Senseless Violence? Fiction and Feeling in Contemporary America

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ABSTRACT

"Senseless Violence" analyzes depictions of violence in contemporary American fiction that refuse to offer an ethical payoff, social critique, or cathartic release. Critics tend to focus on representations of violence that have straightforwardly political intentions, such as those in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. As Wright himself explains in the essay "How Bigger Was Born," his protagonist's violent behavior is best understood as a symptom of the racism and misogyny of American culture. The kind of violence represented in *Native Son* has shaped the broader discussion of representations of violence in relationship to marginal identities. However, many representations of violence in African-American, feminist, and queer literature and art make no sense in a social or political context. Critical emphasis on social and political context, moreover, has foreclosed other important aspects of literary violence, particularly the emotional work such representations have historically done.

By depicting scenes of violence that defy familiar kinds of interpretive closure, texts by Toni Morrison, Kara Walker, Kathy Acker, Riot Grrrl artists, and James Baldwin are freed from overdetermined readings that link marginalized identity formations to predictable kinds of meaning. These texts, I argue, point us toward the volatile relationship between representations of violence and affects including disgust, shock, and shame. Senseless violence in minority fiction highlights the risk inherent in expecting representations of violence to provoke predictable emotions or do straightforward ideological work. By examining texts that refuse to let violence play a predictable ideological role, my project complicates the distinction between representations and acts

of violence and between literary and visual representation. Senseless violence thus marks the space where affect's precognitive, biological jolt meets emotion's unavoidable social determinism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction

The term "senseless violence" typically emerges in political or media conversations about random acts of violence with no discernable rationale—violence for violence's sake. President Obama, for example, has referred to the Charlie Hebdo attack of January 2015 and terrorist attacks in London and Benghazi as acts of "senseless violence."[1] This designation, which the President has also used to describe the Holocaust,[2] accomplishes a number of rhetorical objectives: it can suggest the incomprehensible awfulness of an act of violence; it can sidestep legal terminology that might prompt particular behavior (calling the Benghazi attacks "senseless violence" is a way to avoid calling them "terrorism"); it can obscure possible motivations of perpetrators, or suggest that such motivations cannot justify or adequately explain an act of violence; and finally, perhaps inadvertently, the term necessarily suggests that some acts of violence are comprehensible, rational, or necessary. A wide range of violent acts can be explained through moral, political, or pragmatic appeals—naming an act of violence "senseless," therefore, is never an objective claim about the fixed characteristics of a given act, but instead is a rhetorical gesture that makes implicit claims about the circumstances under which violence is justifiable or explainable.

In its everyday use, "senseless violence" can mean almost anything. It is precisely the simultaneous familiarity and ambiguity of the term that makes it useful for articulating a literary strategy that relates to interpretations of violence and the politics of representation. "Senseless violence" is, like race, gender, and sexuality, a floating

signifier: its meaning takes shape in relation to broader social and emotional frameworks of intelligibility. In contemporary American fiction, for example, categories of identity profoundly shape the meanings imputed to representations of violence. For most readers of American literature, violence inflicted on or by a racial or sexual minority must necessarily make some kind of statement about that identity formation, or about racial or sexual politics. For marginalized bodies, according to this line of thought, violence is always interpretable.

This project considers literary representations of senseless violence, focusing on aesthetic strategies writers and artists use to obscure motivation or foreclose interpretation of violent acts. The writers in this project thus refuse familiar interpretive impulses that try to make sense of literary violence by seeing it, for example, as evidence of stereotypes or other acts of symbolic violence, as a metaphor for structural injustice, as an act of witnessing, as a working-through of historical trauma, as an imaginative act of resistance against oppression, or as an appeal to readers' sympathies, one that would open their eyes to previously ignored suffering. In each of these instances, representations of violence are understood as primarily ideological or political. They may either reinforce or subvert the dominant power structure, but their meaning is primarily in relation to that power structure. The texts in this dissertation use absurd, non-cathartic, or arbitrary acts of violence to work through and comment on this interpretive habit, and to emphasize other ways we might make sense of violence beyond ideology critique. Instead of uniformly executing the same aesthetic strategies of senselessness, each work in the dissertation raises questions about the limits of sense-making.

Literary representations also raise important questions about the role of affect in texts and in readers. The stakes of analyzing fictional violence are different from the stakes of analyzing real-world violence; though "representations" are part of reality and "reality" is mediated through representation, there are still distinctions between real and represented violence. Fictional violence can allow readers to interact with violent representations without necessarily considering them through a lens of real human suffering. Organized around different affective responses to literary violence, this dissertation builds on Marco Abel's claim that represented violence can exert affective force independent of its relationship to real-world violence (xi). Literary violence is thus not merely depicting violence, but also provoking, repelling, or captivating readers in an aggressive way.

In order to articulate the critical paradigm "senseless violence" rebels against, I take *Native Son* as a paradigmatic example of "intelligible" violence. Debates around the novel's violence exemplify the critical impulse to make sense of violence in terms of either real-world violence or the politics of representation. Indeed, Wright himself anticipates, and perhaps shapes, such an impulse in his discussion of the novel entitled "How Bigger Was Born." The very title of the essay indicates an impulse to explain Bigger Thomas, *Native Son*'s protagonist, according to a causal logic that locates his violent behavior in social inequality. Bigger is "produced" by his environment; his behavior is a result and a symptom of the oppression and violence of Jim Crow. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright describes five "Biggers" who influenced the character he created; each of these Biggers, Wright explains, "were the only Negroes I know of who

consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least, for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken" (437). Violence is at the heart of the environment that produces a Bigger Thomas; Wright attempts to show that, rather than being "organically bad" (437), violent, anti-social black men like Bigger are forged in the crucible of totalizing repression that is underwritten by the constant threat of violence.[3] To be anti-social in the Jim Crow era is to be against a society that hates you. By writing Bigger's rage and violence, Wright diagnoses the hatred and violence directed toward black life that shapes American culture. Even though Bigger's first murder is accidental, Wright intends it to be read not as a meditation on the arbitrariness of violence, but as a critique of the social structure that puts Bigger in a particular relationship to Mary and structures the subsequent events after he accidentally strangles her.

As a communist, Wright felt a responsibility to advance his political beliefs without simply toeing the party line. In writing *Native Son*, he attempted to convey the "political impulses felt by the reader in terms of Bigger's daily actions, keeping in mind as I did so the probable danger of my being branded as a propagandist by those who would not like the subject matter" (452). In addition to aligning his critique of racial injustice with communist ideology, Wright also attempted "to show what oppression had done to Bigger's relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the

oppressor" (452-3). *Native Son* has explicit political goals, even though Wright avoids writing propaganda. Violence plays a central role in articulating the novel's politics. More to the point, the question of senselessness and sense-making is central to the way violence articulates politics in the novel. As Ira Wells points out, "many of Wright's contemporaries . . . were appalled by the text's matter-of-fact portrayal of brutal violence, daunted by a protagonist whose behavior and motivation seemed beyond comprehension, and offended by the suggestion that American society was to blame for the pathological nihilism bodied forth in Bigger Thomas" (874). Explaining violence that seems "beyond comprehension," *Native Son* literally diagnoses the social world that leads to Bigger's violent behavior when it ends with Max's defense of Bigger in trial. Wright portrays seemingly senseless or incomprehensible violence in order to subsequently make sense of it for readers.

What we see in the discourse around *Native Son*'s violence is a debate about senselessness and sense-making, one in which making sense of Bigger's violence is a political as well as aesthetic project. Wright makes sense of senseless violence via an investment in the politics of representation and a belief that representations of violence in African American writing are directly related to the social world. Inevitably, critics of the novel's violence fall in one of two camps: Bigger either "achieves self-recognition and affirms his human identity" or he merely embodies "stereotypes of African American men and exaggerate[s] their misogyny" (Takeuchi 56). This kind of framework for understanding violence in African American literature, I argue, pervades critical approaches to writing by racial or sexual minorities. Moreover, this critical paradigm,

while it has been crucial for recognizing and articulating networks of violence that have historically failed to register as such, can ignore other modes of representing violence and marginality. Jodi Melamed contends that *Native Son* is emblematic of a damaging mode of reading representations of race that arose after World War II. This approach to "race novels" aligned with a formation of U.S. global dominance and structural inequality that lurked behind an avowed anti-racism. Works including *Native Son* were part of a "race novel discourse" that "secured the enduring trope of the damaged black psyche, of African Americans as victims psychically wounded by racism" (24). Melamed claims that "race novel discourse" stood in for, and thus silenced, debates about structural inequality that enacted what Žižek refers to as objective violence;[4] her discussion of *Native Son*, however, also indicates the limiting frameworks that prescribe what violence can do in fiction by racial and sexual minority writers.

Authors render violence senseless through aesthetic strategies that foreclose ideological interpretations. Scenes of senseless violence, which are unmotivated, random, amoral, or non-cathartic, often prompt a hermeneutic impulse (readers want to interpret them through moral, political, or ideological lenses) while also preventing such an interpretation. Strategies include Kara Walker's silhouettes, Morrison's figurative language and narrative withholding, Kathy Acker's collage and "cut up" writing, and James Baldwin's narrative point-of-view. Although the chapters that follow will implicitly consider the relationship between subjective and objective violence, the violent acts I analyze are all clearly recognizable *as* violence: discrete acts that result in bodily injury. I seek to complicate a critical paradigm that interprets such representations of

subjective violence as illuminations of real-world, often objective violence. When, for example, a tunnel collapses during an impromptu protest in *Sula*, readers are encouraged to see social critique in a violent accident (162). Although the tunnel's collapse may be understood as unmotivated, arbitrary, or without an intentional actor, the novel associates this scene of violence with the town's racist hiring practices, offering a metaphorical connection that illustrates structural violence. Indeed, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many readers will be more attuned to the ways accidents, natural disasters, or other instances of "senseless" violence are enabled or exacerbated by social inequality. Thus, my discussion of violent scenes is in conversation with issues of structural and symbolic violence.

A number of critical approaches have offered alternative understandings of literary violence. Psychoanalysis has long understood subjectivity itself to be grounded in violence. Freud's theory of the death drive suggests that the psyche contains destructive, violent impulses, and his emphasis on chaotic, irrational parts of human subjectivity have profoundly shaped modern understandings of the self and subsequent psychoanalytic investigations of violence. Recent approaches to literary violence that emerge from psychoanalysis relate it to trauma or melancholia. Trauma theory imagines literary texts as spaces to witness or work through personal and historical trauma (Felman, *Testimony*, xv). Indeed, narrative can "serve a palliative role in the healing process" (Horvitz 6). "Fictional characters," Horvitz explains, "experience trauma and, subsequently, as a self-protective response, repress its memories" (10). Readers are then able to see into the characters' experience of repression while also recognizing the trauma they are

repressing. Thus, for trauma theorists, literary violence offers a kind of surrogate experience for readers, one that can intersect with readers' own potential trauma. At the very least, the form of the novel, trauma theorists would say, is well-suited to the ultimately political work of witnessing personal or historical trauma, employing aesthetic strategies that mirror the psychoanalytic process of "working through" (Freud). Writers can represent violent experiences, claim trauma theorists, through gaps, silences, and projections, and readers can locate repressed trauma through interpretive strategies that read between the lines. By "witnessing" personal or historical traumas, fiction can take the political action of marking under-acknowledged or private violence *as* violence—standing witness to the suffering of Holocaust victims, claiming as real the private trauma of sexual abuse, or imaginatively reconstructing the horror of slavery.

Likewise, the constituting violence of human sexuality informs queer theory, and melancholia has been a key concept for theorists including Judith Butler and David Eng. By diagnosing the self-alienation of racial and sexual otherness in the vocabulary of melancholia, these theorists reframe an ostensibly universal experience of loss to articulate the specific losses that shape subaltern identity. Another vein of queer theory, characterized as "queer negativity," understands certain forms of violence to do the valuable work of deconstructing repressive social norms.[5] In each chapter, I engage with Leo Bersani's foundational contribution to queer negativity, his theory of "self-shattering" (1987). Although Bersani tends to think of violation in terms of abjection and its deconstructive effects on individuals' sense of themselves as stable, rational, and self-enclosed, he places his psychoanalytic approach to sexual penetration in the historical

context of the AIDS crisis, emphasizing the way ideology—heteronormativity, of course, but also broader beliefs about masculinity, the coherent self, and the generative forward-march of human society—enacts violence against queer people. Even as the body count ticked higher, the AIDS crisis was largely unrecognized as an effect of objective violence. The violence enacted by Reagan's inaction regarding AIDS, shored up by broader disgust at queer sex, and even broader beliefs about what sex should be, is non-obvious, leading Bersani to explicate these policy decisions and moral beliefs *as* violence. I found myself returning to the concept of self-shattering in each chapter of the dissertation, and as I considered the gender implications of Bersani's theory, its relationship to shame and abjection, and the alternative ways of being it could offer, I realized that self-shattering raises questions about violence and marginal identity, and that "Is the Rectum a Grave?" points toward the weird, singular, emotional particularities that are rarely accounted for in critiques of systemic violence. I hope, particularly in the dissertation's final chapter, to build on Bersani's work (and critiques of it, particularly by Jack Halberstam and Robert-Reid Pharr) as I trace what I call an affective logic of violence.

Bersani is not the only thinker to understand violence as annihilating subjectivity, at least temporarily. Elaine Scarry understands torture as an act of "deconstruction," which shares some characteristics with the familiar definition of that term—revealing breaks in meaning and discontinuities of representation—but also describes "a situation where the body so engulfs consciousness that the created world is finally blocked out, unraveled, destroyed" (Morris 145). The extreme pain of torture annihilates the lenses of

consciousness that otherwise filter and constitute any embodied experience of the world. Scarry describes a disconnect between the language of violence and the experience of pain that results from it: she claims that pain can be more successfully conveyed to an audience by describing the act of violence causing pain than by attempting to describe the feeling of pain itself (16). Our inclination to describe the feeling of pain by pointing to an agent of pain (a hammer, a knife, etc.) results from the fact that agents of pain are material: the agent "either exists" or "can be pictured as existing…at the external boundary of the body," coming into formation on the boundary between the internal experience of pain and the external apperception of it (16). Similarly, representations of violence do more than articulate, describe, or depict suffering: they are the language through which we can speak pain, and they can enact a force on an audience that echoes the pain being represented.

Senseless Violence considers the phenomenological experience of represented violence in relationship to the cultural politics of disgust, shock, and shame. Arguing that represented violence offers a unique mode of viscerally experiencing texts and for reflecting on the relationship between representation and emotion, the project builds on earlier work that examines contemporary cultural fascinations with wounding, suffering, and violation. Cultural theories of violence pose questions about our collective fascination with violence, and respond to those questions by pointing to particular historical or material formations.[6] Such approaches to violence maintain an interest in the psychological or phenomenological aspects of violence, but they largely focus on the way real-life acts of violence are circulated through American culture, how they take on

meaning, and what they reveal about the contemporary cultural moment. The stories that get told about violence, and the broader narratives such stories reveal, are the focus in cultural theories of violence.[7] Because I write about marginal identities and representation, I would be remiss to ignore culture in favor of a more strictly phenomenological or formalist approach to literary violence. However, I believe cultural theories of violence and of emotion can be further illuminated by incorporating formalist and phenomenological analysis of represented violence.

More recently, a renewed interest in affect theory has foregrounded different questions about represented violence: namely, "what is a violent image?" (Hamblet), and where does the violence of violent images actually occur? Instead of uncritically analyzing violent images as representations of real-world violence, we might instead foreground the affective force of those images (Abel xi). If violent images are something other than straightforward representations, then interpretations that focus solely on their political and ideological effects by analyzing their verisimilitude or social context misunderstand their object of study (Abel xii). Abel is right to urge critics to focus on the affective force of violent images, and his claim that such images are violent not because they represent violence, but because they have a strong affective impact on audiences, is compelling. However, Abel begs an important question: how do we determine what images are violent, if not by the fact that they represent violent acts?

Moreover, if violent images are violent not because of what they depict, but because of the force they exert on audiences, then must it be the case that all audiences have similar affective responses to a violent image? And how do critics measure the

affective force of a violent image, except by their own emotional reaction? Eugenie Brinkema raises such questions in her discussion of Abel, pointing out his tendency to base his claims about violent images on his own affective responses and framing her own project around the claim that affects themselves have forms. Through the formal strategy of the close-up, for example, filmmakers can produce disgust in audiences by manipulating the distance audiences feel between themselves and an image (31-7, 139-41). Brinkema, like Abel, is a film scholar, but her approach to formal strategies for rendering affect influences my own. Instead of providing a taxonomy of literary strategies for provoking affect, however, I focus on literary strategies that disrupt familiar connections between particular affects and identity categories. Thus, my chapter on disgust, for example, focuses on aesthetic strategies for preventing or modifying disgust where it would often be found: directed at the violated black body. Likewise, the other chapters draw out strategies for renegotiating the relationship between shock and sexual violence and between shame, queerness, and racial identity.

Many literary scholars concerned with race, gender, and sexuality focus on the representational work performed by violent images, and remain committed to the notion that a real and important relationship exists between represented violence and real-world violence. In the wake of a long history of material oppression, pervasive violence, and art that shored up racism and sexism, it is with good reason that these scholars elucidate the often-unacknowledged ideological work performed by violent images. More than that, anti-racist and feminist critics have unpacked the way representational strategies for depicting non-white and/or non-male lives have enabled or justified real-world violence

against oppressed groups. To claim that every representation does ideological work, as anti-racist and feminist critics have largely done, is a crucial corrective to oversights in cultural criticism. But one effect of this sea change, as scholars including Claudia Tate and Hortense Spillers have pointed out, has been that critics often reduce literary representations to their politics, overlooking other kinds of work that literature does: express emotion, reconceive aesthetic strategies, or provoke laughter, grimaces, or tears. Violated bodies, in particular, seem to provoke ideological interpretations. Yet, as Abel suggests, violent images are not only mimetically reproducing real violation, they are also enacting affective force on audiences, engaging in a kind of violence that is not coterminous with the violence they depict.

The relationship between literature and violence, of course, has a long history. Tragedy, in particular, has used violence in order to depict the arbitrary, meaningless aspects of existence and to articulate a vision of pointless suffering. Tragedy is not strictly about violence, or straightforwardly defined by the presence of violence, but it does use violence as a mode for exploring human suffering, fate, personal agency, and loss. Famously, much of the violence in tragedy takes place off-stage—we do not see Oedipus's eyes plucked out; we know Medea has killed her children solely by the screams heard off-stage. Violence indicates suffering, marks out pain, but its importance for tragedy comes through its ability to mobilize audiences' reflection on metaphysical and philosophical problems. Tragedy is also, of course, understood to provoke emotional responses in its audiences. For Aristotle, these responses include pity, fear, and ultimately catharsis (*Poetics*). Tragedy not only provokes particular feelings, but also enacts a

process by which audience members move through or process states of feeling, purging or resolving negative emotions.

Modernist and avant-garde artists also considered violence central to their aesthetic and political practices. We might mark the beginning of modernist interest in the possibilities opened up through violence with Nietzsche's insistence that we should "take a new look at cruelty" (qtd. Nelson 3). Nietzsche enacted a shift in thinking that profoundly influenced avant-garde aesthetics and their relationship to ethics. In the wake of Nietzsche's nihilistic approach to cruelty and violence, the twentieth century saw global wars on a new scale, genocide, and environmental devastation. Alongside technological developments that afforded new and horrific acts of violence were those developments that proliferated art: photography, film, and radio (and later, television and the Internet) (Nelson 4-5). Violence thus played a complex role in avant-garde artistic formations of the early twentieth century: it became a vehicle for rejecting traditional (Christian) morality and destroying the old institutions associated with those ways of thinking. A mode of "making it new," violence was also a mode for transgressing social norms and marking oneself as against bourgeois culture. Moreover, as a fundamental part of human nature (according to Nietzsche and Sade before him), violent, cruel impulses must be allowed to escape the moralistic repression of civilization (Nelson 251).

Influenced in part by the Marquis de Sade's challenge to sexual morality and embrace of aggressively taboo subject matter, experimental artists including Baudelaire, Georges Bataille, and the Surrealists depicted violence as a way of shocking audiences out of complacency and exploring repressed desires. André Breton, for example,

advocated for "violence and terrorism…as a kind of traumatizing shock therapy to regenerate and redeem a decadent, enervated people" (LaCapra 124). More broadly, the Futurists called for violent destruction of most institutions as a way to create new art and culture. Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty" outlined an aesthetic practice that would violate audiences' expectations and, consequently, their familiar strategies of interacting with theater and art. This subversion of expectations would enact a paradoxical violence that returned audience members to a more primal mode of engagement. Employing transgressive subject matter and aggressively experimental form, the theater of cruelty would violate audiences' familiar senses of themselves, opening them up to new, authentic ways of engaging art (Barber).

Artaud imagined "cruelty" (which encapsulates more than straightforward representations of violence to include primal sounds, aggressive dance, assaultive lighting, and the like) to clarify or sharpen artistic articulations of truth. Influenced by the Surrealists, Artaud believed that an assaultive theater could enable audiences to access the recesses of their psyches (Barber). Artaud's conception of cruelty is particularly illuminating for the way it imagines art to engage with a wide range of sensory perceptions in audiences. Artaud considered the theater to be the best medium for an art of cruelty, because theater directly engaged audiences' visual, aural, and kinetic senses. Yet his insistence that art can do something other than represent the world in order for audiences to reflect intellectually upon it, or feel familiar feelings about it, influences my own sense that our bodies are in play—in unpredictable, often unacknowledged ways—when we read fiction. In what ways, I want to ask, do writers like Toni Morrison, Kathy

Acker, and James Baldwin engage our senses? How do Acker's line drawings inserted in her fragmented narrative bridge the seeming distinction between looking at pictures of bodies (a visual experience) and reading descriptions of those bodies (not a visual experience)? How does Baldwin's description of Giovanni's wine-soaked, fetid room engage readers' sense of smell, and thus build readers into the affective interpersonal terrain he creates in his novel?

Artaud insists that mimetic fidelity to real life limits artistic possibility and distracts from the embodied, subconscious, and sensory engagement audiences have with art. This notion is widely influential, found in ideas ranging from John Cage's rearrangement of the concert hall to Kathy Acker's stylistic cries of primal pain (Jannarone). Although I do not attempt to trace the influence of avant-garde treatments of violence in contemporary American fiction, I began this project with an eye to something like Artaud's interest in the possibilities of cruelty. I set out to look for representations of violent women, images that contradicted the more familiar narrative of women as always and inevitably the innocent victims of violence borne out of patriarchal culture. Later, I extended this interest to representations of violence that pushed against by-now-familiar (at least to literary scholars of identity) models of suffering that cast marginalized subjects as victims and encouraged readers to find a perpetrator in white supremacy, sexism, or homophobia. I wanted, in the spirit of Artaud, to recover the negative impulses and cruel, base desires that had been excised from post-Civil Rights discourses of marginal identity. Landing, finally, on senseless violence as an aesthetic strategy that disrupts familiar narratives of victims and perpetrators, I hope to bridge a gap between

critical approaches to avant-garde violence, which understand it as a mode for exploring meaninglessness, the subconscious, or absurdity, and an American studies-inflected approach to violence in minority literature, which links violence to political commitments.

In the context of U.S. literary studies, scholars have analyzed violence in terms of settler colonialism and manifest destiny. Richard Slotkin's seminal trilogy demonstrates that "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5), meaning that American national myths formed around scenes of violent confrontation: the European settler confronted the wilderness, then the "Indian," and had to resolve the conflict between European and New World culture through violent encounter. For Slotkin, Daniel Boone is emblematic of this national mythology; European/Christian "civilization" and New World/Indian "savagery" meet in the figure of Boone, who embodies the hybrid spirit of America. Certainly, genres including the "western, the hard-boiled detective story, the gangster saga, and the police melodrama" depict violence as part of their respective genre conventions, and, as John Cawelti has argued, do so in such a way as to further the belief that violence can be necessary to uphold the moral good (525). Violence is thus a means to resolve moral conflict and either maintain or renegotiate cultural boundaries. In a broader sense, Americanists have understood literary violence to make meaning: depictions of violence operate seamlessly within a moral universe that recursively comments on the moral necessity of violence. The role violence plays in American myth-making thus also has

ideological ramifications: American modes of representing violence rationalize the domination of the Other.

