice Known as Churning,” \textit{Here Come the Warm Jets}, 66.
reflexive self—such as the “You” of “Acting Out”—as itself an object within a larger history. In this schema, misogyny appears as an endless, diversifying, changeable stream of constitutive moments in the reproduction of capital.

We could therefore point to a singular commonality between Warren’s and Kapil’s poetry, since it is possible to consider both *Here Come the Warm Jets* and *Ban en Banlieue* as efforts to overcome the limit-point encountered by any attempt to situate oneself within a structure only knowable through the medium of its effects. In this regard, I think it is possible to conceive of Kapil’s poetry moving “inwards” toward the internal negativity of the value-form, and Warren’s poetry moving “outwards” towards abstraction, in an effort to go further than Cremonini, to not only paint the relations but to describe their workings—to make the invisible known, as Althusser would put it. Of course, in the same dialectical breath one could say that Kapil’s writing radiates “outwards,” towards other persons who find themselves placed somewhere along the scale of the socially-mediated category of relative surplus population, and that Warren’s attempt to render intelligible value’s form-determining dynamics falters at the border of its own hermeneutic—which is to say, cognitive—limits, thus turning “inwards” on itself.

The meeting point of Kapil’s and Warren’s poetry, then, is the value-form. Kapil’s focus at the level of the abject involves a verbal and non-verbal, anti-representational, messy poetics of the global banlieue. This is a poetics which, in view of the expanded definition of the abject theorized earlier, indexes the doubly-dissociated, counter-reproductive underside of value: a counter-reproductive negativity within the value-form itself, the negativity Elson acknowledges when she notes that abstract labour is the only form of labour reflected in the universal equivalent. Warren’s attempt to “think” a Marxian theory of form-determination and real abstraction in poetry takes aim, instead, at what it knows to be value’s illusory independence and consequent form-determining capacity. But both poets suggest a recalcitrance that must be defeated by capital, not, as Arthur has it, at the point of production, but through the category of the abject: a category which, as we saw in Chapter Three, is not meted out to individual subjects, but mediates a diverse set of relationships to the wage across populations. This process necessitates differential and shifting patriarchal,

---

115 Ruth Jennison’s essay, “29 | 73 | 08: Poetry, Crisis, and a Hermeneutic of Limits” is instructive here as it points to how poetry as a form of mediation “encodes in its forms and contents a vast array of ‘limits to capital’,” including those “spatial and temporal barriers to the valorization of capital.”
white supremacist, colonialist and heteronormative relations. As Elson reminds us, even waged individuals “can’t just choose anything, are unable to re-invent the world from scratch, but must choose from the alternatives presented to them.”

Thus, my claim is not that poems perform a scientific analysis of the value-form and abstraction, but that they suggest, in an age where the internal contradictions of modern commodity society, and their unsustainability, remain as stark as ever, both the existence, and something of the character, of these internal contradictions. The poetry presented here performs a curious task in this sense. Consider that task next to the project of value-form theory, summarized here by Elba as a theoretical practice of “form development”:

Form-analysis develops these forms (such as value, money, capital, but also law and the state) from the contradictory conditions of the social constitution of labor, “clarifies them, grasps their essence and necessity.” Form development is not to be understood as the retracing of the historical development of the object, but rather the conceptual deciphering of the immanent structural relationships of the capitalist mode of production. It unscrambles the apparently independent, apparently objectively grounded forms of social wealth and the political compulsion of the capitalist mode of production as historically specific and therefore—albeit in no way arbitrarily or in a piecemeal manner—as changeable forms of praxis.\textsuperscript{116}

In many ways, contemporary feminized poetry pursues what Elba might call “the conceptual deciphering of the immanent structural relationships” of capital, where, following our analytical journey through Elson’s value theory of labour, and the elaborations provided by feminized poetry to Endnotes’ theory of the abject, those relationships come to mean much more than the readily classifiable capitalist forms listed by Elba. But the poetry in this study also discloses an awareness, often at the most abstract level, of the essential illusion of capitalism. In this work, too, capitalist forms of social wealth and its impersonal compulsions come to appear anything but “independent.”

Bibliography


Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Art and Answerability*. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1990.


Di Prima, Diane. Dinners and Nightmares (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1998 (1961)).


Villaneuva, R.A. Twitter Post, October 9, 2015, 8:50 a.m. https://twitter.com/caesura.