Represented violence has particularly high political stakes in the context of African American literature. Emerging in the context of slavery, African American literature has necessarily been shaped by an ever-present violence and has deployed violence to make claims about black personhood. Reading and writing themselves were revolutionary acts for enslaved people, linked to freedom and, indeed, personhood.[8] Literature became a space for articulating black suffering in the context of a society that claimed black bodies could not suffer and protesting the quotidian violence of white supremacist America. Ronald Tataki, who begins *Violence in the Black Imagination* with a discussion of the Rodney King riots, points out that "violence against the oppressor is a dominant concern" in nineteenth-century black writing (12). Tataki explicitly links the imaginative work of black fiction writers with the real-world violence against black people that formed the backdrop against which they wrote. He also frames his discussion of nineteenth-century African American fiction in terms of contemporary racial violence, exemplifying the way real-world violence continues to be the central context for reading African American fiction.[9]

Discussions of violence in American fiction have often been divided along gender lines. One approach focuses on the way war, imperialism, and interpersonal aggression represent fragmented subjectivity, often discussing the work of authors such as Hemingway, Cormac McCarthy, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk. In *Deadly Musings*, for example, Michael Kowalewski emphasizes the complexity of reading

representations of violence in American literature, suggesting that violence in literature cannot be straightforwardly analyzed for thematic content. Instead, representations of violence should be analyzed as stylistic practice. Kowalewski's main concern in his analysis is "with the ways in which [violence] has been imagined or 'performed' in American fiction—the ways in which it exists not as an isolated element or subject but as the conformation, at a given moment, of a larger stylistic field of force" (8). In contrast to earlier discussions of violence (notably W.M. Frohock's *The Novel of Violence in America*), recent approaches to violent novels have taken up questions of masculinity and race. Greg Forter, for example, argues that American crime novels deploy violence in ways that both shore up misogynistic impulses and explore "masculine debasement and abjection" (4). Analyzing five American crime novels by authors including Faulkner, Dashiell Hammett, and Chester Himes, Forter argues that the crime novel can be a space where masculinity is "murdered," opening up new possibilities for other kinds of less violent male subjectivity (5). Here, Forter builds on arguments by Bersani about abjection and gendered subjectivity in order to recuperate crime novels from a presumption that they straightforwardly enforce misogyny.[10]

In contrast to this mode of theorizing violence, feminist explorations of violence tend to focus on women as victims of violence, emphasizing the quotidian nature of sexual and misogynistic violence. Feminist approaches to literary violence have an obvious grounding in political commitments against rape and domestic abuse. Indeed, feminist readings often reframe sexual "defilement" as violence; from Ovid to Shakespeare to Richardson to Hardy, depictions of rape abound in literary history, yet

such depictions were historically read as "crimes of passion" rather than acts of violence. Analyzing brutal scenes from contemporary fiction, Laura Tanner insists on the moral imperative of witnessing literary depictions of misogynistic violence. She claims that when reading scenes of violence, the reader necessarily negotiates a position relative to "victim, violator, or observer" (3). There are thus more- and less-ethical ways of reading scenes of rape and torture, and authors can either distance readers from violence by aestheticizing it or bring readers closer to violence by narratively aligning them with victims.[11] Tanner provocatively asks, "to what degree can the reading subject be said to be a reading body?" *Senseless Violence* likewise explores this question, but it does so with respect to acts of literary violence without obvious victims or violators.

My approach to senseless violence is aligned with feminist and critical race theories of violence, and seeks to interrogate gender, sexual, and racial formations in discussions of violence. Marginal writers, those associated with racial and sexual minority identities, foreground new questions about American literary violence. My approach to marginality and difference in U.S. literature is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's definition of "minor literatures." They write that "a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs with a major language" (16). This project reframes their theory in the context of U.S. fiction, focusing less on the ways authors write inside or outside a particular language, and more on the ways minority identities are written into canonical fiction. I look at texts that have, in the second half of the 20th century, moved closer to canonical status partly in relation to academic disciplines focused on race, gender, and sexuality. Although I follow Deleuze

and Guattari's definition of a minor literature, reframing their argument in the context of U.S. fiction, my project arises, in part, out of a major disagreement with them. While Deleuze and Guattari argue that any aspect of minor literature is de facto political, my project focuses on depictions of violence that seem designed to evade political or ideological interpretations. Using formal strategies such as ambiguous characterization and collage-esque composition, marginalized texts at once provoke and foreclose readers' attempts to derive coherent political meaning from their depictions of violence. In doing so, they explore the affective charge of violence and prompt surprising affective responses.

Although my project is more formalist than historicist in methodology, the texts I discuss are also clearly in conversation with identity politics. The modes of reading that many of these texts complicate are strategies that arise after the Civil Rights movement. In order for a writer to push against a limiting and limited political reading practice, that practice must be ascendant, or at least familiar. And political reading practices that come out of feminist, African American, and queer critical theories, of course, became increasingly visible in the wake of the rights movements of the twentieth century.

The texts in this project operate in ranges of possible affects. Rather than claiming to link a particular reader-response to a particular text, I outline two or more poles of affective experience the texts seem poised to elicit. I do this because reader responses are unpredictable; they are articulations that are linked to the social world. When I call reader responses "articulations" of a text, I build on a key concept in cultural studies. For Stuart Hall and other cultural studies scholars, cultural forms do not have inherent meaning, but

take on meaning in relation to other historical and social contexts. In that moment of articulation, however, meaning is unified and stable. Responding in part to a dogmatic Marxism that understood all culture to be an expression of economic conditions, cultural studies scholars came to describe articulation as the way cultural forms take on meaning in relation to material and social realities, but can also take on other meanings in other contexts (Slack 114-7). Likewise, I understand the texts in this study to respond to affects that have been mobilized to particular ends at different historical moments. I also demonstrate how they use formal strategies to imagine new connections between identity and emotion. Therefore, aesthetics and affects don't work in the same way across each chapter.

While I discuss representations of affective responses to violence in the text, I also consider affect in the reader. This is not an ethnographic or sociological study of reading practices, but is instead a theorization of the phenomenological relationship between reader and text built upon a formalist analysis of narrative strategies. My approach to readers varies in each chapter; the differences between texts, and between the affective and cultural formations they're in conversation with, demand different approaches to readers, as well. Chapter one takes Sula as a model for readers of black suffering; Sula is a character who contradicts familiar emotional responses to depictions of black pain, and when she observes violent deaths that echo lynchings, her lack of disgust in response emphasizes the centrality of that emotion in the politics of representing black violation. At the same time, her aesthetic interest in violence also echoes the reflective, distant stance with which readers approach fictional violence. By

contrast, chapter two combines a formal analysis of the collage aesthetics in work by Kathy Acker and riot grrrl artists with an examination of the riot grrrl artist Kathleen Hanna as a real-life reader of Acker. Tracing a genealogical connection that is grounded in the affective experience of reading, the chapter makes claims about artists as readers, instead of addressing widespread reading patterns across the riot grrrl subculture. The final chapter is indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach to reading and shame. Baldwin's protagonist is both a scribe of his own identity, affect, and desires, and the embodiment of Baldwin's "reading" of racial and sexual identity. Offering a reading of violence that articulates the role of shame and desire in the quotidian, violent enforcement of heteronormativity, the novel also raises questions about communities of readers and their feelings of shame. In contrast to the 1950s reader who might be marked by queerness and blackness were he seen with a copy of *Giovanni's Room*, those reading the novel in the context of black queer studies today have new kinds of interpretive and emotional opportunities. As I move to the conclusion, which takes up critical reading practices, I increasingly analyze other literary critics as readers.

I have chosen texts that have risen to canonicity in the wake of Civil Rights-era interrogations of the traditional canon. In other words, each novel in the project might appear on the syllabus of a women's, African American, queer, black feminist, or black queer literature course. Others have traced the formation of such courses and departments in the contemporary academy; notably, Robyn Wiegman has argued that social justice movements have shaped identity-based knowledge formations.[12] Wiegman is interested in the affective relationships that underwrite scholarly commitments to identity-based

inquiry. My own interest in identity-based critical practice relates to a more specific reading of violence in minority texts, and in the way an author's alignment with feminism, blackness, and/or queerness shapes critics' interpretations of violence in their work. I hope to link this critical approach to violence with the broader affective fields that are associated with minority identity formations. Wiegman focuses on the affects, desires, and political commitments that bear out in identity-based disciplines. In a related way, I am interested in how authors and artists use violence to theorize their own relationship to the affects that collect around blackness, queerness, and femininity. In tracing aesthetic strategies of senseless violence, I also hope to develop an alternative to interpretive strategies that treat minority-identified bodies as excessively meaningful or inherently politicized.

Chapter one argues that Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Kara Walker's silhouette series *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* reflect upon the overdetermination of the violated black body. Whether animating racist violence or anti-racist social critique, representations of black woundedness have historically been expected to mobilize disgust for particular political ends. Kara Walker uses black silhouettes on white gallery walls to depict scenes of antebellum violence that have the power to disgust with their subject matter, but that withhold the visceral details of more realistic representations. Because the silhouette form erases affective responses from her characters' faces, Walker's installations depict ambiguous scenes of violence in order to claim space for humor, desire, and absurdity in representations of plantation life. Disavowing disgust as a moral arbiter, Walker's silhouettes highlight the risks inherent in

expecting violated black bodies to do predictable emotional work. *Sula* likewise meditates on the overdetermined status of the "disgusting" black body. By portraying her eponymous protagonist as excessively interested in scenes of disgusting violence, Morrison aligns Sula with the novel's readers. *Sula* depicts senseless violence alongside politically legible or structural violence in order to drive home the point that represented violence inevitably has an aesthetic dimension, one that plays a powerful role alongside emotion.

Chapter two outlines a feminist theory of shock that reframes the concept of sexual consent. Ranging from Kathy Acker's 1979 novel *Blood and Guts in High School* to the riot grrrl zines of the 1990s, this feminist avant-garde formation arose in a moment when anti-rape and anti-pornography activism made consent a key term in defining sexual violation. Through visual and literary depictions of shocking violence, these texts disrupt the reading experience and deny readers the implicit ability to consent to experience literary violence. When Acker and riot grrrls violate this form of consent that takes place between the reader and the text, they also expose the limits of consent as a framework for understanding sexual violence. While legal discourses of sexual violence fail to accommodate emotional responses including desire, indifference, annoyance, or murderous rage, victims may nevertheless feel such things. Acker and riot grrrl construct a textual space that allows for taboo affective responses to violence and, in doing so, expand the possibilities for resisting sexual violence beyond a politics of consent.

Chapter three argues that James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* depicts shame not as an affect bound within the individual who feels it, but as a force that brings about broader

interpersonal effects. The novel is structured around Giovanni's imminent execution for murder, which his lover, David, feels responsible for. Through a narrative structure that slowly weaves together an affective logic of cause-and-effect, the novel develops the counterintuitive claim that David's sense of shame about his same-sex, interracial, cross-class desire does in fact lead to Giovanni's execution. The novel thus suggests that state violence is deeply embedded in complex structures of feeling, though not in ways we might expect. Complicating scholarly claims that emotion can be mobilized on a broad social level to enable violence and injustice, *Giovanni's Room* explores the meeting point of affective experience and social phenomena at the level of the individual. Echoing the kind of sense-making project undertaken by Richard Wright, *Giovanni's Room* disambiguates an act of seemingly "senseless" violence. The "senseless" murder and state execution portrayed by the novel, moreover, exemplify the politics of calling an act of violence senseless: this rhetorical gesture erases the social structure that makes some bodies more vulnerable to violence than others and can drive violent impulses. What *Giovanni's Room* uniquely offers, however, is an affective map of the emotional, interpersonal structure that underwrites more obviously socio-political aspects of inequality.

Senseless violence confronts readers with difficult subject matter. Perhaps more difficult, however, is the way such scenes of violence preclude the kinds of stories readers typically tell to make sense of violence. Thus, readers are left with their own often-surprising affective responses. Through narrative strategies that erase perpetrators, foreclose moral outrage, or provoke ambiguous responses, the authors and artists in this

dissertation encourage readers to reflect on the way affect circulates around violated, marginalized bodies. “Senseless” depictions of violence redirect readers’ attention to other modes of sensory perception, to the bodies they inhabit as they read, and to the strange but strong relationship between readers and texts. In its effort to point beyond straightforwardly political interpretations of marginal literature toward the ways these texts represent affect and manipulate it in the reader, this study aims as well to join the call for attention to the body in literary studies and to look for new possibilities in American Studies. Throughout this project, I explore the tension between “senseless” and “legible” acts of violence, and the emotional and rhetorical phenomena that shape our ability to make sense of literary violence. I also, I hope, offer a way to think about literary violence that complicates critical paradigms for understanding the relationship between representations and racial, sexual, and gender identity.

Chapter One:

"Pretty Forms for Content that Hurts": Disgusting Violence in Sula and Kara Walker's Silhouettes

In this chapter, I analyze the role of senseless violence and its relationship to disgust in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Kara Walker's installation *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. The dominant affect associated with senseless violence in these works is disgust, a feeling that might be the most violent affect itself. The ability of disgust in verbal or visual imagery to provoke physiological reactions like nausea, vomiting, or turning away makes it a particularly rich feeling through which to explore the meeting point between mind, body, and text. *Sula* foregrounds the cultural power of disgust, emphasizing its close ties with desire and aesthetic engagement, as well as its role in regulating community norms. Disgust circulates between characters in the novel and is manipulated in readers through the eponymous protagonist's relationship to violence. Sula is disgusting to other characters in the novel both because she breaks taboos and because she fails at being properly disgusted in the face of violence. By aligning readers with Sula, the novel challenges the distinction between aesthetic interest and visceral disgust, highlighting the contingent nature of images of black suffering. Echoing Morrison's formal strategies that bring together aesthetic pleasure and disgust, Kara Walker uses the silhouette form to reflect on the relationship between disgust, violence, and racial embodiment. The silhouette allows Walker to render acts of violence ambiguous and explore the scopic nature of racial and sexual social organization. Both works provoke important questions about fictionalized violence and its relationship to

cultural politics. How does our sense of disgust shape our reading practices? And what can fiction tell us about the politics of disgust?

Both Morrison and Walker take American racial violence as their subject matter: Morrison's novels famously explore the ways slavery disrupts any stable notion of ethics or of rational ethical actors, as well as the structural violence of Jim Crow laws and the symbolic violence perpetrated through standards of beauty and taste. Both artists have been critical lightning rods because they treat racial imagery in complex, often ambiguous ways. In the case of Walker, her treatment of violence is foregrounded in the critical discourse about her. Walker's large-scale art installations transform the museum space into tableaux that combine the traditionally feminine craft of silhouette-cutting with imagery that relies as much on disturbing scenes of violence as on nostalgic clichés about the moonlight and magnolias of the antebellum South. Through the use of figurative language (in Morrison's case) and the silhouette (in Walker's), these very different artists pursue the limit-point of ethical representation by rendering horrific violence aesthetically beautiful, by using "pretty forms for content that hurts" (qtd. Als, "Shadow").

Although it might seem that aestheticizing violence would be a way for artists to make a kind of sense out of profound suffering, the actual effect in *Sula* and *My Complement* is confounding, unsettling, even disturbing. As art critic Jerry Saltz said of the first time he saw Walker's work, "I was sickened, thrilled, and terrified." I want to unpack the cultural politics of this kind of response to Walker's work, characterized as it is by contradictory, and powerful, emotions. Although Morrison is now a decidedly

permanent figure in the American literary canon, earlier controversies around her politics of representation mirror current ones about Walker's depiction of black violence and violation.[13] Both artists challenge conventions of African American cultural production surrounding violence and disgust. Responding to racist imagery that figures the racialized body as disgusting, African American literature has often offered up images of a mutilated black body to provoke righteous outrage at white supremacist violence. One thinks, for example, of Frederick Douglass's gruesome depiction of his aunt being whipped (7). Whether in the service of white supremacy or anti-racism, many images of black suffering have been deployed to do unambiguous political work.

In her groundbreaking work on the legacy of slavery, Saidiya Hartman discusses, but refuses to reproduce, Douglass's famous scene of Aunt Hester's whipping. This scene exemplifies the burden of meaning placed on representations of black suffering. Douglass's account of Aunt Hester's whipping reproduces brutality in an effort to affirm black humanity and protest black subjection. But Hartman cautions: "Rather than inciting indignation, too often [such accounts] immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity" (2). Hartman is hardly the only scholar to articulate anxiety around reproducing this "scene of subjection;" Christina Sharpe emphasizes the "awful configurations of power, desire, pleasure, and domination to be found not only in the original scene, but also in its transmission, transformation, and renewal, to which we in the present are equally inured." Sharpe insists that repeating the horror of black violation "does not make the violence of everyday black subjection undeniable" and "does not confirm or confer humanity on the suffering black body" (2). By destabilizing the connection between images of black

suffering and familiar narratives of black subjection, violent scenes in *Sula* and *My Complement* explore precisely this predicament. The two works inflict forms of violence on their black characters that are difficult to align with a stable political ethos or focused social critique. Moreover, both works explore the overdetermined nature of the injured black body through formal strategies that emphasize the aesthetic practice of *looking* at black suffering. In *Sula,* the title character has an aesthetic relationship to violence, at the expense of an ethical relationship grounded in emotion. *My Complement* takes up analogous questions about aesthetics and affect, but places viewers in the emotionally and ethically ambiguous position of looking at violation.[14]

Reading disgust, desire, and violence across *Sula* and *My Complement* offers scholars a way to think through connections between affect and critical race theories by clarifying significant intersections and divergences. Hortense Spillers and Claudia Tate have argued that the norms of reading African American literature leave little room for thinking through the psychological complexity of black subjectivity. Instead, texts are often read through sociological or political lenses; African American novels are taken as windows onto an authentic (if often pathologized) black community or as forms of witnessing or social protest. Spillers and Tate offer a psychoanalytic lens as a corrective to such oversimplifications. A number of critics have followed Spillers and Tate with new, expanded ways of conceiving black subjectivity and its relation to affect.[15] Darieck Scott, for example, has examined black abjection in order to locate "a form of counterintuitive *power*—indeed, what we can begin to think of as *black* power," which "is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the

constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundaries" (9). I want to build on their important work to argue that black art is also a valuable resource for understanding how affect circulates in a social world and to better account for the ways in which precognitive, surprising, or unpredictable emotional responses are at play in even the most explicitly political circumstances.[16]

Morrison and Walker are equally interested in challenging the limitations of more orthodox approaches to African American cultural production, even at the risk of being misread or criticized. As Hilton Als writes in his *New Yorker* profile of Morrison, while "situating herself inside the black world, Morrison undermined the myth of black cohesiveness. With whiteness offstage, or certainly right of center, she showed black people fighting with each other—murdering, raping, breaking up marriages, burning down houses." As I will argue below, *Sula* challenges the cohesiveness of black community via an expanded range of possible emotional responses to violence. Characterizing Sula as an emotional outsider and using violence to align her with the reader, Morrison plays out the risks of representing black suffering in the diegetic world of the novel. Reframing this dilemma in the art gallery, *My Complement* challenges familiar narratives about affect and racial violence via the silhouette form.

In this dissertation, I try to make sense of senseless violence by focusing on sensory perception. Taking advantage of this opportunity for wordplay, I suggest that the sensory might offer us the best way to make sense of the senseless. Approaching the work of Morrison and Walker through the lens of senseless violence helps us see why

these artists are so vociferously debated. Both *Sula* and *My Complement* depict senseless violence that cannot quite be accounted for through critiques of structural violence. Unmotivated or inexplicable violence appears in the novel and the silhouettes, and while the works explicitly reference real-world scenes of violence against racial and sexual minorities, they also render violence in a senseless aesthetic that, rather than encouraging sympathy or horror in order to mobilize political effects, emphasizes the emotional life of racial terror. J. Jack Halberstam has claimed that, "Precisely because we cannot predict what action representations will give rise to, it is impossible to describe the boundary that divides imagined violence from real violence in any detail" (187-8). That is, there is no clear-cut line between imagined violence bodied forth in literature and art and the real-world violence that it may seem to mimetically depict. For Halberstam, imagined violence committed by marginal figures against those in power does important political work precisely by blurring the line between imagined and real violence: the threat against power is imaginary, but it is threatening because it could always become real. Although I am more interested here in how we might approach represented violence that seems to avoid social commentary, I also want to foreground Halberstam's compelling claim that the boundary between fictional violence and real-world violence is fuzzy and contingent. Indeed, I devote a chapter to disgusted responses to fictional senseless violence precisely because I understand violence as a nexus at which represented and lived experiences might intersect.

Senseless violence in *Sula* and *My Complement* is characterized by confusion, obfuscation, and absurdity: the works dwell on inexplicable or absurd violence, they use

mimetic and figurative techniques to render "legible" explanations of violence—taxonomies of obvious perpetrators and victims—absurd or senseless, and they assault their readers and viewers with the violence they represent. Moreover, both Morrison and Walker use specific formal techniques that provoke disgust while simultaneously rendering offensive violence aesthetically pleasurable. While Kara Walker's silhouettes force viewers to rely on racial stereotypes and visual cues to construct narratives about plantation life, Morrison's juxtaposed representations of the structural violence of Jim Crow with meaningless, unmotivated, or absurd instances of violence elude readers who might want to interpret her work as a closed, rational political critique or an ethical guidebook.

Disgust, Violence, and the Body

Throughout the history of the United States, disgust has played a key role in symbolic violence against African American people. In its most extreme forms, symbolic violence justifies acts of physical violence in the form of chattel slavery, lynching, rape, and myriad other abuses. As scholars such as Robyn Wiegman, Ashraf Rushdy, Russ Castronovo, and Hazel Carby, among others, have shown, the lynched bodies of black people held a peculiar fascination for white supremacist America at large: the lynch mob dehumanized, maimed, and tortured its victims, but also consumed them as perversely aestheticized objects which reinforced "racial, sexual, national, psychological, biological, as well as gendered" borders (446). More broadly, cultural theorists have developed a trenchant critique of the "politics of disgust," showing how political repression is

exercised and justified through the use of the language of revulsion and repulsion. Martha Nussbaum, for example, has pointed out the prevalence of disgust in the discourse about gay rights, and Ange-Marie Hancock argues that disgust animates the classical political myth of the "welfare queen." In her fiction and literary criticism, Toni Morrison actively elucidates and provides alternatives to our long literary and cultural history of associating blackness with perversion, excessive sexuality and love, dirt, the body, "anarchy," and "routine dread" (*Playing*, x). Morrison follows a long tradition of black cultural production that refutes this deeply pervasive and deeply problematic metaphorical suturing of blackness to disgust.

Disgust has played a powerful role in producing and justifying violence directed towards African Americans, but it also operates in historically contingent, rhetorically fluid, dynamic ways. Ashraf Rushdy, for example, has examined the ways that disgust has also inspired anti-racist activism, pointing to the representational power of Emmett Till's lynched body—photographs of which were circulated widely and appeared in publications like *Jet* magazine after his funeral—to provoke moral outrage at white supremacy and racial violence (72-3). Images of Till have been credited with igniting some of the action of the Civil Rights movement, and Rosa Parks invoked the memory of Till when asked about her motivation for her own civil disobedience (Houck and Grindy, x). Disgust has a powerful relationship to racial violence, but this relationship can function in multiple, changing, and contradictory ways. Whether igniting or refuting racist beliefs, the "disgusting" African American body has been symbolically overdetermined, relentlessly put in the service of varying forms of social commentary.

This is the affective and political terrain that *Sula* and *My Complement* traverse: an artistic field in which the violated black body is displayed in the context of a politics of representation that depends heavily on disgust.

Disgust is often thought of as an affective response to the abject: we feel disgusted when we taste something rotten, smell something foul, or watch something gruesome. What counts as rotten, foul, or gruesome may be socially contingent, but the bodily response disgust compels is often imagined as pre-cognitive and universal. This notion is evidenced by the physiological reactions we have to disgusting objects: we pull our head back, wrinkle our nose, and curl our lip. In extreme experiences of disgust, we might even gag or vomit (Haidt et. al 111-16). Yet in spite of the physiological reality of disgust, it is not only inflected by cultural context, but is also a mechanism by which moral codes and aesthetic categories—and, indeed, the very designations of "we" and "us"—are enforced. Disgusted feelings help communities to police the boundaries of the social order and individual subjects to maintain boundaries of the self.

Audre Lorde vividly frames the connection between proximity and disgust in terms of white supremacy in "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger." As a small child on the subway, she sat down beside a white woman who immediately pulled her coat away from Lorde's "little snowsuited body." The woman's "mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, taking mine with it." Lorde continues:

> I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us—probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she is looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to

> me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch (147).

Here, Lorde makes three points about disgust: it is expressed as a desire to distance the self from the disgusting object, it is partly an anxiety about proximity, and it plays a role in maintaining racial hierarchy by attaching to black embodiment. In the context of the essay, Lorde also links this phenomenon of racist disgust to black women's politically-directed rage, drawing out the complex circuits of affective exchange that are constantly playing out in the terrain of social and political life. Clare Hemmings points to this example to remind us that "only for certain subjects can affect be thought of as attaching in an open way" (561). By foregrounding disgust through violence, Morrison and Walker explore the relationship between blackness and disgust, emphasizing disgust's visceral and unpredictable qualities in terms of its uneven attachment to racially- and sexually-marked bodies.

Carolyn Korsmeyer defines two categories of disgust: "literal 'core' or 'material' disgust that is viscerally responsive to foul and contaminated objects in close proximity, and 'moral' disgust that takes as its objects persons or behaviors that transgress social norms" (5). Core disgust refers to the visceral, gut-level response of revulsion. We might feel core disgust when we see rats on the empty subway track, maggots in the garbage, or a decapitation in a horror film. Moral disgust, on the other hand, refers to disgust we feel in the face of behavior or beliefs. Psychologists, literary critics, and anthropologists continue to debate about the relationship between core and moral disgust. Korsmeyer

claims that there is no link between core disgust and moral disgust; taboo behaviors or beliefs do not trigger the same disgust sensor as seeing someone's head decapitated; instead, that feeling of nausea, revulsion, or involuntary flinching functions as an appropriate metaphor for the sense of outrage or horror people may feel in their moral judgments. It would be easy to point to the biological function of disgust to prove that there is no meaningful link between core and moral disgust, for disgust clearly plays a role in helping keep us safe, warning us when something is contaminated or can make us sick.

Yet sociological research has also provided evidence that this base biological disgust is so intertwined with social taboo and cultural norms that the distinction between the two categories cannot be meaningfully disentangled. In their research, Haidt, et. al found that the association between core and moral disgust traversed national and cultural lines. Although the associations were different cross-culturally, in each group that they studied, subjects described feelings about moral or social issues in terms of disgust. They credit this phenomenon to the notion that much of the way we think about the world is shaped by metaphors of embodiment (111). This embodied schema can be seen in the way we use our physical experience of the world to narrate our thoughts and feelings. Disgust is a particularly good example of the way this schema operates; the sensation is felt as being pulled toward or pushed away from a force. Even a moral judgment can be physically felt in a similar manner to an encounter with rot, violence, violation, or death. For this reason, the debate about the relationship between core and moral disgust makes Walker and Morrison interesting case studies. In the case of both artists, audiences may

react with disgust, and the feelings they may experience seem to be a combination of core and moral disgust. Indeed, in the case of senseless violence, a terrible act may elicit both sensations at once.

Violence and disgust both relate to the boundaries of the body and to anxieties about "matter out of place" (Douglas, qtd. in W. Miller, 44). Along with sexual taboos, Haidt, et. al note that acts of violence often trigger disgust, since they indicate "a forcible breach or alteration of the exterior envelope of the human body" (109). Evidence of violence is a common source of disgust insofar as it disrupts the boundaries of a body, reminding observers of their own bodily fragility and finitude. Julia Kristeva has situated disgust in relation to violence in her theory of abjection, noting that "abjection preserves what existed in the anarchism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). For Kristeva, sensations of disgust operate in part by returning one to a violent origin of subjectivity.

Much of the symbolic violence that has historically affected African American women can be linked to the cultivation of disgust around black female sexuality. According to Dorothy Roberts, we can trace current negative stereotypes, such as the welfare queen or crack whore, to the abjection of black women that is rooted in chattel slavery. Historically, disgust has been used to police black women, but Morrison and Walker are also engaged with other cultural work that has critiqued and destabilized the negative associations between blackness and disgust. For better or worse, both Morrison and Walker foreground senseless violence to disrupt familiar definitions of

victim/perpetrator, and to inhabit the politically discomfiting affect of disgust. While the critical reception of both artists has typically claimed to arbitrate political questions about representation, those same critical judgments are often made in response to the emotional stimulation of disgust. This chapter explores the way these artists provoke, reframe, or manage disgust through their aesthetic practices.

Kara Walker's Violent Aesthetic

Kara Walker has enjoyed a rapid rise to canonicity. Born in 1969, Walker is the daughter of an artist who moved the family from Stockton, California to Stone Mountain, Georgia when Walker was 13. She received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994, and only three years later, she won the MacArthur "Genius" Grant. Immediately out of graduate school, she rose to prominence with her signature large-scale murals cut from black paper. Her work has been shown in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Walker was the 2002 representative from the United States to the São Paulo Biennial, participated in the Venice Biennale in 2007, and has shown over 30 room-sized installations in museums around the world. Best known for her large scale, often black-and-white installations, Walker also makes short films, drawings, and collages.

My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love was Walker's first American retrospective, premiering at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2007 and traveling to the Whitney Museum, the Hammer Center in Los Angeles, and ARC/Musée

d'art moderne de la ville de Paris. To make her installations, Walker draws freehand on black paper and then cuts out the silhouettes, which she then installs in the gallery space, creating tableaux some 50 feet long and 13 feet high. More than one critic of Walker's installations analyzes them in relation to narrative; the series of images seems to beg to be read as a kind of story, and the large scale of the pieces helps regulate the way viewers absorb them; as the eye moves across the gallery space, it takes in images in a linear order reminiscent of narrative. This assumption, however, fails to account for the many ways viewers can interact with her work. The large scale means that viewers can begin to "read" the piece at any point, and the aesthetics of the silhouette itself prevents a narrative logic from prevailing in the work. While the eye can surely travel across the gallery wall and the viewer can see narrative causality linking each image, a viewer can just as easily see each vignette as discrete. Indeed, many museums installed circular gallery spaces to display the silhouettes, eliminating clear beginnings and endings to the scenes. More importantly, the silhouette restricts Walker from depicting nuanced facial expression, foreground and background, and, for the most part, perspective. There is a powerful sense of being pulled or strung along through the gallery space, yet at the same time, the tableaux avoid signifying cause and effect or other temporal relationships between characters.

Although most of her installations utilize only black and white, the tableaux will often collect a stark, yet superabundant (Yaeger 770) group of images together. The visual excess of "Slavery! Slavery!" is mimicked in its full title, which continues: "Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern

Slavery or 'Life at "Ol' Virginny's Hole" (sketches from Plantation Life)' See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and Leader in her Cause." This title parodies 19th century convention, crowded as it is not just with capital letters and exclamation points, but appeals to an audience that can look forward to aesthetic, if not scopophilic, pleasure in the face of the "picturesque" images of plantation life. Indeed, the title reminds viewers that they are seeing an art object, and it suggests that, as art, the plantation can be a site of pleasurable observation that allows viewers to marvel at the craftsmanship of its "Emancipated Negress" artist. Walker's title highlights the double-bind that has haunted African American cultural production and performance from its beginnings: can a black artist create without inevitably becoming an object for a white gaze, or acting as a representative of her race, or either confirming or resisting stereotypes, or, in spite of her best efforts, embodying racist archetypes?

A middle-class form of portraiture and craft that was popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the silhouette recalls the neoclassical revival as well as the interest in physiognomy that played important roles in popular culture at the time (Dixon 11, 19). In an interview with Hilton Als, Walker tells the story of her affinity for the silhouette form. In graduate school, Walker devoured feminist criticism by the likes of bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler, as well as reference books on early American art. Walker recalls:

> I had a catharsis looking at early American varieties of silhouette cuttings. . . . What I recognized, besides narrative and historicity and racism, was this very

> physical displacement: the paradox of removing a form from a blank surface that in turn creates a black hole. I was struck by the irony of so many of my concerns being addressed: blank/black, hole/whole, shadow/substance, etc. (There's also that great quote from Sojourner Truth: 'I sell the shadow to support the substance.')

In her installations, Walker plays with the concept of the shadow as well as with the irony of rendering antebellum dramas in literal black and white. The silhouettes replicate the perverse racial logic of the time: the myth of intractable division between black and white residents of the plantation both hides and enables the fact of masters impregnating enslaved women. Although the interracial families on the plantation might be denied, they also helped maintain the slave labor system itself.

Walker's manipulation of the silhouette format allows her to emphasize the racial codes we use to categorize bodies, yet it restricts her depictions to those racial categories for which we have clear and obvious codes—that is, figures in her installations can only be coded as either black or white. Although miscegenation is repeatedly suggested in the narrative action of the installations, the formal character of the pieces prevent Walker from depicting the very bodies that often confound our racial codes. By virtue of her aesthetic choices, "race," for Walker, "appears as an essence and a binary" (Davis 109). In a sense, Walker's self-imposed aesthetic restrictions illustrate the dual nature of the social construction of identity: the images mirror U.S. racial ideology by virtue of their black-white binary, but at the same time, racial signifiers hide in the "shadows" the silhouette recreates.

Figures that evoke Saartjie Baartman, perhaps the most-studied historical figure in scholarship on racism, aesthetics, and Enlightenment ideals, recur in Walker's work.[17] Referred to derogatively as the "Hottentot Venus," Baartman was a Khoisan woman who grew up in South Africa and, in 1810, was brought to London to be displayed nearly naked in Piccadilly. She was soon sold to a Parisian animal owner who also displayed her as a curiosity for caricaturists as well as medical illustrators until her death in 1815. The epistemic violence that Saartjie Baartman underwent mirrors the gruesome violence inflicted on her body when her labia were displayed in British museums after her death (Hobson 1-2). An object of both metaphorical and literal dissection, her life serves as a particularly cruel example of the dual fascination with aesthetic judgment and categories of racial difference that characterized the eighteenth century.[18] Baartman's story illustrates how the Enlightenment project of defining the beautiful was always bound up with defining humans according to race. Her inclusion in Walker's oeuvre is only one example that illustrates the inescapable nature of racist narratives that attach to visual signifiers like body parts, skin color, posture, and hairstyles.[19]

Caroline Brown traces the presence of the black woman in the development of modern aesthetics, arguing that from Kant to Gilroy, she has emerged at the boundary of the aesthetic, marking the shape of categories like the beautiful or sublime. Brown recalls Edmund Burke's sentiment that the black female body is organically sublime, as well as Thomas Jefferson's assertions in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that white women are simply, naturally, more beautiful than black women. Hegel's master-slave dialectic, as a central metaphor for the experience of modern subjectivity, is also shaped by the social

reality of racial hierarchy and violence. Across these figures, Brown argues, the black female body plays a "critical function" in "the production of a space of radical negation." The black female body functions as lack of subjectivity and threat to subjectivity. In Western modernity's philosophical formulation, the black female body becomes a site for anxieties about sexuality, contamination and infiltration, and the boundaries between human and animal (28-9). In short, modernity's relationship to the black female body maps onto theories of disgust and abjection.

The narrative indeterminacy of Walker's silhouettes renders her depiction of plantation violence senseless. The silhouette form—which erases the visual signifier of skin color even as it relies on racial stereotypes and antebellum, Jim Crow, or primitivist tropes to be understood—refuses to provide viewers with fixed racial categories. Often, this refusal forces viewers to make interpretive judgments about the relationships that play out in her installations based on racial categories that are at once unknowable and necessary for interpretation. Her work evokes the visual economy of lynching, minstrelsy, and stereotyping, assaulting the viewer with images that write the violence of those economies very large. Even as it offers up what might be disgusting scenes of violence—rape, disembowelment, maiming—the formal character of her work promotes the possibility that desire circulates in the violent, oppressive relationships she represents. Many theorists of disgust agree that disgust plays a large role in attraction, aesthetic interest, and desire.[20] *My Complement* suggests that the inverse is also true: desire and attraction may be present in the way audiences relate to the morally outrageous and viscerally repulsive scenes of violence Walker depicts.

Her work eschews core disgust and courts moral disgust. This dynamic makes Walker a politically troubling artist—she has been critiqued by prominent African American artists for "consciously or unconsciously . . . catering to the bestial fantasies about blacks created by white supremacy and racism" (qtd. Als, "Shadow"). Indeed, through aesthetic strategies that do less to direct viewers' sympathy, disgust, or outrage at suffering, and more to encourage a whole range of emotional responses—disgust, sadness, or anger, certainly, but also laughter, delight, and pleasure in beauty—Walker courts the violent desire directed towards violated black bodies that runs through American history and culture. Risking the possibility that her work will align with violent and/or self-destructive desire in her audiences also, however, allows Walker to open up "shadowy" spaces for new and surprising emotional engagements with racial and sexual violence, ones which can imaginatively reconstruct antebellum life in more complex ways.

While the controversy inspired by Walker's art is clearly about the relationship between vexed signifiers and their viewers, it also clusters around images of potential violation of black bodies. These ambiguous images fly in the face of the assumption that ethical depictions of violence must convey stable messages. As Amy Tang has pointed out, critics who understand Walker's art as either rehearsing the trauma of chattel slavery and white supremacy or masterfully deconstructing racist ideology through parody can only make such claims by assuming that artistic agency "functions as a zero-sum game" in which Walker "either…defeats the forces of racism or…is defeated by them" (152). For most critics, the most important question to ask about Walker's work is: is it racist or

anti-racist? This question, however, is also shaped by disgust and its relationship to representations of the African American body. Walker's silhouettes can thus illuminate the ways disgust is entangled in the aesthetics of race and gender. Instead of worrying over the seemingly irresolvable question of whether Walker's silhouettes are fundamentally racist or anti-racist, critics might understand Walker's work as precisely *about* the impulse to read depictions of blackness according to this binary. The confusion viewers feel about how to understand the racial and gender politics of the installations is not an impediment to understanding, but is in fact the central aesthetic experience the installations enable.

A detail from "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven" [fig. 1] illustrates Walker's treatment of emotional indeterminacy. In the detail, a corpulent man stands on an artificial leg. He leans back, holding himself up with his sword, which pierces a baby that lies on the ground, feet in the air. Instead of his second leg, the man uses the leg, or legs, of an enslaved child. All of the figures seem naked, although the man appears to have something around his neck, a cravat or fur stole, perhaps. The child is bent over and holds onto a corn stalk with both hands. She (her gender is unclear) looks back at the man's large gut, mouth open in an ambiguous expression—is it shock? Surprise? Pleasure? Ironically, seeing the child's expression as one of suffering might be most politically palatable to many viewers, given that such a visual would align with familiar notions of victimhood and violation. What might be most disgusting about the image is in fact the ambiguity in the child's face.

It is no wonder, then, that the tenor adopted in criticism of Kara Walker is one of disgust. Haidt et. al have found that, for Americans, threats to human dignity and the rights of the individual are often considered disgusting. Senseless murder, rape, racism, and child abuse are morally outrageous in part because they violate the rights and autonomy of the individual and are, by extension, threats to an American sense that human life is sacred and meaningful (126). By flaunting taboos that throw questions of consent, the individual, and dignity into question, Walker upsets a moral sense informed by the belief that the boundaries of the individual subject are sacrosanct. And, indeed, the silhouette visually erases the boundaries between the man, the child, the sword, and the infant. When we look at Walker's work through the lens of rights discourse, we have a hard time discerning injustices or ethical prescriptions.

In "The End of Uncle Tom," which appears, in its likeliest narrative form, to depict a slave master raping a young enslaved girl and impaling an enslaved baby, Walker aggressively blurs signifiers of autonomy, victimhood, and agency. The silhouette obscures the boundaries of the body, so that the agent of the narrative action is unclear. So is the circulation of affect. As a result, the image refuses to depict a scene of violence in which it is clear who is doing what, and how everybody feels about it. The ambiguity in the image—is it a scene of violence, or of perverse pleasure?—is the source of moral disgust that can arise in response to Walker's work. In this vignette, Walker emphasizes the unknown, contradictory, or difficult-to-imagine affective circuits of the antebellum South.

At the same time, her work is more explicitly in conversation with popular representations of the South—*Gone with the Wind*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Song of the South*—than with the historical reality those texts depict. Walker's work "is far more engaged with representations of history than with history as such . . . Though Walker has been reviled for reviving historical images of black degradation, her oeuvre has radically defamiliarized the history of slavery" (Keizer 1669). Even the figure of the Negress, who recurs in Walker's art and is aligned with the artist, can be traced, not directly to the plantation, but to Thomas Dixon's 1905 celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Clansman* (Brown 60). "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven" reminds viewers that culture gives aesthetic shape to both racism and appeals for rights. Indeed, Walker's absurdist treatment of signifiers emphasizes the changing emotional and political work that representations actually perform. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is only recently understood to portray its enslaved characters as straightforwardly sympathetic and its white characters as straightforwardly evil: although Stowe's project was abolitionist, that did not prevent readers from experiencing nostalgia for the "lost cause" (Morgan 175). "The End of Uncle Tom" offends a sentimental view of the enslaved person as innocent victim, and a sense that the plantation, in all its brutality, nevertheless functions as a rational, if deeply unjust, place. Walker's vision of the plantation, by contrast, is characterized by competing, ambivalent feelings, unclear boundaries between bodies, and sense of self and agency turned upside down.

Walker's art often gets conscripted for a politics that, upon closer inspection, it cannot be truthfully said to espouse. In order to align their aesthetic appreciation with

their political tastes, critics like Henry Louis Gates proclaim that Walker deconstructs racist imagery, striking a forceful blow in the righteous battle of resistant, transgressive art (Tang 151). This school of interpretation, of which Gates is emblematic, denies precisely the mechanism that it bases itself on; that is, the unpredictable, contingent circulation of meaning attached to images. In fact, Adrienne Davis argues that Walker's art explicitly rejects a politics based on an extant rights discourse of injury and redress, where consent becomes the fundamental arbiter of good and bad acts. She describes the problem with this formulation:

> In classic civil rights and feminist conceptions, bodies, power, and subordination run through a defined circuit. Certain bodily relations manifest or reinforce group-based power imbalances and should be condemned as subordinating. Both projects view sexual relations as particularly vulnerable. Indeed, structural subordination, whether racial or sexual, erupts most violently and visibly through bodies, leaving its imprints on broken carcasses—whipped, battered, lynched, or raped. These racially and sexually injured bodies manifest the machinations of material political economies that accumulate and allocate power among groups, and much of the historic mission of civil rights and feminism has been to investigate, document, and combat these effects. Both justice projects advocate egalitarian and regulated social relations, especially in sex, as crucial to countering group subordination (125).

According to Davis, Walker's playful, reckless engagement with abjection, violence, and violation does not serve a project of artistic redress or social critique, instead, she

explores "the spaces opened up by civil rights and its transformation of race, of changing racial subjectivity in the shadow of these new spaces" (142-3).

Roderick Ferguson, in his characteristically astute reading of *My Complement*, celebrates Walker's silhouettes as signifiers of the "black holes" in African American history. He claims that "we might read these holes as the invisible blemishes that African American history—as a way of writing and imagining community, as a script for living it—is supposed to withhold from conversation and keep out of sight" (186). Instead of suggesting that Walker fills in the gaps in the historical record with new information about the plantation past, however, Ferguson characterizes the silhouettes as "meditation[s] on the ingredients of African American history itself." The silhouettes demand that the viewer confront depictions of African American history that fall outside scripted, familiar narratives that are understood to underwrite political participation (187-8). This is what is so dangerous about African American history and so urgent about Walker's art: African American history, which Ferguson links to respectability politics, is understood to "affirm the political choices and maneuvers that we make in the present" (186). To reimagine a different, messier version of African American history, one which Walker points toward, would seem to risk undermining the viability of black subjectivity and citizenship.

Instead of working through Walker's art with a hermeneutic framework that begins and ends with questions concerning victimhood, agency, and political subjectivity, perhaps the gut impact her work makes on viewers should lead us to focus on questions of emotional labor demanded by the tableau. First, we should follow Arlene Keizer's lead

and resist the temptation to see Walker's work as a representation of the past that must, if the artist is ethical, inevitably provoke righteous horror in viewers or otherwise work against oppression. Keizer reminds us that black viewers can have "multiple nontraumatic responses" to seeing Walker's work (1670). Kara Walker's works "dare to imagine that enslaved black women may have experienced sexual desire for the white men who dominated them" (Keizer 1666). No wonder Walker is so controversial. This gesture toward a messy, anti-rational, conflicted, and compromised emotional landscape flies in the face of a long, deep history of justifying black women's humanity by naming trauma and rejecting the Jezebel stereotype.

Finally, the silhouettes foreground the ways in which representations of violence are inevitably aesthetic, even when they attempt to mediate real-world violence directly and viscerally. Extant cultural narratives around racial and sexual violence shape the interpretations that are available to audiences. In "Cut" [fig. 2] which has sometimes been understood as a self-portrait, a young woman in a full dress with two tight braids has slit her wrists with a large razor, which she still holds. Leaping in the air, perhaps clicking her heels together, she raises both arms above her head. Each wrist has split, as though it were paper being cut (as indeed it is). Her wrists are opened up as if on hinges, and blood spurts from them in long, gently curling arcs reminiscent of paisleys. Below and to the left of the woman, the viewer sees two puddles that are probably blood, but, given their prevalence across Walker's oeuvre, could also be feces. "Cut" exemplifies the aesthetics of violence that characterize Walker's art. Her medium of cut-paper silhouettes prevents

represented violence from mimetically reproducing real-world violence, highlighting the mediated distance between embodied violence and artistic representations.

This fairly obvious point carries particular meaning, however, in the broader artistic context of Walker's subject matter and biography. The piece reminds viewers that the woman they see before them has, in the work's narrative, slit her own wrists, while in fact, it is the hand of the artist that has committed this "violence." Indeed, the title, "Cut," might describe the diegetic action of the piece, but it also describes the material process of its creation. African American artists, whose work has so often emerged in the context of broader social disagreements about their human dignity, intellect, and creativity (that is, in the context of white supremacy), have often been understood as de facto political, uniquely associated with speaking truth to power, uplifting their community, justifying their own full humanity, or providing political commentary or sociological evidence. Keizer has argued that, "[s]ince their inception, African American art and literature have been burdened with the imperative to make certain kinds of meaning" (1671). The ambiguity of "Cut" leads me to believe that Walker is interested in refusing this imperative.

The nature of the piece's composition emphasizes the aesthetic forms that are in play in any representation of the suffering black body, from the mimetic to the abstract. Viewers will never mistake the violence in "Cut" for real violence, and therefore any strong emotions viewers have in response to the piece will be characterized as something other than disgust avoidance in the face of violation or gore. Instead, the sense of disgust that surrounds Walker's work is prompted by the meaning viewers attach to her images,

the layers of association that such images—even when they are stripped down to silhouettes—inevitably attach to in the American psyche. The unmotivated eruption of violence is a useful formulation for figuring the tension between representation and reality. Taking up a cultural legacy that has often been burdened with making certain kinds of meaning or justifying political appeals for rights, Walker uses senseless violence to access the strange, enigmatic relationship between symbolic and real violence. Walker herself has described the kinds of psychological spaces opened up within her work. Writing about her response to Hurricane Katrina in the catalogue for *After the Deluge*, she describes the phenomenon by which, as events like Katrina pass into memory and narrative, they become simplified and smoothed out into "a more assimilable legend." Yet in spite of the fact of historiographic tidying up, "always there is a puddle—a murky, unnavigable space that is overcrowded with intangibles: shame, remorse, vanity, morbidity, silence" (Walker, qtd. in Brown 63). Ironically, it is through her own aesthetically clean images that Walker jumps into the puddle.

Managing Disgust in Sula

Toni Morrison tackles the complex relationship between disgust, symbolic violence, and systemic violence directed toward black women in two ways in her 1973 novel *Sula*. First, she develops a critique of moral disgust for the ways it has so often reinforced social norms that, in fact, excuse other kinds of cruel or violent behavior. Clearly, Morrison's fiction is enmeshed in the social context that produced it. In *Sula*, she takes up the effect segregation has on black subjectivity and confronts readers with the

subtle ways that aesthetic distinction—questions of beauty and desire—interact with racial hierarchy. The novel foregrounds the psychological impact of the color line and the material consequences of white supremacy. By offering scenes in which characters confront, say, prurient disgust in the face of an aging whore, black men's disgust at Nel's mother when she tries to smile flirtatiously with a white train conductor, or a white farmer's disgust when he finds the bloated corpse of the drowned Chicken Little, Morrison grapples with the role moral disgust has played in enforcing racial hierarchy. Likewise, the novel emphasizes the structural violence of Jim Crow, the shaming of women's sexuality, and the ways white supremacy damages black men who, in turn, mistreat black women. It is easy to see how critics have arrived at the conclusion that the novel develops a feminist critique of normative morals and the role feelings of disgust plays in enforcing them.

Secondly, the novel's critique of moral disgust is embedded in a more interesting meditation on the limits of communal affect. As scholars such as Houston Baker, Maureen Reddy, Phillip Novak, and Sianne Ngai have argued, *Sula* explores the relationship between communities and the individuals who constitute them. These scholars have even suggested that the community of the Bottom functions as a kind of protagonist in the novel, in spite of the fact that Sula herself would logically seem to be the novel's main character. She may share her name with the novel's title, but Sula is a deeply unsettling, and often unlikable, character. The moments that mark Sula as an outsider are often sparked by senseless violence, as when the girl accidentally drowns Chicken Little, or, centrally, when she watches her mother burn to death. The novel

reveals that senseless violence often provides communities with the opportunity to share a strong emotional experience. Yet Sula stands apart from her community in the face of violence, often reacting inappropriately by the standards of the Bottom. In this way, she models the affective failure that readers may feel in the face of the novel's senseless violence.

Sula takes place in a small black community in Ohio known as the Bottom, between the years 1919 and 1965. Many critics claim that the novel is "about" the relationship between Sula and Nel, which, as Adrienne Rich has famously shown, exemplifies the closeness of two women on the lesbian continuum. *Sula* follows the friendship of the two women past the death of Sula herself, and seems at first glance to turn on the way Sula destroys this relationship by sleeping with Nel's husband, Jude. However, Rich points to the end of the novel to convincingly show that it celebrates female friendship as a superior alternative to compulsory heterosexuality (34). Many critics have read Sula and Nel as ethical counterpoints: Sula rejects social norms, even when doing so might hurt other people, and Nel conforms to normative morality, even when she has to sacrifice her own sense of self to do so. For many critics, the ethical question driving the novel is in fact voiced by Sula: "How do you know . . . about who was good[?] How do you know it was you?" (146). In this case, Sula is addressing Nel, but we can also imagine that Morrison asks the reader the same question. While scholars have often allowed this question to shape their understanding of the novel's ethics, it constitutes only a piece of the novel's exploration of ethical problems.

This chapter answers Phillip Novak's observation that *Sula*'s "brutality" is "rarely the focus of critical inquiry," even as it is "endemic and pervasive, the text's most persistent preoccupation." Part of what makes *Sula* such a confusing or senseless read is the "almost uninterrupted registering of violence, of violation, of destruction and self-destruction, played out in the form of addiction and alcoholism, self-mutilation, murder, and mass suicide." Brutality "is a feature of the narration itself—an aspect of the language, of the composition of individual scenes, a matter of details . . . There is a luxuriousness in this lingering over the graphic, a luxuriating in pain that makes the novel both consistently compelling and very difficult to read" (185). I argue that the novel confounds our moral judgments about the nature and meaning of violence as well as our definition of a violent act. Readers become disoriented and disturbed by the relentless violent acts in the novel, but also by its narrative structure and descriptive texture.

Morrison's relationship to the canon looks very different than it did when *Sula* was published in 1973, and debates about how well she represents African American life are no longer contentious. As a Nobel prizewinner and perhaps the most important living American author, the aesthetic and political value of her work is no longer in question, and almost no one is asking whether her novels are, in a crude sense, bad for black people. Although early treatments of *Sula* often fretted that it portrayed black men in a negative light, reinforcing stereotypes that had appeared a decade earlier with the publication of the Moynihan report, the novel is nowadays celebrated as a feminist, queer, deconstruction of normative love. Critics also emphasize its literary complexity,

formal innovation, and nuanced, well-developed relationship between its characters and the socio-historical context of its setting.

What they overlook, interestingly, are the frequent, bizarre eruptions of often unexplained or accidental violence. For example, critics often explain Eva's immolation of her son Plum as a merciful act, alleviating him from the mental anguish he endures after returning from World War I. Critics can push this analysis further and make the claim that Eva's violent act is a horrific, ethically complex, but ultimately necessary response to the results of structural violence that sent Plum to the trenches in the first place. Such readings accurately describe parts of the novel's project, but overlook the way Morrison's narrative style disorients readers' ethical judgment and forces them to rely on their sensory responses. This phenomenon coalesces in the scene I just described when Eva, walking through her son's bedroom, lifts a glass of what she thinks is strawberry soda to her lips, only to realize that it is water tainted with Plum's blood (46). Her disgust, and ours, thus stages the novel's ethical dilemmas. Senseless violence in *Sula* is best understood as a way of provoking disgust in readers while also critiquing the ways visceral and moral disgust have historically been deployed to maintain structurally violent social hierarchies. Morrison explores the senselessness of violence in order to demonstrate that the relationship between real and imagined violence is unstable, and that the experience of the reader may be the nexus at which they meet. Emerging as they do in the midst of critiques about symbolic violence in visual culture, both *Sula* and *My Complement* suggest that the representation *of* violence is linked to representation *as*

violence, but such representations are articulated in unpredictable ways across communities of readers.

My understanding of *Sula*'s ethics moves away from an assessment of the behavior or beliefs of individual characters and towards questions about aesthetic absorption and pleasure in the face of literary violence. Throughout the novel, readers are confronted with violence inflicted upon characters: Eva kills her son by setting him on fire and she may have lost her own leg by allowing it to be run over by a train; Sula and Nel toss a young boy, Chicken Little, into the river, inadvertently drowning him; a large group of townspeople die in a march towards an unfinished tunnel. One could look to structural inequality to explain much of this violence: Eva needs insurance money, so she injures herself. Her son is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder he developed in the first World War, so she puts him out of his misery. The townspeople die in an impromptu protest of the racist hiring practices for building the tunnel. Clearly, the suffering of the black characters is soaked through and through with social meanings.

Yet much of the novel's violence can't be assimilated into a commentary on injustice. When Chicken Little drowns, for instance, the novel renders his death as inexplicable, unnecessary, bizarre, and disorienting. While young Sula and Nel are playing by the river, the little boy approaches them and Sula begins to tease and play with him. While swinging him around playfully, Sula loses her grip and sends the boy sailing into the water, which "darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank" (60-1). When his body is found by a white bargeman, who "[shakes] his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children," readers are explicitly

reminded of the historical connection between racism and disgust. Echoes of Emmett Till emerge in the novel's explanation that Chicken was missing for three days before his body went to the embalmer.[21] Like Till, "he was unrecognizable to almost everybody who once knew him." Unlike Till, Chicken would not have an open casket at his funeral. This information is conveyed in its own, abrupt paragraph: "So the coffin was closed" (64). Instead of accruing moral weight, Chicken Little's death is senselessly tragic.

While Chicken's body might elicit disgust in other characters and in readers, Morrison suggests disgust only through elision, closing the coffin that Mamie Till Bradley, Till's mother, had left open. As Claudia Rankine puts it, Bradley "'disidentified' with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a warning to the black community, thereby using the lynching tradition against itself. The spectacle of the black body, in her hands, publicized the injustice mapped onto her son's corpse." Morrison manipulates the spectacularity of the black body in this scene, associating disgust with the white bargeman's misreading of Chicken's death. Echoing Emmett Till, the scene reminds readers of the anti-racist work disgust can perform, and, indeed, of the way grief and mourning can perform the political work of articulating and insisting upon black humanity. At the same time, however, the scene emphasizes a remainder that accompanies public black suffering: absurdity, senselessness, tragedy, and numbing shock.

Even as this scene refuses to provoke a predictable emotional response in readers, it emphasizes both the political contingency of disgust and the ways in which the black body is overdetermined as an aesthetic-affective cultural production. For Fred Moten,

Till's body, captured on the pages of *Jet* magazine and offered up by Mamie Till Bradley, is not only seen by its viewers, but heard, as well. By carrying the sounds of his mother's grief, the potential sound of the whistle in the direction of a white woman that supposedly justified his murder, and a broader echo of what Moten calls "black mo'nin,'" Emmett Till's body stages a political intervention that is always already an aesthetic performance. As Moten explains, the photographs of Till's mutilated body do more than stand as evidence of the horror of Jim Crow violence. They also challenge broader assumptions about the ontological status of visual experience. The visual economy of the mutilated black body, then, becomes loosed from a strictly sentimental or voyeuristic binary.

"Looking at Emmett Till," argues Moten, "is arrested by overtonal reverberations; looking demurs when looking opens onto an unheard sound that the picture cannot secure but discovers and onto all of what it might be said to mean that I can look at this face, this photograph" (198). The "I" that looks must also think about black suffering "in terms of a kind of beauty, a kind of detachment, independence, autonomy, that holds open the question of what looking might mean in general" (198). Even in this instance of a picture that does political work, "the looker is in danger of slipping, not away, but into something less comfortable than horror—aesthetic judgment, denial, laughter, some out and unprecedented reflection, movement murder, song" (201). When Chicken Little is similarly displayed by the novel, readers are forced more assertively into the aesthetic disposition that Moten names. Just as Walker raises questions about looking at black suffering, Morrison revisits questions about looking at Emmett Till in order to highlight "how blackness and the black subject come into being through visuality" (Fleetwood 71).

The visual realm is understood as a space that can make sense of race, where one can locate and identify blackness, violently marking black subjects (Barrett, qtd. Fleetwood 17). As Moten points out, however, "looking at Emmett Till" can characterize a whole range of engagements with the visual regime and the concept of black subjectivity. Framing Chicken Little's death as senseless thus emphasizes its aesthetic, scopic, and affective aspects, and raises the question of looking, which Morrison will explore throughout the novel.

Failing to Feel: Disgust as a Communal Norm

Morrison's critics have tended to either ignore disgust in favor of emphasizing the novel's critique of dominant literary forms and normative social hierarchies or, conversely, they celebrate violence and disgust as subversive models for developing an alternative, enlightened ethics. Scholars who read *Sula* as a critique of dominant paradigms emphasize the novel's resistance to heteronormative models for love and the pernicious effects of racial hierarchy. Critics like Adrienne Rich, Deborah McDowell, and John Duvall have done important work to show that *Sula* critiques, rather than embraces, racist and sexist associations between black women and amorality, excessive sexuality, and abjection. Adrienne Rich reads the novel as a celebration of female friendship and often-erotic affection, reminding us that at the novel's end, Nel mourns a lost Sula, prioritizing her friendship over her marriage (34). Deborah McDowell has focused on the techniques the novel uses to deconstruct novelistic conventions. In the ways the novel refuses to follow literary convention, it critiques the normative concept of

the ego-bound self as well as sexist, white supremacist aesthetic assumptions. Because the title character occupies perhaps a third of the novel, McDowell argues, *Sula* "critiques such concepts as 'protagonist,' 'hero,' and 'major character' by emphatically decentering and deferring the presence of Sula" (153). McDowell's argument is compelling and has influenced scholarship on Morrison, aligning as it does with arguments that Morrison writes postmodern Black novels. Critics have claimed that Morrison's novels revise and reimagine the American past.[22] Duvall sees Sula as an artist manqué whose destructive impulses and affective flatness might have been productively sublimated by making art. For Duvall, the novel critiques sexist repression and celebrates art as a social good (51). For these critics, associating African American cultural production with disgust, violence, and the body is understandably problematic.

In this vein of *Sula* criticism, the role of disgust in the novel is often overlooked or deliberately avoided in the service of challenging American racial hierarchies. For these critics, the novel's representation of violence is often understood as ethically justified, a mode for developing a postmodern historiography, or part of a larger deconstructive project. Novak, for example, argues that the novel's "luxuriousness in … lingering over the graphic," and its "luxuriating in pain" (185) ultimately serves a resistant, revisionary purpose: for Novak, the novel mourns the loss of African American community and argues that sustaining mourning for this lost community facilitates a political goal. "Because African American culture is still at risk," Novak argues, "getting done with grieving might well constitute a surrender to the forces that produced the losses in the first place" (191). Novak interprets the novel's violence in relation to a discourse of

trauma and melancholia, rather than revulsion, embodiment, or sentiment. This is understandable, given that historical trauma has so often been a mode through which black cultural production has been understood, and part of the history that black culture has sought to revise has been precisely an over-affiliation of black subjectivity with embodiment, excessive sexuality, and animality. Yet the affective texture of *Sula* demands that readers engage with disgust, for such an inquiry enriches discussions of the novel that focus on its cultural politics as well as its formal technique.

While much of the most intriguing work on Sula has focused on the novel's structure, my discussion takes up the formal qualities Morrison uses to represent disgusting violence. Readers may be frustrated by the novel's refusal to play by convention, but Sula is hardly the only work of 20th century fiction to actively embrace violence, fragmentation, confusion, disgust, frustration, or irritation as modes of expression. Phillip Novak reminds us that Shadrack's presence in the novel as a "register" of the "cultural discontinuity" caused by the first World War is a "modernist convention" (187). To be haunted by war is to fall in line with 20th century literary convention, and narrative fragmentation is only one way art has sought to transgress social convention or address a kind of authentic experience. Like the scandalous, the erotic, or the shocking, the disgusting has also marked the limit of decency across which writers and artists have sought to access seeming truths about human experience (Menninghaus 11). Indeed, disgust has enjoyed a kind of vogue in artistic and critical circles, and "the vulgar, the low-minded, the perverse, the 'abject'" have all "enjoyed, in the 1990s, a downright epidemic and generally affirmative expansion in the realms of

literature, art, and the humanities" (Menninghaus 15). It is perhaps surprising, then, that little attention has been paid to the way disgust haunts *Sula*.

Perhaps this is because the novel seems more interested in exploring the close relationship between disgust and desire than it does in shocking the reader toward a particular response with straightforwardly repulsive imagery. Although disgust is often thought to demarcate the limit of aesthetic experience and shut down any experience of desire, in fact, disgust and desire are deeply enmeshed. Abjection pushes repellent objects outside the boundaries of the self, but it is prompted by the canny fear that what is abject inhabits the self. The affective strength of disgust emerges in part from this close dialectical relationship between it and desire, for the disgusting object is repellent in part because, at the same time, it "seems to say, 'you want me,' imposing itself on the subject as something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed" (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 335). Rather than seeing the disgusting as something that is only repellant, we should attend carefully to the imbrication of disgust and desire, to the ways in which what disgusts us does so precisely because of the possibility that it may infect us, and we may want it to. *Sula* deflates the ethics of disgust by connecting it to both desire and violence.

Throughout the novel, the people of the Bottom are collectively repulsed by behavior that falls outside social mores. After Sula sleeps with her best friend's husband and institutionalizes her grandmother, the townspeople speak of her as "a roach" and "a bitch." Moreover, the men in the town "gave her the final label, [and] fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing . . . the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said Sula slept with white men" (112).

Disgust is prompted by Sula's promiscuity and cruel behavior, but what truly taints her is the claim (unfounded, Morrison goes on to note) that Sula has betrayed her racial identification and slept with white men. The image of Sula that the men share exemplifies the way an ethics of disgust is grounded in cruel, violent, or otherwise amoral desire. Although Sula disgusts the men because her desires fall outside moral or political correctness, Morrison carefully describes their disgust in violent, misogynistic terms. The rumor about Sula makes "young men fantasize elaborate torture for her—just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her." Like other examples of disgust in the novel, this one collapses both violence and sexual desire onto the affect. The narrator tells us that all the men in the town imagined Sula "underneath some white man," "each according to his own predilections." Although these imaginations "filled them with choking disgust," we also learn that they are specific to each man's "predilections." We get a hint of the lascivious in this description, a suggestion that desire is sparked by Sula's transgression, even though there is "nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier" (113). By emphasizing the importance of metaphorical disgust to ethical judgment, Morrison reveals the ways an ethics of disgust has been shaped by racist and sexist notions of black female sexual excess and availability.

If the townspeoples' condemnation of Sula indicts moral disgust as symbolic violence, Sula's self-violation highlights the dialectical relationship between disgust and desire. When Sula and Nel are still young girls, and their behavior has not yet provided readers with an opportunity for ethical judgment, they experience a threat of violence. The girls encounter a threatening group of white boys while walking home from school.

In order to protect Nel, we learn, Sula cuts off the tip of her finger, threatening the boys by asking, "'If I can do that to myself, what do you suppose I'll do to you?'" (55). Later, readers learn that Sula was scared in that moment, but was so driven to protect Nel that she acted almost unconsciously. The narrator explains that, "although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes. Yet there was one time when that was not true, when she held onto a mood for weeks, but even that was in defense of Nel" (53).

It is easy to read this scene of violence as support for arguments that the novel critiques sexism and valorizes female friendship. Like many of the novel's ethical problems, this scene tempts the reader to judge Sula's behavior. While it may seem clear that Sula injures herself in order to threaten the boys and protect Nel, her choice to cut off the tip of her finger is nevertheless extreme, even to the point of senselessness. It becomes easy to wonder whether Sula's act emerges out of self-destructive, as well as protective, desire. The novel also suggests that Sula's relationship to violence is closely connected to her affective alienation (Ahmed 30, 39) from the community norms of the Bottom. Looking back on the incident, Sula realizes that her emotions and the social codes around her rarely align. Using free indirect discourse, the narrator explains Sula's feelings about Nel:

> Nel, she remembered, always thrived on a crisis. The closed place in the water; Hannah's funeral. Nel was the best. When Sula imitated her, or tried to, those long years ago, it always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness

> but mostly for its being bizarre. The one time she tried to protect Nel, she had cut off her own finger tip and earned not Nel's gratitude but her disgust. From then on she had let her emotions dictate her behavior (141).

We learn, then, that part of Sula's sense of her own emotions emerges out of her alienation from normative codes of feeling. Although Sula is motivated by her protective regard for Nel to cut off her finger, this scene also illustrates Morrison's depiction of senseless violence. Sula sees her violent act as reasonable, and it slowly becomes legible to readers, but because other characters see her behavior as absurd, unreasonable, and bizarre, they abject her from a community of feeling. The violence done to her finger is not ontologically senseless, but registers as senseless because of the non-normative way Sula feels about it.

More important than the question of Sula's motivation to commit violence, however, is the way Morrison figures violence in order to collapse the realms of "the aesthetic" and "the disgusting." Her use of language that may at once provoke and displace disgust presents its own ethical problem: under what conditions is it ethical to engage violence on aesthetic terms? In the scene, Morrison compares "the scrap of flesh" to a "button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of [her] slate" (54-5). By comparing a violently detached part of the body to food, Morrison collapses the distinction between the appetizing and the repulsive that disgust typically enforces. In fact, although Morrison uses metaphor to soften or aestheticize this scene of self-mutilation, readers may be all the more disgusted precisely because she has collapsed the distinction between scraps of flesh and attractive, edible objects. Both cherries and

mushrooms are smooth and small, and Morrison further emphasizes these characteristics by making the mushroom a "button" mushroom. Indeed, the button mushroom does not merely associate the scrap of flesh with smooth aesthetic objects and food, but also recalls decay and fecundity.

By conveying disgusting content in appetizing language, the scene captivates readers, who can experience this language through both an aesthetic sensibility and a sensation of disgust. In this scene, however, Morrison's use of metaphor may provoke both aesthetic interest and disgust. The figurative language collapses Kant's distinction between the seemingly-disembodied disinterestedness and the deeply visceral sensation of disgust. Moreover, it emphasizes the role of the body in reading. Sula's affect seems flat in the novel, and this is part of what disorients readers. Yet her affective "failure" also redirects our attention to the visceral ways we might realize meaning in the novel.

Through its emphasis on the body, coupled with the displacement of readerly disgust through metaphorical language, *Sula* challenges any notion that representing violence is ethically straightforward. If we think of narrative representation as a kind of knowledge production that organizes a senseless or chaotic world, then we might look to literary representations of senseless violence as a richer alternative to political or media discourses that use the term "senseless" to condemn, dismiss, or willfully ignore the circumstances that produce acts of senseless violence or the motivations of perpetrators. Fictional representation of senseless violence may also be condemned or dismissed, but when violence appears in a novel, the logistics of reading may force a reader to sustain a longer encounter with it, or to inhabit the fictional mentality of a "senseless" actor, a

sympathetic observer, or even a victim of senseless violence. Although there is no reason to think that readers will be any slower to judge fictional violence than real violence, fiction also affords readers an opportunity to approach violence from a more empathetic, humble, or submissive position. In this way, senseless violence in fiction can produce new knowledge about violence, and that knowledge in turn might help us better understand the motivations for and effects of violence in the world.

Beautiful Disgust

In *Sula*, Morrison refuses to follow a naturalist imperative to portray disgusting objects or acts in all their gory, intimate, and abject glory. For much of the twentieth century, abject art designed to disgust has been an important mode for both artistic innovation and cultural critique. Ngai suggests that "as a negation of beauty that anticipates the modernist avant-garde's critical assault on art's identification with beauty, there is a sense in which the disgusting is 'the true Kantian sublime'—more sublime than the sublime itself, or, as Derrida suggests, the absolute 'other' of the system of taste" (*Ugly Feelings* 334). While artists like Cindy Sherman, Catherine Opie, or Robert Mapplethorpe and writers like the Marquis de Sade, Charles Baudelaire, and Georges Bataille develop transgressive themes by zooming in on scars, dead skin, orifices, and other abject figures, effectively pushing the viewer past comfortable visual boundaries and into a verisimilitude that leaves her feeling disgusted, uncomfortable, or shocked (Menninghaus 396), *Sula* develops a very different relationship with its reader. While Morrison doesn't try to shock readers through graphic portrayals of horrific violence, she

does needle them with highly aestheticized, yet still disgusting, depictions of violence. *Sula*'s disgust usually emerges through the portrayal of violence and may assault the reader in a violent manner. Indeed, violence in the novel doesn't even always register as such, and perhaps this is why critics have overlooked it so often. Although we might want to relegate disgusting representations in art to a paradigm that equates shocking or transgressive subject matter with artistic innovation, *Sula* disturbs precisely because of its ability to render disgusting subject matter beautiful. Moreover, when readers encounter abject content conveyed through beautiful imagery, they are moved to feel simultaneously absorbed and disgusted by the scene. It is as if the disgusting aspects of the narrative have contaminated the aesthetic object the reader has before her.

Like the novel's earlier scene that sees Sula cut off a part of her own finger, its extended description of sex between Sula and her lover, Ajax, emphasizes the dialectical relationship between disgust and desire. A cursory reading of this scene, in which Sula tops Ajax and climaxes, might characterize it as a feminist depiction of a self-possessed, sexually liberated woman experiencing pleasure, or, even better, a subversive rendering of sex in which Sula effectively penetrates her male partner. Sula's orgasm is reached at the end of an extended metaphor in which Sula rubs, digs, scrapes, and chips away into deeper and deeper layers of Ajax's body. She experiences sex as a penetrator, but also as a destructive force.

If for Leo Bersani sex between men allows an individual to open himself up, if only temporarily, to an experience of "self-shattering" (217), sex between Sula and Ajax gives Sula the opportunity to "shatter" an "other." In the scene, the narrator speaks from

Sula's point of view, developing a perverse blazon of Ajax and figuring sex as destructive excavation:

> *If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge of your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf. I can see it shining through the black. I know it is there…*
>
> […]
>
> *And if I take a nail file or even Eva's old paring knife—that will do—and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster. The alabaster is what gives your face its planes, its curves. That is why your mouth smiling does not reach your eyes. Alabaster is giving it a gravity that resists a total smile.*
>
> […]
>
> *Then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs. For it is the loam that is giving you that smell.*
>
> […]
>
> *I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below.*
>
> […]
>
> *I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?* (130-1, emphasis original).

Perhaps the first thing a reader will notice about this passage is its resemblance to another of the novel's scenes of excavation. In the chapter titled *1922*, Sula and Nel, as young girls, begin to play with twigs and grass in a clearing, eventually digging a hole in the ground. The two girls dig with twigs that they have denuded of their bark, and when Nel's twig breaks, she throws it into the hole "with a gesture of disgust." The girls then begin to throw any trash and debris they can find into the hole: "paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there." The girls then cover this "grave" with dirt and grass (58-9). While this scene suggests Rich's lesbian continuum, it also emphasizes disgust as much as desire. Just as the reader is alerted to the queer dynamics in this scene—the girls lie on their stomachs while "underneath their dresses flesh tightened and shivered in the high coolness, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort" (58)—she is also reminded that erotic exploration risks opening oneself to sensations of shame, disgust, and defilement. While this scene suggests that disgust shuts down queer playfulness, erotic desire does not merely override feelings of disgust; instead, transgressing the boundary of disgust can be erotically compelling in its own right.

In fact, recent scientific research has shown that our disgust sensors are overridden when we become sexually aroused (Borg and de Jong). Anticipating this finding, and even extending it, Miller argues that erotic desire is charged by the "thrill of transgressing another's boundary" as well as "the thrill of granting permission to be so transgressed upon" (137). Miller defines two categories of disgust. First, disgust may be a

reaction formation against an unconscious desire. This Freudian model of disgust is often associated with sexual desire, and creates a psychological barrier against the desired object or act even as it also heightens the pleasure of transgressing that barrier and indulging desire. Miller argues that disgust may even be a condition of possibility for sexual desire, for one must develop sufficient desire for the object that one can overlook or absolve the disgust barrier that prevents desire. Alternately, disgust can result from overindulging desire, as when one experiences a hangover or unpleasant feeling of fullness from overeating. In addition to exploring the erotic charge that can be embedded in disgust, Miller imagines love as a way to transcend barriers constructed by disgust. More provocatively, he suggests that we do not love in spite of disgust, but that, over time, "disgust dissolves boundaries of the self not via grants and regrants of privilege [to be intimate with the beloved in ways that would provoke disgust in others] but by weakening the separation of self and other so that the whole idea of granting privilege ceases to make sense" (141). *Sula's* sex scene enacts the way desire transmutes disgust. The scene is a compellingly beautiful description of what might have been characterized as a violation of Ajax's body or identity. Our sense that Ajax's body is an onion to peel seems like it should be disgusting—the narrative describes something more like an autopsy than a sex scene—yet Morrison reimagines disgusting violence as profound, organic connection.

Kathryn Bond Stockton reads the sex scene as a feminist alternative to Bersani's theory of self-shattering, showing readers a fictional world in which black women celebrate the anal stages that Freud claims we must repress or sublimate in order to

socially or psychologically develop. Making much of the fact that the novel takes place in "the Bottom," Stockton argues that embracing abjection provides a means for its residents to "demolish in rectal graves their 'own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous [white] judgment against [them]'" (89). Stockton reminds us that Freud connects "masculinity to activity and, specifically, to mastery and cruelty. Morrison reverses Freud's relations, in effect, so that she may untie the Gordian relationship of black men and women to black and white economies. To loosen this knot, she must lash black women to cruel-seeming mastery, while binding black males to forms of passivity" (90).

However, *Sula* aestheticizes the disgusting—especially violation and violence—in a way that makes it difficult for readers to claim that disgust in the novel always appears in the service of critique or transgression. While Stockton's reading of this scene contorts it into a celebration of abjection and anality, it misses part of what is interesting about this scene by reading it as more disgusting than it actually is. The loam, gold leaf, and alabaster in this scene connote much more fecund, beautiful kinds of excavation than the language Morrison uses in the digging scene that features young Nel and Sula. Much of what discomfits about this scene is the fact that sex is rendered at once violent, "dirty," and aesthetically beautiful. As a result, it induces a mixed kind of aesthetic response that resists the categorical boundary of "disgust," as well as of "violence" itself. Although disgust is typically linked to a transgressive, modernist aesthetic, in *Sula* it is most closely associated with beauty and aesthetic absorption. If "the boundary of the self is manned at

its most crucial and vulnerable points by disgust" (Miller 137), then what do we make of an aesthetic mode that troubles such a boundary?

Improper Affect and Ethics

One of the ethical problems the novel poses is precisely that of metaphor's relationship to structural violence. As Yung-Hsing Wu has argued, Morrison's novels tend to pose "an ethical dilemma for all those who read her. She turns ethics into a problem" (781). In fact, Morrison's novels refuse to allow readers to reach either "a definitive and comfortable ethical stand" about the transgressions of her characters, or "a resolution to the problems posed by the novels' ethical dilemmas" (787). Wu faults critics for assuming that the ethics of Morrison's novels must lie in readers' judgments of characters' behavior. Instead, what she finds successful about Morrison's novels is their ability to prompt ethical questions that can never be resolved, but instead must be asked again and again. We see this ethical ambiguity evidenced in *Sula*'s portrayal of disgust. While *Sula* is critical of moral disgust, suggesting that it is shaped by racism and sexism and enforces harmful social norms, the novel embraces the chaotic nature of material disgust. Although some critics have celebrated this material disgust as a transgressive rejection of oppressive social mores or a new and improved ethics of disgust—one in which what is gross is good—this interpretation still relies on character behavior to make ethical judgments. Like Wu, I reject the assumption that, in order to participate in the novel's ethics, readers must ultimately decide which characters are "good," or assign fault to some entity, whether it's Sula's selfishness, Nel's passivity, or the Bottom's

normative morality. Instead, the novel calls into question the very notion that we might make reliable or fixed judgments grounded in disgust.

Just as the novel *Sula* puts readers in the position of being seduced, delighted, or entertained by portrayals of what should be disgusting subject matter, the character Sula repeatedly has the wrong affective responses to violence, experiencing senseless or apolitical violence not through feelings of disgust, shock, outrage, or trauma, but through aesthetic absorption or selfish pleasure.[23] The novel aligns Sula with the reader in an aesthetic, rather than ethical, field. Emphasizing Sula's affective alienation from the novel's diegesis releases her from the ethical dichotomy in which critics have often placed her. A shift toward affect also reveals the extent to which Sula's relationship to the Bottom reflects readers' relationship to the novel. She provides a model, in fact, for the ambivalence, attraction, and distaste that may simultaneously circulate while reading *Sula*. Precisely by feeling "wrong" about violence, Sula reveals the political and historically contingent contours of "natural" affect and offers readers not only a case study in ethics (as many critics have productively shown), but also a place for readers to put their own bad feelings of desire and pleasure in the face of violence. Reading *Sula*, that is, allows us to inhabit the role of affect alien, to know more deeply the complexity and contradiction that inheres in our consumption of violence through art.

If, as Winfried Menninghaus argues, disgust marks both our ethical categories and the limit of the aesthetic, then *Sula* develops an aesthetic of senseless violence to highlight the contingency of our ethical categories. As an alternative to an ethics of disgust, *Sula* emphasizes an aesthetic mode as a way of accommodating the dialectical

relationship between disgust and desire. I want, finally, to turn to a moment in the novel that has often been read as solidifying Sula's role as the Bottom's pariah. The scene takes place at the end of Sula's girlhood, marking a transition in the narrative. The third person narrator is following Eva, Sula's grandmother and Hannah's mother, as she searches for a comb in her bedroom. Eva glances out the window to see Hannah trying to light a fire in the yard, and continues to search for her comb. When she finds it, she looks out the window again and sees Hannah on fire, the flames "making her dance." Eva's first impulse is to "cover her daughter's body with her own," and she attempts this by jumping out the window. Eva cannot save Hannah, and a neighboring couple pours a bucket of water on her in an effort to stop the flames, "sear[ing] to sealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace." Although she is taken to the hospital, "she had already begun to bubble and blister so badly that the coffin had to be kept closed at the funeral" (75-7). The chapter ends with Eva's thoughts about Sula, who watched the burning from the porch:

> Try as [Eva] might to deny it, she knew that as she lay on the ground trying to drag herself through the sweet peas and clover to get to Hannah, she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking. When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck *dumb*, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was *paralyzed*, but because she was *interested* (78, my emphasis).

Sula's response contrasts importantly with that of another young girl on the scene, whose vomiting "finally broke the profound silence and caused the women to talk to each other and to God" (76). The young girl's reaction of extreme disgust provides a counterpoint to Sula's affectively inappropriate response to violence. As the passage makes clear, shock might be an appropriate alternative to disgust in this scene: Eva's friends try to explain Sula's response by suggesting that she was paralyzed by shock. Sula is disturbing in this scene because she has an aesthetic, rather than affective, response to violence. Her response in this scene shows us why she is so ethically confounding for readers: violence does not have the same effect on her as it does on other characters.

Not only does Sula respond to her mother's burning in the wrong way, with interest rather than shock or disgust, she observes the scene from a slight distance, watching rather than emotionally participating, as other characters do. The gruesome violence is portrayed through language associated with cooking—searing, bubbling—playing on the boundary between the appetizing and the disgusting and gesturing toward the dehumanizing desire circulating in the lynch mob. Eva is herself badly injured by her leap from the window, and experiences shock, guilt, and pain in response to the immolation. Likewise, the young girl has a strong affective and embodied response. Although vomiting does not have as violent an effect on the body as massive bleeding, it is nevertheless an instance of the body out of control, and indeed, unlike Eva's bleeding, is here brought about through an emotional, rather than physical experience. Unlike these figurations of bodily reaction, however, Sula is "interested" (which, following Kant, is also "disinterested"), engaging aesthetically rather than viscerally. Revising the Kantian

formation of aesthetic engagement, in which disinterested interest is free from desire (Scruton 24), Morrison suggests that desire and aesthetic judgment can intermingle.

Instead of acting as a means for directing readers' ethical sentiments, I would argue, disgust in *Sula* is linked to aesthetic interest, creating circumstances in which readers can experience the seemingly incompatible feelings of aesthetic absorption and visceral disgust simultaneously. Barbara Johnson convincingly demonstrates that Sula explores a tension between the solitary, removed experience of an aesthetic observer and a visceral, embodied experience of the world that brings individuals into the Bottom's community. Guided by a scene in which Nel sees her husband and best friend naked on the floor together and thinks to herself, in a distant, flat, way, that perhaps Sula will explain what is happening using some of her "lovely college words," Johnson calls these two poles "aesthetic" and "rapport" (8). Johnson characterizes aesthetics as "the domain of the contemplation of forms, implying detachment and distance," and rapport as "the dynamics of connectedness" (9). She argues that these terms signpost the distance between an aesthetic disposition and a communally-sanctioned, embodied, common-sense phenomenological experience. Arguing that the novel is about the tension between these two states, Johnson frames *Sula's* ethical questions not in terms of "who was good," but in terms of the problems that arise when depictions of suffering fail to provoke rapport.

When Hannah burns, the novel puts readers in the same position as Sula: removed observers who may feel our bile rise, but who nevertheless engage with violence only through the mediation of language. Readers contemplate the form of violence, are

perhaps absorbed by it, even as they might feel disgust. Sula's "interest" in her mother's burning body is an aesthetic one, and it contrasts sharply with the townspeople's "rapport" with one another through their shared experience of disgust in the face of trauma. Sula performs an aesthetic relationship to violence that echoes the phenomenological position of the novel's readers, who encounter scenes of violence that invoke lynching iconography (Chicken Little's waterlogged body, Hannah's "seared" flesh) via the mediating role of language. As Brinkema has argued, disgust points toward something unfigurable, the "worse than the worst," leaving a gap in our sensory apperception (115-151). Both Morrison and Walker rout disgust through aesthetic absorption, refusing the classical Enlightenment assertion that disgust demarcates the outside of aesthetic engagement.

Walker's silhouette "Burn" [fig. 3], which depicts a young girl self-immolating, echoes the immolation in *Sula* that crystallizes its questions about looking at violence. Like the deaths of Chicken Little and Hannah, "Burn" recalls signifiers of lynching—not the hangman's noose, but the "burning flesh" of "Strange Fruit"—that scene of violence that strongly articulates disgust's contingent relationship to black violation. Like those fictional deaths, "Burn" also recalls lynching without representing a lynching, showing an image of suffering but removing a political-historical context that would direct contemporary viewers towards a straightforward moral horror. The smoke that rises from the girl's self-immolation creates an outline of a woman's profile and a series of tombstones, crosses, and obelisks (Raymond 354). These signifiers encourage viewers to interpret them, but they also remain ambiguous. While Raymond sees in "Burn" the story

of a young girl who would rather kill herself than continue to live in slavery, the girl's ambiguous dress and features open the image up to other interpretive possibilities, as well.

More to the point, the silhouette form itself erases many of the visual details of a violated body that commonly elicit disgust. Just as "bulging eyes" and "twisted mouth[s]," to continue with Holiday/Meeropol's imagery, are absent from this image, so, importantly, is the "smell" of that burning flesh. The silhouette erases sensory details that might provoke visceral disgust at an image of black suffering, encouraging a range of more- or less-moral responses to the image and, in turn, revealing a historical truth about looking at black suffering. Depending on the observer, lynching has provoked visceral disgust and moral outrage, but it has also provoked callous delight, indifference, and aesthetic absorption. For many white participants, a lynching was a moment of affective connection and community-building, and lynching postcards provide an example of circulating images that also circulated affects, affects that often reinforced bonds between people.[24]

Houston Baker argues that the novel paints a clear and cohesive picture of what he calls "place," that is, black community, but I want to bring further attention to the way the novel paints Sula as outside that community specifically through the circulation of disgust. When Sula watches her mother die, the novel suggests that she experiences an affective failure, in which she feels the wrong thing in the face of another's physical anguish. Not only does she fail to be disgusted, but, as Eva intuits, her response is characterized by aesthetic interest. Sula contemplates the *form* of a burning body when

she should, according to the norms of the Bottom, be repulsed by the suffering it so gruesomely demonstrates.

In this way, *Sula* explores the dangers of offering up a mutilated body and expecting a certain ethical response. If the question we ask about the novel's ethics goes something like, "is Sula bad because she is merely interested in her mother's burning?", then we risk relying on an ethics of disgust when we read the novel. If I make an ethical judgment about the character Sula because I am disgusted by Morrison's figuration of Hannah's bubbling, burned body, I risk overlooking my own interest in this figuration. What role, for example, might the assonance of "seared to sealing" play in provoking my disgust at an imagined burning body? When Sula is passively interested in violence that seems like it should provoke a strong affective response, she models an aesthetics of violence that emphasizes disinterested interest over bodily engagement. Although the novel emphasizes a structural parallel between Sula and the reader, that parallel does not go so far as to suggest that readers should respond to real violence with aesthetic interest instead of disgust, shock, or empathy. Instead, it merely reminds us that violence itself does not produce a singular, stable affective response in an observer. Indeed, feelings about violence always circulate in relation to social attachments, legal structures, and aesthetic conventions.

Sula presents ethical problems that resist solutions. Instead of provoking righteous disgust, violence in the novel may simply be something interesting to look at. Disgust is a response to the infiltration or collapse of bodily boundaries, but Morrison shows us that ethical and textual boundaries can also prompt disgust. By collapsing aesthetic judgment

and affective response, the novel reverses Kant's argument that disgust is a boundary of, rather than a participant in, aesthetic experience. In so doing, it incorporates one of the more violent affects into readers' experience of literary figurations of violence. Because it can complicate the distinction between watching and experiencing violence, disgust may be an important part of our critical apparatus. If our field demands that we read, re-read, and close read, what happens to our bodily engagement with literature? Disgust may be an avenue for disrupting critical familiarity with a text and bringing bodily response to bear on aesthetic interest and ethical judgment.

Conclusion

Both *Sula* and *My Complement* refuse to either abject or sentimentalize the violation of black bodies. Given the overdetermined nature of the black body in U.S. culture, this refusal constitutes a radical break from the codes of racial and gender representation that most audiences are familiar with. The refusal of these works to represent the violated black body as either an object of rejected disgust or sentimental pity brings about a particular kind of aesthetic experience for readers and viewers of these works. Walker and Morrison depict scenes of violence that refuse to tell viewers what to think or feel. Since viewers cannot easily assimilate depictions of brutality into an extant paradigm of abjection or sentimentalism, they can often be repulsed by the very confounding nature of such depictions. Repulsion, then, plays a key role in aesthetic judgment and in the relationship between represented and real-world racial violence. By orienting viewers and readers toward gaps in the familiar protocols of reading disgusting

violence, Morrison and Walker risk provoking a range of unpredictable audience responses, but they also construct an aesthetic space in which an expanded range of emotions can circulate.

It is perhaps surprising that disgust, which is so closely associated with the sensations of taste and smell, should operate so forcefully in the sanitized, visual space of the gallery and in the mind's eye as one reclines quietly with a novel. This surprising confluence suggests that more of our sensory perception is in play when we experience art than it might seem at first glance. Indeed, as our visceral feelings of disgust bleed into the way we look at visual art, and visual cues infect our reading experience, it becomes difficult to ignore the ways the different senses evoke one another and overlap. *Sula* and *My Complement* show us, in turn, that aesthetic engagement shapes our relationship to community, to politics, and to bodies.

Chapter Two:

Shock and Recognition in a Feminist Avant-Garde: Riot Grrrls Reading Blood and Guts in High School

Building upon the notion that senseless violence can introduce new affective possibilities, this chapter outlines a feminist theory of shock: one that shows how artistic spaces can allow writers and readers, particularly young women, to work through complex, contradictory emotional responses to sexual violence. In order to theorize the relationship between consent, shock, pleasure, and danger, I examine the influence *Blood and Guts in High School* had on riot grrrl aesthetics and highlight the way the avant-garde framed by Acker and riot grrrl manipulated the terms of consent between texts and readers. Acker has explained that she set out to shock with *Blood and Guts*, and her non-linear narrative of incest, rape, prostitution, and death does so at the levels of form and content (Henke 2008, 98). Both Acker and riot grrrl writers, including Kathleen Hanna, depict violation graphically, often treating experiences like rape or incest with a surprisingly flat tone or a directness that seems to evacuate emotion. Not only do such aesthetic practices ostensibly elide the psychological complexity of violence, they also seem poised to shock readers. Indeed, many of Acker's critics credit her with using formal techniques to yank readers out of complacency, highlighting everyday forms of violence in a patriarchal world that are often not even recognized at all, let alone as acts of violence.[25] Another, surprising effect of Acker's use of shocking violence, however, is

the way that it has influenced riot grrrl aesthetics through an affective linkage characterized by recognition, connection, and love. In contrast to a more traditional understanding of shock that is linked to avant-garde aesthetics, I develop an alternate view of shock as characterized not by a numbing or foreclosing of audience response, but instead by identification and attachment.

Blood and Guts in High School shocks readers on two fronts: first, through horrific depictions of brutality, and second, through a postmodern style that is indebted to avant-garde poetics. Difficult to read both in terms of its cut-up, plagiarized, non-linear form and its graphic depictions of incest, rape, and abuse, *Blood and Guts in High School* seems to push readers away. As I read the novel, I often wonder whether it would still be in print, were it not for college courses that can make good use of its formal difficulty and theoretical fluency. Famously fragmented, the novel is quite inaccessible, aborting narrative threads as soon as it picks them up and speaking with a childlike directness that Acker has called "stupid writing" (Milletti 360). For readers unfamiliar with Deleuze and Guattari and Derrida and Haraway and Foucault, the novel can be particularly opaque. Since Acker was consuming mass quantities of poststructuralist theory as she was writing the novel, scholars tend to read *Blood and Guts* as a translation of high-theory concepts into literary tropes, finding bodies without organs literalized and chains of signifiers deconstructed. The novel is so theoretically dense that it is easy for readers to lose sight of the role of the body in their understanding of it.

Yet bodies are everywhere: descriptions of sex are conveyed via an explicit navigation of the flesh, and readers hear an awful lot about thighs, clits, and cocks. Acker

even provides readers with crude drawings of naked, aroused bodies, starting from the novel's second page. These images foreground embodiment on two levels: readers see bodies, and in so looking, they are returned to an awareness of the visual, embodied aspect of reading. Without words on the page to help readers lose themselves in the narrative they are reading, readers are reminded that they must look at the book in their hands, that reading itself is a physical, as well as mental act.

The chapter begins by briefly recounting scholarly discussions of avant-garde aesthetic conventions, which often sought to provoke shock in order to alienate or otherwise assault readers. Then I turn to *Blood and Guts in High School*, which uses avant-garde strategies of narrative fragmentation and shocking violence. Scholars have often understood the novel's shocking depictions of sexual violence as either a critique of the structural violence inherent in language, family, and sexuality, or as a feminist embrace of masochistic desire. By emphasizing the ways the novel's formal experimentation and graphic depictions of violence might affect readers, however, I reframe the novel's feminist politics around the affective community it has the potential to create precisely through its deployment of shock. The novel's manipulation of shock raises important questions about consent and the nature of the relationship between a reader and a text. It is by complicating our understanding of consent, I argue, that Acker's deployment of shock helps construct a textual space for feminist affective connection. In my discussion of consent and the phenomenology of reading, I hope to demonstrate the limits of legal definitions of consent in making sense of sexual violence. The feminist avant-garde exemplified by *Blood and Guts* and riot grrrl, I argue, uses shocking sexual

violence to highlight those limits and articulate the complex emotional experiences of sexuality and violence that a conventional understanding of consent fails to account for.

The chapter then turns to Kathleen Hanna's writing in the zine *My Life With Evan Dando, Pop Star*. Acker's influence on Hanna can be seen in the aesthetic conventions of her zines and their depiction of sexual violation. Deploying senseless violence by depicting decontextualized sexual trauma and by aggressing against readers with graphic images and language, the zines create a textual space for their readers to experience the full affective jolt of shock. Deployed in the context of feminist avant-gardes, however, shock does not merely alienate readers, shut down emotional engagement with a text, or horrify to the point of numbing. Instead, shock provides an entry point to affective connection between readers that might not physically interact with each other, and between readers and the violent texts that depict the vast, often contradictory, range of affective responses one might have to sexual violence.

This chapter will make a case that *Blood and Guts in High School* uses aesthetic strategies to shock readers, and that those strategies mark an important difference from the way avant-garde shock is typically understood. By tracing aesthetic affinities between *Blood and Guts* and 1990s riot grrrl subculture, I map a version of a feminist avant-garde that deploys shock as an experience of recognition, connection, and self-creation. It is perhaps surprising to find that riot grrrl writers felt love for *Blood and Guts*, instead of or alongside the feelings of shock, alienation, disgust, and anger one might expect. This affective resonance ceased to surprise me, however, when I began to see that Acker and

riot grrrl authors used analogous strategies of collage to construct textual spaces that encourage contradictory emotional responses to sexual violence.

Cruelty, Shock, and Avant-garde Audiences

My jumping off point is the early twentieth century avant-garde, which often sought to shock audiences through formal experimentation or taboo subject matter. I briefly sketch the role shock plays in scholarly understandings of the avant-garde, then turn to the postmodern moment, when the novelist Kathy Acker was creating a punk feminist avant-garde through novels like *Blood and Guts in High School*. Acker's feminist avant-garde aesthetics, I argue, are echoed in a subsequent subcultural formation, the riot grrrl scene of the 1990s, which took shape around feminist punk music, a simultaneous embrace and deconstruction of girlishness through sartorial and cultural style, and a culture of zine making and distribution. Through the production of zines, which were hand-made, often highly personal and confessional, magazines that teenage girls would distribute through the mail, riot grrrl became an avant-garde movement that coalesced around a particular understanding of feminism as well as a complex, but largely positive, affective relationship to shocking depictions of violence. By highlighting some of the aesthetic and affective convergences between *Blood and Guts in High School* and riot grrrl zine culture, I will outline a feminist theory of shock that reframes some of the key questions in debates about the avant-garde.

The avant-garde has often been understood to intervene in two arenas: the art world and its aesthetic conventions, and radical Left politics. Renato Poggioli's

foundational discussion of the avant-garde located its origins in Leftist political activism of the 1840s and 1920s. As an avant-garde tradition began to develop, earlier calls for social revolution converted to metaphors for artistic innovation. This transition led to the avant-garde's characteristic exaggeration of art's ability to intervene in the social world. Scholarship on the avant-garde has occasionally suffered from an eagerness to equate formal experimentation with social upheaval or transgression.[26] In the context of the classical avant-garde, characterized, for example, by Antonin Artaud's theory of "cruelty," shock is a central tool in unmaking bourgeois culture. Cruelty, for Artaud, connotes an art that assaults audiences with the radically unfamiliar in order to engage their bodies in the experience of art. It is designed to affect audience members more deeply than realism and to render them powerless in the face of art. In the classical avant-garde, shock numbs, alienates, hurts, or destabilizes readers or viewers.

Avant-garde artists thus seek to trigger certain forms of affective response. For Artaud, whose "Theater of Cruelty" rejected the primacy of language in favor of other modes of provoking audience response, the theater could use non-verbal modes of communication, like light and sound, in order to exert power over an audience. Maggie Nelson describes Artaud's "cruelty" as a form of aggression directed at audiences that creates a path to an authentic experience. According to Nelson, "cruelty" describes a paradoxical, highly constructed artistic experience that provokes a more direct, authentic connection between artist and audience (16-17). By manipulating physiological responses, the theater of cruelty sought to take audiences outside of themselves. Moreover, the theater of cruelty can "[furnish] the spectator with the truthful precipitates

of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior" (92). Although Artaud's use of force in his performances were designed to shock audiences out of complacency and subject them to overwhelming sensation that would shut down language-based critical engagement, his description of cruelty's other edge points toward the feminist uses of shock exemplified by Acker and Hanna. Even when it is imagined as a breakdown of comprehension, a numbing of the senses, or a repulsed sense of horror, avant-garde shock has the ability to incite certain kinds of understanding and connectedness, if only between audiences and their subconscious selves.

Importantly, the avant-garde can be characterized by a preoccupation with gender, or rather, with a guiding language that takes "man" and "woman" as structuring metaphors. Modernism was marked by its exploration of the category "woman" (Jardine, qtd. in Suleiman 13). Whether that exploration took the shape of the Futurist celebration of masculine aggression and "contempt for woman," or of the Surrealists' abiding interest in the female body, the "putting into discourse of 'woman'" was a structuring interest of modernist aesthetic practice (Jardine, qtd. in Suleiman 13). While the classical European avant-garde had a distinctly masculine cast, it would be incorrect to suggest that women were simply excised from avant-garde formations. Female avant-garde artists such as Mina Loy and Valentine de Saint Pont drafted their own manifestoes in part to respond to the misogyny of many avant-garde artists (Lyon 90). Thus, the later feminist avant-garde formation that took shape in the U.S. does not merely provide an antidote to the sexism of

earlier avant-garde formations. Indeed, the feminist avant-garde's preoccupation with the structural violence that maintains gender inequality can be seen as a point of continuity, rather than rupture, between earlier and later avant-garde formations.

In general, the classical avant-garde is characterized by an antagonistic relationship to institutions, a vexed relationship to time, and a vision of shock that repels, shuts down, horrifies or erases an audience's emotional engagement. Such a conception of shock implies that an avant-garde movement cannot survive institutionalization. If avant-garde aesthetics rely on the shock of violent rejection of social or aesthetic conventions, then one of their defining features is erased by institutional acceptance. Because they are anti-institutional, avant-gardes by definition cease to be avant-gardes when they are incorporated into museums, libraries, and classrooms. Their allergy to institutionalization is reinforced by a fraught relationship to time. Defined in part by an attempt to break with tradition, avant-gardes seek to do something other than create art that will survive the ages. By virtue of the spatial metaphors that imagine avant-garde art as always ahead of the forward sweep of time, an avant-garde formation must maintain forward movement and reject the past—even, it would seem, its own past. This tension thus casts the avant-garde in an endless cycle of nostalgia, and indeed, Peter Bürger characterizes the avant-garde as always-already lost or nostalgic (Eburne and Felski vi). Finally, the avant-garde is characterized by an exploration of taboo content and formal experimentation that is designed to shock audiences out of their bourgeois complacency.

Yet if we look to the punk feminist avant-gardes of Kathy Acker's fiction and riot grrrl zines, a different vision of shock takes shape. For this brand of the avant-garde,

which is aesthetically, if not genealogically, linked, shock can withstand institutionalization, is stretched over time, and can effect audience recognition, identification, and pleasure. Janice Radway has explored the "afterlives" of zines, arguing that their sharpest political intervention is in the academic archive. Although zines enacted a radical politics in the moment of their production and circulation, their political intervention morphed as their creators and readers grew up and became academics, archivists, and librarians (145). Like Radway, I understand riot grrrl to be in a less antagonistic relationship to institutions than the classical avant-garde. I also see shock working in a different way in this particular feminist avant-garde. As I will explore below, Acker and Hanna's avant-garde aesthetics are designed to shock audiences, but they do not fail when audiences cease to be shocked. Instead, shock provides an entry point into multiple responses, which can include recognition, joy, and love.

Kathy Acker's Cruelty:
Consent and Pleasure in Blood and Guts in High School

In Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, we see a modified form of Artaud's "cruelty" in play, one that emphasizes and challenges the question of "consent" to the experience of shocking violence. By foregrounding the complicated question of consent, the novel creates a discursive space for readers to experience conflicting emotions. "Consent" has become a central term in popular and political discussions of sexual violence, yet *Blood and Guts* demonstrates the limits of consent in demarcating a sexual

experience as violent or violating. Likewise, the novel explores experiences of non-consent that may produce contradictory feelings for characters as well as readers.

The novel follows 10-year-old Janey through the remaining four years of her life. She lives with her father in Merida, Mexico, but leaves him early on to move to New York City. Janey and her father have an incestuous relationship, which mimics normative adult relationships, rather than being portrayed according to realist standards. Janey leaves her father because he has become interested in another woman, and Janey reacts to this more as a scorned woman than a traumatized child. In New York, she works briefly at a bakery, where she holds all the customers in contempt, has two abortions, and joins a street gang called the Scorpions. After surviving a car accident in which her fellow gang-members are killed, Janey moves to the slums of New York, where she is eventually abducted by thieves who sell her to a Persian slave-trader. The slave trader, Mr. Linker, trains her to be a prostitute, but he releases her when he realizes she has cancer. Janey considers suicide, but determines that her cancer will kill her eventually anyway, so she travels illegally to Tangier, where she meets Jean Genet. Janey and Genet travel together through North Africa. Janey tells Genet about her life in the United States, which readers suddenly realize has involved a sadomasochistic relationship with President Jimmy Carter. In Alexandria, Janey steals from Genet and is thrown in jail, where Genet soon joins her. Soon after their release, Janey dies.

Yet the novel continues for 25 more pages, which chronicle a journey into the tomb of Catullus to search for an ancient book. Instead of the conventional typeface that comprises most of the novel, the words in this section are interspersed with pictograms,

illustrations, and maps. This section ends with a drawing that resembles a seal, which contains a scene including birds, a snake, and two human figures: one appears to be running, and one is visible only from behind, bent over at the waist. On the recto, we return to the novel proper to learn that "soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth" (165). I describe the final part of the novel in order to demonstrate its characteristic collage of intertexts, styles, and even media. Influenced by the feminist and punk movements, as well as poststructuralist theory and the 20th century avant-garde, *Blood and Guts* is also heavily plagiarized. Acker described her writing style as "piracy;" she would purposely steal with little regard for hiding her thievery. Paige Sweet argues that Acker's piratic technique challenged "the legal categories that protect and even sanction one kind of thievery (that which operates on behalf of capitalist accumulation) while criminalizing another (such as copyright infringement)" (23).

Representations of shocking violence in the novel undermine readers' sense that they are in control of their own reading experience, raising the concept of consent. Consent comes into question in nearly every part of the novel, but it is crystallized in an early image of a headless, naked woman, bound by her hands and feet. This image, which appears in the novel as a line drawing interjected into the narrative, and captioned "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (63), hints at an ambiguously violent encounter. This is particularly so, since the drawing makes it impossible for viewers to tell whether the drawing artistically leaves out the woman's head, or whether it depicts a decapitated woman. Clearly, a picture of a naked, bound woman suggests some kind of violence: the first conclusion to which we might leap is that the woman has not consented to this experience, that she has

been captured and abused. Yet without any hints given by the proximate narrative action or the title of the drawing, one cannot be sure that this is the case. Perhaps readers are witnessing a consensual, pleasurable BDSM scene. Perhaps what is being represented by the drawing is less important than its relationship to the title: the victim of violence here is Keats' poem, which has been remade, slandered, or critiqued by its association with this drawing. Readers might be less shocked by the image itself than by what it says about "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or Romantic poetry more generally. What is most remarkable about this image, however, is the fact that it *is* an image, that readers will turn the page and encounter its totality in one fell swoop. Readers won't have time to shut the cover and put the book away before they have seen this image, and if it shocks them, they won't have had the chance to decide whether or not to subject themselves to such a shock.

Embodied sensation is the language through which the novel represents violent rupture, as well as an overlooked entryway into understanding its interrogation of the concept of consent. Eruptions of senseless violence in the novel indicate moments where language fails in the task of representing embodied experience. In these moments, failures of language are also sites of contested notions about consent. Acker's involvement in sadomasochism provides a context for her treatment of consent as well as her relationship to the sex wars that were reaching a fever pitch around the time of the novel's publication. Like Gayle Rubin, Acker was briefly a member of the lesbian sadomasochism organization Samois (Clune 2004). As Rubin has explained, sadomasochistic pornography was used as evidence that porn is inherently violent and

misogynistic—the images of violation ostensibly speak for themselves. Acker's redeployment in *Blood and Guts*, however, emphasizes the inherent complexity of representation, image, and reception. Acker deploys senseless violence to destabilize the systems of meaning that the anti-porn movement took to be self-evident. Through an aesthetics of collage, stupid writing, senselessness, and pornography, Acker de-familiarizes the sign systems of pornography and sadomasochism and redirects readers' attention toward the affective circuits that representations of violence can provoke.

When critics address the novel's violent content, and not just its form, their arguments tend to see its senseless violence as surprisingly logical. Although scholars tend to take it as a given that Acker's depiction of violence is shocking, they tend to see such violence as doing explicit ideological work in one of two ways: either Acker uses shocking violence to critique real-world violence against women and imagine feminist alternatives, or she celebrates the radical possibilities of masochism. Susan Hawkins usefully glosses the two major camps of Acker's readers. On one side are feminist critics who see her blatant plagiarism and taboo-breaking as a mode for developing an anti-patriarchal, desiring female subject. According to Hawkins, Acker's "textual piracy" is always "an act, albeit small, of feminist guerrilla warfare" (638). In the other camp are those critics who romanticize Acker's masochistic sexuality, seeing the pain in her novels as "the means to liberation" (640). Yet the character is a young girl—can she consent to such experiences? Is that even the right question to ask about a fictional character?

Christina Milletti also links the stylistic terrorism experienced by the reader to Acker's attack on the ideology of copyright, intellectual property, and artistic originality.

Acker's signature is her "terrorist style," which works with her violent subject matter to "exacerbate and exploit" the potent intersection of art and violence (353). In a post-9/11 context, Milletti wishes to recuperate the "terrorist" stance that has become unimaginable in the Western world, but which once functioned as a space for radical critique of aesthetic norms or social commonplaces. The terms "guerrilla," "terrorist," and "piratical" are all frequently invoked to describe the way Acker does things with words, the way she steals, cuts up, and deconstructs.

It would seem as though her extralegal warfare is waged mainly against source texts, literary conventions, and language itself, yet such an attack extends to readers, as well. Acker's drawings, for instance, leap into a reader's field of vision as she turns the page, breaking novelistic convention. Imagine reading the novel in a coffee shop, feeling marked by the book in your hand, which is open to a full-page spread of a hand-drawn vagina captioned, "My cunt red ugh" (19). While this image doesn't depict a violent act, it presses against our definitions of violence in another way. The novel, as if wearing a trench coat with nothing underneath, shows us something shocking, which we cannot un-see.

For Avital Ronell, this image of "my cunt red ugh" contains precisely the interweaving of the physical and the linguistic that *Blood and Guts* explores. Not only do readers see a captioned drawing, they also, as Ronell puts it, "begin by reading the red 'ugh,' at once asignificatory and polysemic, but in the first place barely linguistic" (33). This textual moment exemplifies Acker's "stupid writing," with its onomatopoetic "ugh" and its directly expressive syntax. But it also, as I have suggested, makes a bit of a joke

out of the *différance* enacted by literary imagery itself. It is as if readers see two links in a chain of signifiers on the page—the phrase "my cunt red ugh," which signifies the picture they also see—and are prompted to imaginatively reach for further signifiers. Readers might attach this image to a physical vagina (Janey's? Acker's?), but also to any number of signifiers that the word "cunt" can be linked to. A term that can be spat out with violence, that can carry the threat of violence with it, "cunt" reminds readers that language can be felt, as well as thought, written, or spoken.

Katie R. Muth points out that most critics read the novel as an allegory for the struggle of female writers in a patriarchal society. Yet she argues that this interpretation overlooks the novel's constituting fragmentation, dead ends, and absurdities (89). For Muth, the novel is less concerned with trying to write a way out of the capitalist and patriarchal order (and with the inevitable failure of that project) than with three main poststructuralist concepts: "biopower," "the oedipal family as pathology," and "the gender politics of language" (90). The novel's disjunctions "bring into relief an argument about the authoritarian tendencies of narrative itself—an argument which Acker derived from the analyses of poststructuralist theory and aestheticized in a canonical example of postmodern experimentation" (101). Muth claims that when critics abandon the question of whether or not the novel is properly feminist or anti-authoritarian, and instead trace these nonlinear, conceptual threads, they can better understand both *Blood and Guts* itself and the defining material circumstances of postmodern literature more generally.

Following the genealogy Muth traces can also, I argue, help scholars better understand the role of senseless violence in the avant-garde and academic cultural

formations of the late 20th century. Although Acker is generally considered an avant-garde, or at any rate experimental, author, seeing her as a more direct inheritor to avant-garde artists like Artaud realigns literary genealogies according to their relationship to affect. Moreover, seeing Acker as a feminist avant-gardeist enables a new perspective on violence as part of the avant-garde project. Because she emphasizes what Slavoj Žižek has called the "objective violence" of everyday life—that is, structural violence that does not announce itself as such, but enables more recognizable, discrete acts of violence (2)—Acker also emphasizes the link between language, and violence done to language through artistic experimentation, and physical acts of violence, in particular those which are totally normalized in everyday life. The senselessness of the novel's form, even its violence *to* form, becomes its defining characteristic. And through such violence to form, the novel's aesthetics of shock can also shed light on the physiological experience of shock.

Senseless Violence and Suffering Readers

A reading that mines the novel only for the theoretical concepts it can illustrate seems inevitably to overlook the impact the novel has on readers' sensory responses. The novel's formal experimentation can be disorienting and exhilarating for readers, but coupled with its graphic violence, depicted in obscene language, the novel assaults readers at the level of form as well as content. Violence in *Blood and Guts* is shocking not only because it calls up images of real world violation, but also because it often appears unmotivated, random, or heedless of generic convention. Late in the novel, for

example, while its protagonist is in jail in Tangier, the text begins to mimic Jean Genet's *The Screens*. (Genet, incidentally, is in the cell next to Janey.) In the midst of their conversation about war and suffering, an utterly senseless eruption of violence intrudes in the form of what is presumably an italicized stage direction:

> Genet: Look…
>
> *Dim light has gathered through a tiny hole high up in the wall. Suddenly it goes black. In this blackness, caused by a power blow-out, the upper-middle class women and the cops smash store windows, beat up bums with chains, and wander about. A young black man sticks his hand under a ten-year-old girl's tight yellow sweater.*
>
> Janey: Let us pray to madness and suffering and horror (137).

Readers are prevented from making sense of this passage at multiple sites: the characteristic dialogue in the novel, which mimics the form of a play and emerges without warning in the text, disrupts traditional genre conventions. This echo of the theater also reminds readers that a play, unlike a novel, is brought to life through human actors. There are many layers of communication that an actor can convey to her audience, which a book in a lap simply can't convey. When the stage directions in the passage appear, the novel's generic features are further blurred. With these stage directions, however, we can see the ways a novel can access modes of representation unavailable to a play. Readers are pointed to "a tiny hole high up in the wall," through which someone (presumably Genet, but probably the reader, in a bizarre twist) can see a riot go down. Yet all this action takes place, of course, in "blackness." If we were watching a play,

we'd hear screams and the sound of glass breaking. We couldn't, however, see that "a young black man sticks his hand under a ten-year-old girl's tight yellow sweater." In this form, readers are encouraged to notice that the blackness of the street is echoed in the blackness of the man, and it begins to seem as though language works differently in this passage than it might as a stage direction. Racial signifiers shift, leaving readers to wonder about what, exactly, the language in this novel is depicting.

On one level, the passage disrupts readers' sense-making capability by stealing and mangling generic conventions, yet it also introduces brutality that seems not to have any reason to exist in the novel. Readers can entertain a number of possibilities: the riot sheds light on the unrest that is merely the background to Janey and Genet's own experiences, perhaps. Alternately, it might allegorically depict hierarchies of racial and gendered violence. Readers might find any number of meanings in this passage, yet they must bring their own ideas to the text in order to elicit such an analysis. The juxtaposition of what looks more like a depiction of real-world violence with the exaggerated, allegorical-seeming events in the plot might suggest that the one can illuminate the other, yet for many readers, it's difficult to see how the violence on the other side of the "tiny hole high up in the wall" can shed light on what's happening in Janey's cell. When, after the interlude of the stage directions, Janey speaks again, she might be suggesting that readers think about the explosion of violence in universal terms: she incants a prayer to "madness and suffering and horror." It's unclear what this means, although there are echoes of Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty, of de Sade's libertine ethic, and of a romanticization of violence more generally.

Genet also makes an apt foil for Janey when we consider the novel's relationship to self-shattering and queer negativity. Genet is a central figure for Bersani, who argues that queer activists should not strive for inclusion in an ultimately heteronormative mainstream, which depends on hidden violences and exclusions. Instead, queer folks can subvert heteronormativity precisely by embracing the negative stereotypes of gay male sex as violent, destructive, anti-generative, and anti-loving. Like anti-pornography feminists of the 1970s, Bersani sees penetrative sex itself as intrinsically violent and debasing, yet unlike Andrea Dworkin, Bersani suggests that the threatening aspects of sex should be embraced. Making oneself vulnerable by allowing oneself to be fucked frees one from the myth of the unified, stable, continuous identity that underpins so much of heteronormative culture. Another, impolitic, way of glossing Bersani's argument is that, when they get fucked, men can understand what it's like to be a woman.

There are moments in *Blood and Guts* when Jean Genet seems to anticipate Bersani's theory remarkably well. Janey riffs on Genet's *Thief's Journal*, claiming: "I want the textures of your lives, the complexities set up by betrayals and danger—I like men who hurt me because I don't always see myself, I have my egotism cut up. I love this: I love to be beaten up and hurt and taken on a joy ride. This SEX—what I call SEX—guides my life. I know this Sex of traitors, deviants, scum, and schizophrenics exists. They're the ones I want" (129). Although in this instance, Janey is aligning herself with Genet, she also subjects herself to abuse by him. Their masochistic relationship is in some sense an allegory of the relationship between female writers and a masculinist literary heritage, but it also reframes Bersani's rather romantic claims about self-

shattering. Genet "kicks Janey around and tells her to be worse than she is, to get down, there, down in the shit, to learn. Go to the extreme. To make the decision. Janey girl still has pretensions. She has to be drained of everything. She has to be disemboweled" (131). This passage challenges any sense that there is a clear line between masochism and abuse, or that pleasure and suffering are discrete experiences.

Senseless violence is not restricted to the thematic level of *Blood and Guts*. Acker's narrative structure also appears senseless and violent at several levels. Acker refers to her style as "stupid writing," linking it to a primal cry of pain. She sees this "stupid" mode as a way to clear a path for a more direct depiction of human suffering, one that cannot be fully contained by language. It is a way, according to Christina Milletti, for Acker to *write* suffering without also *representing* it (360). The act of representing, for Acker, distorts suffering, locking it in a prison-house of patriarchal language. Acker's take on her style might surprise her readers, since *Blood and Guts* appears highly performative, never letting the reader forget that she's experiencing a work of art. Acker's "stupid writing" clearly rejects realism, and, in so doing, emphasizes the ways that realist writing can normalize or hide the structural violence of everyday life. As Ellen Friedman has noted, "In Acker's works, sadistic men victimizing slavish, masochistic women represents conventional sexual transactions in society" (41). One might be inclined to reject *Blood and Guts* because it is too difficult to read at the level of theme, but also because one has no road map for the narrative journey the novel traces. Evocative of Artaud's theater of cruelty, *Blood and Guts* deploys a prose style that "violates the implicit contract between author and reader that forms the basis of the novel

as a genre" (Culler, qtd. in Milletti 359). Her writing aims to confront readers aggressively, to make reading itself a violent, risky interaction. Acker's transgression of cultural taboos—conveyed, for the most part, in everyday language—ensures that we feel something as we read.

Can stupid writing actually free a text from the distortions inherent in representation? Is Acker actually writing without representing? I contend that the novel's flat affect with regard to the violence it narrates (sexual violence in particular), is itself a highly stylized mode that distances the reader from the violence he witnesses. Unlike, for example, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which encourages readers to identify with Bone, the novel's protagonist and incest victim, *Blood and Guts* makes it very difficult to identify with Janey. In Ann Cvetkovich's reading of *Bastard*, she shows that the novel reframes discourses of incest that elide the complex emotional and sexual responses victims might have toward their experiences. Cvetkovich focuses on the way Bone eroticizes her experience of incest in order to move through it, claiming *Bastard* as an ideal example of literature's capacity to imagine new ways of understanding incest and to allow for impolitic or distasteful feelings to emerge in a way that enriches, rather than destabilizes, a queer, feminist resistance to the violence of incest (100-5). Acker shares Allison's inclination toward the unpredictable, counterintuitive, and nonsensical ways victims might process their experiences, yet she deals with characters and form quite differently than Allison, and this shift has profound consequences for the way readers absorb the radical claims about affect, incest, and healing that each text makes.

If we move away from the notion that a realistic work is one that closely mimics the real world, we can begin to understand Acker's assessment of her style. Rather than attempting to place the reader inside a textual world that closely replicates the real world, as more traditional forms of realism do, Acker's stupid writing produces an emotional landscape that appears highly stylized, but portrays emotional complexity in a surprisingly realistic way. Stupid writing does not make readers feel like they're in the world of the novel, but it can make readers know the emotional consequences of the relentless violence characters inflict and suffer.

It seems that *Blood and Guts in High School* wants a response to violation that is "more than self-righteous anger or hushed tones of sympathy or respectful silence" (Cvetkovich 4). Yet instead of exploring Janey's inner world, complicating readers' understanding of violence or trauma in terms of Janey's subjectivity, *Blood and Guts* turns toward the reader to explore the emotional valences of masochism, consent, and senseless violence. It is not exactly the case that readers will feel like Janey, treated poorly by the novel itself in an analogous way to Janey's treatment by her father, President Carter, and Jean Genet. Instead, readers experience the violent emotional encounter of shock, which, as Rita Felski explains, "tells us less about the specific content of an affective state than about the qualitative impact of a text or object on the psyche" (*Uses* 113). Felski also suggests that shock can "blur the distinction between self and other" or "unravel the certainty of one's own convictions" (110). Rather than providing life lessons, a window onto the world, or quiet companionship, literary "shock invades consciousness and broaches the reader's or viewer's defenses" (113). It is

shock's ability to invade consciousness that makes it a violent affect; it also links shock to the experience of traumatic violence.

The aggressive breach of shocking literature might also coincide with some of the positive effects we credit books with. The artist Nayland Blake, for example, has written of the recognition and pleasure he found in Acker's novels. He writes: "I read them like they were letters to me" (101). Part of Blake's affinity for Acker's work comes from her use of collage and cut-up technique, as well as its direct, even pornographic portrayal of sexuality. Blake's comments remind us that different readers meet texts at different places and approach them from different standpoints. Blake's affinity for Acker also points to the way her depictions of violence, while often shocking, can also enable multiple, often surprising emotional responses.

Indeed, Acker looks to masochism as the most open or free mode of experiencing violence (Redding 294-7). The masochistic subject is differentiated from a victim, who is locked into "a discursive figuration which allows only limited semantic flexibility," because, "having been brutalized by a ruthless power," she is also endlessly "discursively distinguished by the identity of 'victim,' an identity to which only a certain range of associations may be attached" (Redding 284). With *Blood and Guts*, critics encounter a dilemma similar to the one we saw in regards to *My Complement*: in the context of a violently unjust society whose cultural production so often validates or reproduces hierarchy, what space does an artist have to temporarily inhabit or even reclaim a position of powerlessness or abjection? The novel's exploration of masochism has often been understood to undermine its feminist politics. While the novel might indict

heteronormative patriarchy for the symbolic and structural violence it commits against women, it also undeniably explores the potential pleasures masochism has to offer. An important effect of Acker's "stupid" representation of Janey's masochistic experiences is their erasure of either her explicit consent or her explicit rejection of the abuse she experiences at the hands of her father, Carter, and Genet. While many critics have claimed that Acker puts her depictions of female masochism to work critiquing patriarchy,[27] such an argument overlooks the various and unpredictable ways the novel's violent scenes can be read.

Questions of Consent

In *Blood and Guts in High School*, senseless violence provides a conceptual link between Acker's experimental form and her challenge to conventional understandings of consent. Her fragmentary, piratical, "stupid" style renders the violence she depicts senseless, and it also subjects readers to textual violence that they may not be able to consent to experiencing. Before Janey begins her violent relationship with President Carter, readers enter into a kind of violent relationship with him, in the sense that the novel describes Carter in a shockingly gruesome manner. An excerpt from her diary relates the following:

> We're sitting in the Café el Menara and I tell Genet some of the things that happened in my last weeks in New York City:

> President Carter is the pillar of American society. He's almost fifty-three years old. WORN OUT by DECAying practices, he looks like a SKELETON. He's HAIRY as a RAT, flat-backed, his ASS looks like TWO DIRTY RAGS FLAPPING OVER A PISS-STAINED WALL. Because he gets whipped so much the SKIN of his ASS is DEAD and you can KNEAD it and SLICE it (119).

This description continues, getting more and more graphic as the reader's eye moves down the page. In the moment of reading, I would argue, consent is continually renegotiated: there is a strange experience of being at once in control of the text, and dragged along by it. A reader can close the book, of course, but by the time she does so, she has already crossed the threshold of what she can tolerate. She might be toughing out a gruesome read, assuming the repulsive descriptions will abate. She might be curious to find out what happens, and thus tolerate the sense of violation she feels as she reads horrifying words. While the novel's title signals that we might encounter some gore as we read, this novel doesn't signal its content to readers in the way that, say, the film posters for the *Saw* franchise alert viewers to the kinds of experiences they can expect. As one reads the passage describing President Carter, one is subjected to increasingly repulsive imagery that paints a vivid picture of a mutilated, decaying body. This might be an indictment of "the duplicitous use of first-world power … viewed through the backdrop of Iranian oppression and the Carter presidency" (Milletti 375), but the novel conveys its critique by way of a distracting and bizarre violence.

The rather mystifying inclusion of President Carter as a character exemplifies the novel's fraught representation of consent. Once President Carter is interacting with Janey,

we see a relationship defined by withdrawn consent, insufficient consent, and desire for violation. President Carter plays a more extreme version of the role Janey's father occupies at the beginning of the novel: a "boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father" (7) who abuses and neglects Janey. If we strive to see the novel in terms of its connection to the real world, we are appalled at the incestuous relationship between 10-year-old Janey and her father. Readers might also, of course, recognize their own family dynamics. When we slip into the bizarre world of the novel, compelled by Acker's diction into hearing Janey speak as a scorned (adult) lover, we recognize her father's abuse as that of a callous lover in a dying relationship.

If we interrogate this violence looking for political critique, we are hard pressed to unearth a coherent statement. Yet the visceral effects of this scene tell a story about the embodied experience of reading that can help us think through issues of consent and violence in the real world. By subjecting herself to the shocking violence of *Blood and Guts*, a reader, in effect, undergoes a compromised form of consent in a manner that approximates, to a small degree, the affective texture of violence itself. Reading *Blood and Guts* foregrounds the bodily experience of violence. As Judith Butler reminds us, "the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (*Precarious Life* 26). As surely as we might sympathize with Janey, a victim of the worst symptoms of patriarchal oppression—incest, enslavement, and rape—the narrative registers by which we encounter brutalities permits the possibility that readers will feel all sorts of things in the

face of violence. Disgust or outrage certainly, but also, perhaps, delight, numbing shock, familiarity, or boredom. What readers consent to, in the end, might be the possibility of just such an unpredictable, and uncomfortable, emotional response.

When readers open the pages of *Blood and Guts in High School*, they continually negotiate a tenuous agreement to give themselves over to a masochistic relationship with the text,[28] consenting to the possibility of being shocked by the novel's gruesome violence. They agree to something they might not desire, opening themselves to the possibility of reading a depiction of violation that they cannot un-think, that can, in its own way, be violating. Readers also open themselves up to the possibility of gaining discomfiting self-knowledge, learning, perhaps, that they have the capacity to laugh at violation. While in principle one can set a book down at any time, the compulsions of narrative often pull a reader across pages that make them wince, tie their stomachs in knots, and call up their bile. Karin Littau reminds us that books are physical objects that engage readers' bodies, sensations, and affective responses. Pointing out a tendency in critical theory to imagine reading as purely cognitive that dates at least since Wimsatt and Beardsley decried the "affective fallacy," Littau points out that "reading is historically variable and physically conditioned" (2). Interestingly, feminist and critical race theorists have occasionally been the exception to the "mentalist" tendency in critical theory, and have foregrounded the materiality of the reading body. Adding to Littau's insights, we might think of Acker and riot grrrl's feminist theory of shock as of a piece with 1970s and 1980s feminist theory's interest in embodiment and materiality. Janey's masochistic relationship to many characters in the novel is analogous to readers' compromised

consenting relationship to the novel's textual aggressions. To read *Blood and Guts in High School* under such conditions is to consent to violence under duress.

The novel thus raises questions about the relation between violence and consent inside the text and outside the text. Kathy Acker's deployment of senseless violence challenges our conventional sense of "consent" as an agreement between informed subjects to engage in a particular relationship. Once you consent to, say, being slapped in the face, the terms of injury or violation operate differently—because you have consented to being hit, you were not violated in the same way (if indeed you were violated at all) as someone who did not consent to such an assault. The conundrum *Blood and Guts* poses about consent concerns the relationship between abuse and love. While fourteen-year-old Janey is living in Tangier with Jean Genet, she begins to describe life in the U.S. by talking about President Carter. As people will do in dreams, President Carter soon materializes in Tangier, and he and Janey begin a violent affair. Of their relationship, she writes in her diary, "I didn't want to fall in love with him because I didn't want to put something in my life, but he was screwing me so GOOD and beating me up that I knew I was going to fall in love with him" (122-3). Critics have argued that this violent, sexual relationship is one of many that illustrates the extent of Janey's psychological trauma: she falls in love with abusers, over and over again, illustrating deep pain caused by her incestuous relationship with her father.

When Janey talks about falling in love with President Carter, it is tempting to disbelieve her, to see what she calls "love" as symptomatic of the trauma of incest or a continuum of heterosexual oppression. The pain of romantic longing is aligned with the

pain of abuse. As Jerome McGann explains, for Acker, love is "revolting" in the sense that "it is repulsive and it is in revolt. Love's characteristic form appears as violation, torture, rape" (5). The novel's association of love with violence is clearly troubling, and certainly demystifies the violence that can underpin romantic love. Yet instead of simply explaining away Janey's desire for violation, the novel points readers toward the intensity of love to emphasize the limits of self-knowledge in dictating the terms of consent.

In short, Janey's interaction with President Carter lays out the shortcomings of "consent" as a model for understanding sexual interactions. Within the world of the novel, Acker's deadpan humor and use of pastiche disrupt attempts to read Janey's interactions with men in relation to real-world dilemmas of sexual consent. We can't glean an alternative ethics of sadomasochistic sexual relationships from the novel; we also can't quite condemn Janey's relationships as abusive, signs of her utter violation and trauma. They are too funny and weird, and, moreover, Janey uses an abstracted language of love and desire when she writes about them in her diary. Perhaps Janey's invocation of love might be understood as evidence of her false consciousness, but such an interpretation oversimplifies Acker's complex portrayal of love and abuse. The representations of consent that I have already discussed are best understood in light of another contested relationship: that between the reader and the text.

Even if we don't agree that books and readers are our friends, as Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum would have it (Felski, *Uses* 107), we might concede that readers are in control of their reading experiences and have power over the books they read. Indeed, many critics seem to believe that readers hold tyrannical authority over books.

We often talk, for example, about translations or adaptations doing violence to an original. Yet *Blood and Guts* suggests that the inverse is true: it is the reader, not the text, who is vulnerable to pain. When we are deeply affected by shocking scenes of violence, we register an empathetic, almost ghostly impression of the violation that is located in our own bodies. We could say that a text reaches out and touches us—or even slaps us. "Like trauma," suggests Cvetkovich, "touch is a term that has both physical and emotional, both material and immaterial, connotations. To be emotionally touched, like being traumatized, is to be affected in a way that *feels* physical even if it is also a psychic state" (51). While Felski suggests that literary shock is experienced not as a "real or imagined threat to our safety," but as an "affront to our moral or aesthetic sensibilities rather than our physical well-being" (113), the emotional experience of shocking literature inevitably retains an embodied, visceral element. Violent literature might be shocking insofar as its content offends or surprises, but the phenomenological experience of shock is one that heightens readers' bodily engagement with a text—it can make readers look away or close their book; it can make them wince or widen their eyes. Indeed, when compared with visual art or film, literature can extend the experience of shock: while I am making a split-second decision about when to turn my eyes away from a scene of torture in a Michael Haneke film, the mode by which language mediates violence protracts my engagement with it, as I more slowly decide when I've reached the limit of the violence I can stand. *Blood and Guts* is a haptic text, one that returns readers to the felt experience of shock and the physiological aspects of aesthetic engagement. Its

haptic nature also illuminates the ways in which literary consent is inevitably concerned with violence to the body.

How does literature manufacture or override consent? What does it mean to consent to an action taken by a text? The physical responses of a reader to literary shock force the question that we might withhold consent from certain kinds of reading experiences. Felski describes shock as "a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying" (105). Shock can also "trigger a notable absence of emotion" (113). The experience of pain or horror seems like something a reasonable individual would always want to resist or avoid. Or, if she consents to such experiences, she does so in carefully controlled ways (the pain of weightlifting or tattooing, two of Acker's treasured hobbies, comes to mind). Senseless violence provokes very different affective responses across texts and across readers. The aesthetics of *Blood and Guts* are geared toward provoking shock as well as boredom. Janey is raped and beaten for no apparent reason, her two abortions are figured as medicalized, traumatic violations, and her relationship with President Carter is rendered in repulsive language. A characteristic interjection (that seems like a poem or song lyric) is found in the midst of a passage where Janey describes her experience at CBGB's to Jean Genet:

> I USED TO BE UNHAPPY
> OH YES
> I LIVED IN THE CORNER OF A ROOM
> THEN YOU CAME ALONG AND FUCKED THE SHIT
> OUT OF ME
> I WON'T BE UNHAPPY AGAIN
>
> SPRING IS A COCK THAT'S HARD
> OH YES
> I KNOW YOU'RE A SECRET TERRORIST

‘CAUSE LOVE LEADS TO DEATH

I WON’T EVER BE UNHAPPY AGAIN
THOUGH IT’S BEEN A WEEK SO YOUR LOVE’S
ALMOST OVER
THE WORLD’S ABOUT TO EXPLODE
TERRORISTS NEED NO MORE COVER
OH YES LOVE LEADS TO DEATH
OH YES (122)

The violent content of this interlude works with its unmotivated, disorienting interruption in the narrative and its broken-seeming, poetic form to pull readers out of the seemingly-disembodied experience of absorption in narrative.

This passage is clearly designed to shock readers, but in a way that makes clear the multiple ways shock might be experienced. By echoing and perverting what sounds like the lyric of a pop love song at the beginning of the passage, replacing something like “you loved me” with “you fucked the shit out of me,” the passage parodies pop culture to suggest the unseen violence that undergirds popular notions of romantic love. More interesting for my purposes, however, is the way that the passage also seems to elicit multiple, and very different, responses. A reader might laugh at the incongruity of the passage, she might feel aggressed against by the violently strong language, she might be put off by the apparent dismissal of romantic love, she might be caught off guard by a stirring of erotic desire in response to an image of violent sex, or she might be bored by the flat tone and lack of psychological depth that characterizes the passage.

Yet in the case of a number of these reactions, “shock,” surprisingly, seems like an appropriate term to characterize them. It might seem shocking, for example, to find oneself turned on by violent, dehumanizing sex, particularly if one identifies as a

contemporary Western feminist. More generally, this passage might elicit a kind of low-grade or ambiguous sense of shock, in which a reader is having a powerful affective response, but can't quite characterize or understand it. Through collage, perverse language, and its "stupid" tone, *Blood and Guts* works like an affective tripwire to provoke a number of possible forms of shock, some of which might draw a reader further toward the text, rather than push her away.

In contrast to Morrison's version of senseless violence, which elides conventional narratives about racial and sexual victims and perpetrators in order to first provoke, and then displace, readerly disgust, for Kathy Acker, senseless violence links physical violence to the kinds of violations a text can inflict on a reader. If Morrison uses violence to disambiguate the relationship between disgust and black suffering, Acker demands an immediate affective response from readers. These very different treatments of senseless violence, however, both shed new light on the question of implicit contracts between a text and a reader.

In Acker's case, child-like syntax paired with direct diction ("My cunt red ugh") shocks through a directness that is nevertheless emphatically not realism. Many of Acker's critics have claimed that her writing style is an attempt to depict an emotional realism, and, by breaking taboos, to show readers a reality that is suppressed in popular culture and contemporary ideology. *Blood and Guts* relentlessly portrays acts of violence that occur all the time—incest, rape, domestic violence, the violence of global capital, but are culturally repressed. Moreover, Acker depicts violence in a casual, straightforward manner that renders it all the more shocking. It is as though the novel speaks so directly

about unspoken, quotidian forms of violence (like incest or patriarchal oppression) that readers are shocked by the matter-of-fact way Acker frames them.

In turn, the novel puts forward shocking scenes of violence so relentlessly that readers become inured to it, or even bored by it. McGann explains that Acker's characteristic deadpan style "destroys its own shock effect" (7). The barrage of obscene language and shocking imagery is so relentless as to become monotonous. Violence or obscenity might mark an important plot shift or thematic nexus in other works, playing an important role of truth-telling in a text. Yet in Acker's work, such shocking content is so relentless that, while it might tell a truth, over and over, "its truth-telling appears meaningless, blind, … ludicrous[,] and obscene" (6). Instead of repeating trauma in order to move through it, readers encounter traumatic events to the point of exhaustion. Indeed, boredom becomes a possible affective response to Acker's representations of violence. A bored response to represented sexual violence can signal a new kind of affective or political engagement with it, rather than a resigned acceptance of its existence in real life.

Like shock, boredom also "ask[s] us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions" and "prompt[s] us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible" (Ngai, *Ugly* 262). In fact, Valerie Solanas begins her famously violent, ironic, and incisive critique of misogyny by stating: "Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the

male sex" (35). Solanas frames her rejection of capitalist patriarchy in terms of her boredom with it, refusing a society that makes violence against women a quotidian, even boring, fact, in a mode that is at once playful and aggressive. Like Solanas, whose *SCUM Manifesto* also belongs in the tradition of feminist avant-garde shock, Acker pours forth a barrage of senseless violence that might produce shock, but also opens the reader to the possibility of experiencing boredom, delight, or any range of reactions.

Riot Grrrls as Readers

Because Acker's novel includes graphic drawings that often depict violence against women, and because it so glibly, "stupidly" describes Janey's suffering at the hands of a number of people, it is easy to assume that the novel provokes shock in the same way as earlier avant-garde works. However, by tracing the novel's influence on one important reader, Kathleen Hanna, I hope to show that a late-20th century feminist avant-garde reimagines the affective texture of shock and deploys shock differently. The result is not to offend the bourgeoisie, but to create an alternate subcultural community.

Hanna is perhaps the most famous of the early-generation riot grrrls who came together around 1990 at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington. Following the impulse of Lisa Darms, whose *Riot Grrrl Collection* insists that riot grrrl is a complexly theorized artistic and cultural movement, rather than one manifestation of zine subculture, I align Hanna with Acker in a late-twentieth century avant-garde formation. In order to think through the new aesthetic and emotional possibilities afforded by Acker's treatment of shock and consent, I also treat Hanna as a reader. The example of

Hanna suggests that readers can have surprising reactions to senseless violence, including moments of recognition, identification, and love.

Kathleen Hanna was deeply influenced by Kathy Acker, and credits Acker with inspiring her to write music. In *Girls to the Front*, Sara Marcus's recent cultural history of riot grrrl, Hanna discusses her experience of reading *Blood and Guts* for the first time, saying:

> I was just writing all this crazy shit and I thought I was totally insane . . . And I got *Blood and Guts in High School* from one of my photo teachers, and I totally felt like, Oh, I'm not crazy! It was such a confidence builder for me. I wasn't even sure what kind of artist I was going to be, like if I was a writer or a photographer or what. But it made me feel like these other women had done this amazing shit and I could too (32).

Hanna describes a sense of recognition, specifically along the lines of being "crazy" and "insane." A tic of contemporary speech, these references to mental illness nevertheless point towards the way *Blood and Guts* approaches narrative, sexual violence, and the phenomenological experience of being a young woman. Through an aesthetic mode that would be seen through a more normative lens as "insane," *Blood and Guts* depicts the conflicting, surprising, or incoherent ways an individual might respond to violence. In doing so, the novel also took Hanna out of isolation and pointed her toward a model for feminist art-making.

When Acker came to nearby Seattle to teach a two-day workshop, Hanna enrolled and brought a copy of her zine, *Fuck Me Blind*, to show Acker. Acker chose Hanna as her

opening act for a reading she was doing at the end of the workshop. Unwilling to stop there, Hanna finagled an interview with Acker by pretending to be a reporter for the magazine *Zero Hour*. Hanna has credited this incident with teaching her that "you should lie to people to get things you want; you can make things happen for yourself just by acting confident" (Marcus 33). This wasn't the only thing her experience with Acker taught her, however. The interview left her deflated, because while Hanna believed men benefited from sexism and misogyny, Acker disagreed with her, claiming that patriarchy harmed men as well as women. Hanna reports: "I walked away from the interview with my tail between my legs." Yet this experience was incredibly valuable: "You know how when your feelings are really hurt, or you feel really humiliated, you can't stop thinking about it? She actually did me the biggest favor anybody could have done me: She treated me like I was really a writer and that I had ideas of my own and that I was strong enough to be challenged" (Marcus 33-4). Acker was a literal influence on Hanna, but this lineage also points toward more general thematic and formal linkages between Acker's punk feminism of the 1970s and riot grrrl aesthetics of the 1990s.

In addition to thematic overlaps between *Blood and Guts* and later riot grrrl zine writing, formal affinities help us trace connections between the avant-garde formation of the New York punk scene in the 1970s and the later punk formation that coalesced in Olympia, Washington and Washington, D.C. In 1974, four years before the publication of *Blood and Guts*, Acker was performing in the underground poetry scene in New York and publishing her work as the "Black Tarantula." Combining her own writing with the appropriated work of other authors, she mimeographed documents and circulated them

through a subscription service to interested readers (Stosuy 26). Her method of dispersal bears some resemblance to Early Modern coterie publication, but it also anticipates modes of zine production and circulation.

Uncanny resemblances between *Blood and Guts* and riot grrrl zines pop up throughout the ephemeral, widespread collection of zines that were in circulation in the 1990s. Echoing Acker's drawing of the headless, tied up female body she captioned "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the cover of *Riot Grrrl* NYC issue 5 depicts a hand-drawn female body whose arms, legs, and head have been cut off (Darms 191). The artist, "Claudia," has shaded the body's contours in ink, and at the base of the torso, the legless body is drawn to resemble the exposed half of a sliced-open apple. The apple's core takes the place of the woman's vagina, offering a grotesque literalization of the notion that the female body is an object to be consumed. The image also evokes Western associations of Eve and the apple that led to humankind's fall from Eden, along with the misogynist view of the female body as a dangerous temptation and innately immoral. Like the reference to the literary canon in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this image echoes the Venus de Milo, but goes further. The image is easily glossed for its representational significance and its ironic feminist point of view, but it also relies on visual pastiche and seemingly-unmotivated violation in order to lure readers to linger over the image, parse the distinction between apple and mutilated female body, and find themselves staring at female genitalia when they thought they were looking at fruit. Like *Blood and Guts*, the cover of *Riot Grrrl* depicts senseless violence that confronts viewers whether they have consented to experience such violence or not.

In her 1993 zine "My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar," Kathleen Hanna uses many of the formal strategies that Acker explored in *Blood and Guts*. An ambivalently violent extended love letter to the Lemonheads lead singer, "My Life" consists of collages made with images of Dando covered with cut out lines of text that read, for example, "Feeling so spectated myself. / I get pleasure from looking / at this bare chested boychild. / Writing creepy letters to Evan / helps me to understand why men / go to stripbars," drawings of nude men and women, and confessional letters. Echoing Janey's description of her masochistic relationship with President Carter, Hanna writes: "I fell in love with Evan because it seemed like the worst thing i could do at the time. I fell in love with Evan because it was totally uncool and pathetic which is how i felt inside." (1993, in Darms, 201). Throughout the zine, Hanna weaves structural critiques of gender and race into masochistic, romantic, and violent writing about the object of her affections. She alternates between a desire to love Dando and a desire to kill him, at one point wryly comparing herself to Valerie Solanas, saying "Valerie Solanas shot [Andy] Warhol to stop co-optation and also to be funny" (217). A hand-drawn picture of "a problematic survivor" emphasizes the backdrop of violence against which Hanna explores her imbricated feelings of pleasure, desire, rage, and disgust, and the material and emotional demands mainstream culture makes on victims of sexual violence.

Hanna's contradictory, aesthetically aggressive style extends from the pages of the zine to her music with the band Bikini Kill. Characteristic of riot grrrl punk music, Bikini Kill's sound is marked by simple chord progression and loud, scream-like lyrics hurled at listeners. In "Li'l Red," Hanna sings, "these are my ruby-red lips, the better to

suck you off / these are my ruby-red nails, the better to scratch out your eyes," (Li'l Red). The lyric epitomizes riot grrrl's imbrication of sexual desire and violence, and in doing so, ambiguously points toward other, unspoken violences that shape the circumstances for the lyric's response. Through the parallelism of "ruby-red," the lyric links the self-abnegating position of a woman sucking a man off to the violent desire to scratch out his eyes. Hanna lingers over the "ruby-red" moments in the song, stretching the vowels and leaning into a deeper pitch. Her pitch drops deeper when she sings "suck you off," and she imbues the line with both anger and desire. When she sings "scratch out your eyes," however, she screeches the lyrics so quickly that they are difficult to understand on the first listen. She follows the line with a series of screams reminiscent of exaggerated vomiting. While the song's style emerges out of the punk scene and would be familiar to those within it, its aggressive tone and refusal to follow mainstream conceptions of melody and tonality mark it as an avant-garde assault on norms of taste and aesthetic pleasure.

Yet, of course, "Li'l Red" and other riot grrrl songs provoked a great deal of aesthetic pleasure when they were played in clubs and basements in Olympia, New York, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. And when young fans attended those shows, they often experienced such pleasure via moshing, which put fans not only close to the performers onstage, but also in a position of bodily vulnerability to the violent dancing and banging against each other of the crowd. Zines covered strategies for safety in the mosh pit (Darms 170), helping girls understand how to protect their bodies by following the unpredictable flow of the crowd and giving themselves over to unpredictability. The

inclusion of safety strategies demonstrates one of the central, if underexplored, tenets of the riot grrrl ethos: there is strength to be gained when one makes oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable to the violence in the world. Risk and even violation are a part of living, and can enrich life. More than that, the social forces that would protect girls from any possibility of risk or violation—the heteronormative family, the politics of respectability, sexual prudishness, the law—are the same ones that enable and often perpetrate violence against girls.

While classical understandings of avant-garde shock imagine the relationship between artist and audience as one characterized by distance, aggression, and alienation, a look at the girls who involved themselves in riot grrrl paints a picture of shock that manages to attract, call to, or otherwise connect audiences to artists. This may be in part because the riot grrrl ethos focuses on blurring the lines between artist and audience. In addition to the public subcultural space of, say, a punk show, riot grrrl also took form in networks of private spaces. Zines circulated between girls via the postal service, and scholars have noted the links between zine-making and other kinds of girls' "play"—scrapbooking, paper dolls, collage, etc. This link shouldn't be understood to diminish the subcultural vitality of riot grrrl; instead, it demonstrates the way riot grrrl rejected the belief that, in Kathleen Hanna's words, "GIRL=DUMB GIRL=WEAK GIRL=BAD" (Darms 168). In addition to reclaiming "girl" as a powerful subject position, riot grrrl zines used formal strategies of collage, "girly" handwriting, drawings, and confessional explorations of taboo subjects to explore the abjection, as well as power, of girl identity.

A feminist avant-garde structured around questions of shock, consent, sexual violence, and pleasure provides an alternative framework to the more recognizable legal parameters for talking about sexual violation and suffering. Legal definitions of rape and sexual harassment are influenced by figures like Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin, whose disgust for male sexuality and suspicion of sexual pleasure have been widely documented. By contrast, an avant-garde, shocking depiction of female sexuality is less structured through disgust at sex, and more focused on the surprising emotions that arise around sexuality. As Lauren Berlant has demonstrated, anti-pornography legislation in the 1980s, which brought together the unlikely bedfellows of radical feminists (Dworkin and Mackinnon) and the Reagan Right, "helped to consolidate an image of the citizen as a minor, female, youthful victim who requires civil protection by the state whose adult citizens, especially adult men, seem mobilized by a sex- and capital-driven compulsion to foul their own national culture" (67). Berlant approaches the pornography wars of the 1980s through the lens of citizenship, but I am interested in the ways affect fueled these debates and, in turn, the legislation that came out of this era shaped the socially-legible affective possibilities for women who experience sexual violation.

The anti-pornography activist Diana Russell offers an illustrative example of that movement's treatment of consent vis-à-vis representations of suffering. She writes, "In another movie I saw, boiling candle wax was dripped onto a bound woman's breasts. Had she consented beforehand? Even if she had, this is a violent act" (qtd. in Rubin 2010, 29). Russell suggests that in the face of violence, consent doesn't matter, that the violence inflicted on a body is how we should determine the consent of the subject inhabiting that

body. And if "we" don't like the kind of violence inflicted, then consent is impossible. Continuing her critique, Russell suggests that naiveté, ignorance, or false consciousness must have informed the subject's consent, and thus, her consent is no consent at all: "even where models have consented to participate, they don't necessarily know what they're in for, and often they are in no position to maintain control" (29). As Rubin explains, "the image's content, and Russell's own revulsion, substitute for evidence that anyone was actually tricked, abused, or coerced in the making of the film" (29). The anti-pornography movement incorporated these kinds of rhetorical strategies and reading practices on a larger scale, but the feminist avant-garde offered a complicating alternative conception of consent and represented violence.

Laura Kipnis, I think, was right to attribute Mackinnon and Dworkin's stance on pornography, sexual harassment, and sex more broadly to disgust with sexuality, in addition to a theoretically-complex analysis of structural misogyny. She suggests that "one might want to interpret feminist disgust as expressing symbolically the very real dangers that exist for women in the world." However, "the net effect [of feminist disgust at penetrative sex] is to displace those dangers onto a generalized disgust with sex and the body (or more specifically, onto heterosexual sex and the male body)" (140). A widely-accepted definition of third-wave feminism includes an embrace of sexuality in reaction to the sex-negativity of some second-wave feminists, but Kipnis's focus on disgust as a driving force in this broader phenomenon clarifies the way affect can structure legal and social parameters.

As my examination of *Blood and Guts* and riot grrrl has demonstrated, feminist shock offered an alternative to the disgust Kipnis describes. For this feminist avant-garde, shock became an aesthetic strategy that recognized the affective power of texts over readers and of images over viewers. Berlant points to this textual aggression as a key to understanding the pornography wars of the 1980s. Many critics believe that "texts are muscular active persons in some sense of the legal fiction that makes corporations into persons: texts can and do impose their will on consumers, innocent or consenting" (67). This belief fuels anti-pornography feminists' assertion that, even leaving aside its conditions of production, pornography commits a kind of violence against women. Acker and Hanna, however, seem to welcome and encourage a text's ability to aggress against unconsenting readers.

Berlant ends her discussion of Mackinnon and Dworkin with a lament for a "feminist or materialist visionary politics Dworkin might have espoused" in this cultural moment. Such a politics "would continue to imagine a female body as a citizen's body that remains vulnerable because public and alive, engaged in the ongoing struggles of making history" (71). I see riot grrrl zines as answering Berlant's hope here, and I understand zines as theoretical alternatives to a sex-negative feminism symbolized by Mackinnon and Dworkin and written into the legal framing of sexual violence. The collage-coupling of image and text, photograph and drawing, paired with an aesthetics informed by diary writing, figures girlhood as a vulnerable, public, and alive identity. Clearly Kathy Acker's work is conversant with the pornographic—with her line drawings of erect penises and exposed vaginas, her appropriation of the "fuck me, daddy" language

of porn—but the shadow of porn also, I contend, falls over riot grrrl zinemaking. As evidenced in *Riot Grrrl* 5, riot grrrl authors manipulated pornographic tropes and depictions of potential violence in order to explore the emotional complexity that Mackinnon and Dworkin's vision of female desire and oppression cannot accommodate.

Within the specific subcultural formation of punk feminism from the 1970s to the 1990s, shock becomes a way of creating community. Scholars of the avant-garde are familiar with the ways avant-garde artists use shock to demarcate communities—that is, to realize who is outside the avant-garde community. But for the feminist subculture that took shape around Kathy Acker and riot grrrl, the feeling of shock was also a way to create an affective network that drew together a feminist subcultural community. An aesthetic of rupture can generate forms of attachment.

Such a structure of attachment and community, however, is also qualified by race. As scholars of riot grrrl, particularly Mimi T. Nguyen, have demonstrated, the historiographical narrative about riot grrrl has often erased non-white girls' experience, both as central participants in the subculture and as excluded from/by many of the calls for sisterly solidarity. Nguyen outlines the way a rhetorical gesture of calling out privilege became a prominent feature of zine culture, and, invoking Sara Ahmed, she argues that such a gesture functions as a kind of absolution from privilege—if I recognize it, I erase it. This rhetorical move also relied on declarations of intimacy that subsumed the embodied and emotional experiences of non-white "others" for a community that nevertheless remained fairly exclusive (179-182). When tracing the lineage of the avant-garde, we see a model of delay that positions women as late to the avant-garde game,

partly because their social position did not allow them to embrace abjection or refuse the shackles of respectability in the same way it did men. In the punk feminist moment, such respectability could be rejected by white girls while non-white women approached respectability out of the context of very different historical circumstances.

The broadest defining characteristic of an avant-garde is its call for a break with a past moment. Often imagined as moving forward in time, an avant-garde gesture may not always call for a refusal of cultural or social tradition, but does generally seem to mark a moment of rupture. A feminist theory of shock, by contrast, expands time, understanding it as compatible with, rather than endemic to, shock's powerful aesthetic effect. Riot grrrl zine culture demonstrates the way an avant-garde primarily interested in categories like gender and girlhood, and reacting to a world structured through sexual violence, deploys shock to forge connections that are not only affectively intimate, but also unfold through time.

Arguing that zines have "afterlives," or lasting impacts on networks of individuals and their participation in more extended social and cultural movements, Janice Radway encourages us to rethink our understanding of time in relation to avant-garde movements. While we might assume that time nearly always washes away the sting of shock that avant-gardes require to forge ahead, Radway offers a different vision of shock's reverberating effects. Academic treatment of zines and zine culture, for example, including library collection as well as articles and books, indicate not a deflation of the political possibility for zine culture, but "a political intervention, an effort to import zines into new social and institutional venues, to extend their lives and augment their rhetorical

effects, to garner for them a new, perhaps larger audience capable of extending and building on their radical claims." Moreover, these political effects "are themselves effects of zine-ing." They have had the radical effect, Radway claims, of "interject[ing] the voices and works of adolescents into the legitimated precincts of knowledge production" (145). Thus, not only does feminist shock sustain a kind of power through long stretches of time, its political efficacy is dependent on a kind of cooptation by those institutions that someone like Marinetti wanted to destroy. A feminist theory of shock, demonstrated through *Blood and Guts in High School, Riot Grrrl,* and *My Life with Evan Dando*, can sustain different forms of shock across a longer stretch of time. For this feminist avant-garde, shock can hail as easily as it can alienate, and shock helps to proliferate subcultural communities, rather than functioning as a gatekeeper for exclusive avant-garde coteries. Most importantly, shock can be come an affective space for experiencing the trauma, joy, mourning, anger, desire, or boredom that sexual violence can—controversially—elicit.

Conclusion

Blood and Guts in High School makes it clear that reading a book can be an emotionally precarious, even painful experience. Rita Felski has linked shock to the vulnerability of reading, agreeing with Lionel Trilling when he claims that modern literature attacks readers with violence and destruction (106). A punk feminist avant-garde suggests that it is the reader, not the text, who is vulnerable to pain. Shock in the feminist avant-garde can incite a kind of pain in readers that blurs the boundaries between the psychic and the physical: readers are moved to tears, gag with repulsion, begin to

blush and sweat. Feminist avant-gardes make the body central, and in doing so, they reimagine the more masculine avant-garde's deployment of shock. In the feminist avant-gardes I have described, shock reaches out to an audience, claims it as its own, and builds affective connection that is sustained across time and across networks of readers.

Shock prompts feminist readers to reflect on the complex nature of consent, and subsequently to think and feel the violation of shock alongside pleasure, absorption, and recognition. For the feminist avant-garde, an aesthetics of shock enables a complex affective response in which girls and women are able to be "bad" victims, to reflect upon vulnerability and violation from multiple angles, and even to find value in vulnerability. Acker and riot grrrl's aesthetic practice emphasizes the embodied experience of art-making and art-consuming, reminding us that emotion occupies a space where the cognitive and physiological meet. Shock itself is a term used to describe particular aesthetic gestures as well as a familiar term in medical and psychological discourse. After all, "shell-shock" is our older term for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The language of PTSD, as Robyn Wiegman (2012) has shown, became central to feminist articulations of sexual violence in the 1970s. Although Wiegman focuses on trauma as a key term in articulating a feminist identity that emerges in part through affective formations and makes new political positions possible, I posit shock as another central term in feminist aesthetics and politics.

Perhaps art is the place for an expansive, internally contradictory, and even incoherent affective field of responses to sexual violence. A feminist theory of shock complicates narratives of trauma around sexual violence and allows for the possibility of

emotional responses that range in valence from numbed shock, to anger, to confusion, to interest, even to certain kinds of pleasure. This expanded emotional vocabulary seems to be politically inconvenient in the fight to end sexual violence, but contemporary feminists might look to the model of affect articulated in the feminist avant-garde to imagine new political possibilities for refusal, failure, expression, and critique that come from a wider range of emotional standpoints. Acknowledging the presence of vulnerability and the impossibility of a safe and secure subject position might help feminists make better demands on the law, or even think about "law" as something to continually question, as Acker does. Feminist avant-garde shock enables a range of affective experiences and communal attachments precisely by making readers vulnerable to art and language. Like Barthes' language that "wounds or seduces" (38), avant-garde shock can enable love through readerly pain.

Chapter Three:

Reading Shame in Giovanni's Room: Baldwin's Affective Logic of Violence

Finally, I want to turn to the connection between shame and violence depicted in *Giovanni's Room* in order to demonstrate how James Baldwin links affective experience with larger cultural and state formations. In particular, *Giovanni's Room* paints a complex portrait of queer shame in order to depict continuities between quotidian and state violence. A familiar understanding of the relationship between shame and violence sees an individual feeling shame for some reason—he is ashamed of his desires, or of his identity—and lashing out in an act of violence. This is not, however, precisely the chain of events that *Giovanni's Room* traces. Instead, the novel's protagonist, David, struggles with profound feelings of shame that shape his cruel treatment of his lover, Giovanni. In turn, Giovanni commits an ostensibly "senseless" act of violence. But, I argue, the novel articulates an affective logic of violence that elucidates causal links between David's own shame, Giovanni's violent behavior, and Giovanni's ultimate death.

While earlier chapters have focused on representations of violence that exceed or confound political interpretations, this chapter emphasizes connections to be made between ostensibly "senseless" acts of violence and the cultural politics of emotion. In tracing an affective logic of violence across the novel, Baldwin also emphasizes the embodied and affective aspects of racial and sexual hierarchy. He links everyday queer bashing, aggressive policing, and capital punishment according to a chain of emotional cause-and-effect. Rather than depicting violence in ways that resist ideological

interpretation, as Morrison, Walker, Acker, and riot grrrl artists do, Baldwin portrays a protagonist and narrator who attempts to trace out the logic of ostensibly senseless acts of violence. Implicating himself in Giovanni's death, David nevertheless constructs an impartial picture of his own culpability.

David recounts the story in flashbacks from the vantage point of Giovanni's imminent execution. He has emigrated to Paris from the United States and maintains an ambivalent romantic relationship with Hella. When Hella departs for Spain to consider her own feelings about their engagement, David meets the Italian émigré Giovanni and they begin a love affair. After David ends his relationship with Giovanni, in a seemingly unrelated sequence of events, Giovanni murders an acquaintance who has raped him. As David packs up a rented country house and prepares to return to the United States on the eve of Giovanni's execution for the murder, he articulates a profound love for Giovanni that slowly becomes tinged with resentment, contempt, and disgust. Throughout the novel, David articulates shame about his queer desire and anxiety about his racial and class status, but in his framing narration he also seems to take responsibility for Giovanni's death. While David's sense of responsibility might strike many readers as either an expression of guilt over his mistreatment of Giovanni or as a narcissistic symptom of a more general anguish, this chapter will take David at his word, contending that the novel spins out an affective, rather than rational, logic of violence in which David is, in fact, to be held accountable for Giovanni's death. This affective logic also serves as a lens through which to understand the state-sanctioned violence that frames the novel's plot.

The novel, published in 1956, is less concerned with demonstrating the damaging effects of internalized shame on gay-identified people than it is in articulating the complex interplay between desire and disgust, the ways shame can shape subjectivity, and the "intrapsychic" nature of shame. As Sally Munt writes, shame "exceeds the bodily vessel of its containment—groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalise the stigma of shame into the tapestry of their lives, each reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities, all with their own specific pathologies" (3). In this chapter, I bring together recent queer theoretical work on shame and literary criticism that has reclaimed *Giovanni's Room* for the African American literary canon and/or for black queer studies in order to consider shame's intrapsychic nature in a book that can also prompt shame in readers. Baldwin links shame to everyday violence and state violence, and through his creation of a white protagonist, he encourages readers to consider their own relationship to shamed identities. State violence is not only disproportionally directed at racialized and/or gender-deviant bodies, but is also structurally maintained through the circulation of shame within and between those bodies.

In 1966, roughly ten years after the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin mapped a logic of the ostensibly "senseless" violence of the race riots that were by that time reaching a fever point in the United States. In The *Nation*, he contextualized the urban violence of the long, hot summers through an extended explanation of the structural violence that placed black Americans in positions of precarity: lack of union protection, increased automation that contributed to unemployment, segregated education, uneven infrastructure, biased textbooks, and racist hiring practices. People in

this precarious position, Baldwin implies, are more likely to be pushed to the limit of violent action, not only because of the psychic damage of daily injustice, but also because they understand the government to be underwriting these injustices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in policing, carried out by those whom Baldwin describes as the "hired enemies" of the black population, "present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests." In this context, argues Baldwin, calls to "respect the law" in times of social unrest are "obscene." "The law," he writes, "is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer." Baldwin's contention that the state shores up and exacerbates the everyday violence of white supremacy continues to be relevant today, in the wake of high-profile police brutality cases in New York, Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston. He also, I argue, works through these ideas via expatriate allegories of race, desire, and state violence in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin's Paris setting offers him new ways to comment on U.S. society; his non-black characters allow him to explore what Marlon Ross has called "white fantasies of desire" (13); and, I argue, the specter of the guillotine enables Baldwin to connect the everyday violences of heteronormativity with the ostensibly rational violence of the state.

Baldwin's experience in a Paris prison shaped his understanding of the law as a "master" that could lash out violently against black, poor, and queer people. In 1949, not long after Baldwin arrived in Paris, he was arrested after a friend left a stolen sheet in his hotel room. Awaiting trial in a jail cell for eight days was one of the most harrowing times of Baldwin's life, which he describes in the essay "Equal in Paris," collected in *Notes of a Native Son*. After his release, Baldwin attempted suicide, failing only because

the water pipe from which he tried to hang himself broke with the weight of his body. As D. Quentin Miller argues, prison links characters and figures throughout Baldwin's oeuvre and "focuses a theme that flourishes throughout his career" and helps him articulate "the reality of the law's power over lives like his" (160-1). Reflecting two early experiences with the police in Harlem, Baldwin's early writing "illustrates that there is no safe haven, no room of one's own that can shelter one from the law" (162). Indeed, Giovanni's room in the novel, which would seem to offer respite from a racist, homophobic world, is figured as a space of abjection and death, more like a prison cell than a haven.[29] Linking the social death of prison to the literal death of the guillotine through an articulation of the law as a violent master, Baldwin disambiguates the law's "rational" violence, emphasizing the "incoherence"[30] (or senselessness) of state violence. "The law," writes Miller, "intended to be the most rational force holding together any society, becomes for Baldwin [while in prison] the most irrational force within society, one that would murder without remorse" (167). *Giovanni's Room* does more than articulate the irrational incoherence of the law; it charts the way emotion works in relationship to the law's subjugating power.

Canonizing Giovanni's Room

Giovanni's Room has historically been understood as an aberration in Baldwin's otherwise brilliant and politically incisive oeuvre. Until recently, scholars largely apologized for it or ignored it. In contrast to his first novel, the Bildungsroman *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, which, according to critics, portrayed an authentic black Harlem,

Giovanni's Room takes place largely in Paris and features no black characters whatsoever. Until roughly 1999, when Dwight McBride published the edited collection *James Baldwin Now*, the novel's absence of black characters was understood as an indication that Baldwin abdicated a responsibility to speak to race, that Baldwin's escape to Paris signified an attempt to write about sexual identity, rather than racial identity. McBride's collection, and a number of books and articles that emerged in its wake, points out the trouble in this kind of separation. As authors including McBride, Ross, and Robert Reid-Pharr have demonstrated, "black" and "queer" are not mutually exclusive terms, in spite of the fact that scholars of African American literature have often imagined the black subject as straight, and queer theorists have often imagined the queer subject as white. Indeed, *Giovanni's Room* has frequently been the focus of the relatively new subfield of black queer studies; Baldwin is the main subject of no fewer than three of the sixteen essays that appear in the critical anthology *Black Queer Studies*.

The novel also has important things to say, however, about the relationship between affect and violence. My reading of the novel fleshes out an under-acknowledged feature of the cultural politics of emotion, which has been so thoughtfully traced by figures including Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. These authors have focused on collective affects and the ways people in power manipulate those affects to maintain social injustice. Building upon the work of these thinkers, who examine emotion mainly as a socially constructed phenomenon, my focus on the phenomenological manifestation of shame depicted in the novel links embodied experience, interpersonal exchanges of affect, and the state. By tracing the connection Baldwin makes between David's

experience of queer shame and the state's execution of his lover Giovanni, I argue that queer fiction illuminates the relationship between individual, idiosyncratic affective life and broader structures of feeling and power. In particular, it imagines the affective state of the subject in the larger field of state power, inhabiting the perspective of the individual who lives and loves in a larger network of power and feeling.

Written during the Cold War period of sexual conservatism and during the early days of the mainstream Civil Rights movement, *Giovanni's Room* was singular in its explicit articulation of same-sex desire.[31] The mainstream ideal of the heteronormative family, which intersected with nationalism, were complemented by the paradigms of African American protest fiction, which celebrated a masculine ideal subject in its critique of white racism. Although same-sex desire was largely silenced under the "repressive norms" of the 1950s, "queer life sometimes flourished despite persecution" (Bauer and Cook 2). Heike Bauer and Matt Cook describe "a coalescing of white (same-sex) sexual identities and identifications," which indicates "the process by which racialized subjects have been produced as insiders and outsiders to our postwar sexuality categorisations" (6). Writing in the midst of social norms and state power that repressed queer life, Baldwin also diagnosed the law's oppressive power over black people and sexual freedom from the vantage point of Paris. Having left New York in 1949, Baldwin was also influenced by Négritude and the increasing global activism of the African diaspora. In Paris, Baldwin observed the relationship between colonized Africans and France, which shared some similarities with the American "Negro problem." However, Baldwin always traced his own diasporic lineage to the American South, to slavery and

lynching (Birmingham). *Giovanni's Room* uses its Paris setting to think about American identity from a transatlantic vantage point and to consider the law's repression of both racial and sexual minorities.

Scholars have reevaluated *Giovanni's Room* according to two major lines of thinking: one emphasizes the novel's continuity with Baldwin's other writing about racial identity and racism, arguing that the novel deconstructs white, normative identity or presents coded forms of blackness or Otherness through the expatriate setting of Paris. Mae G. Henderson, for example, describes the novel's "racial expatriation" as a literary strategy of ostensibly leaving the United States and blackness in order to "open the space of black literary expression to subjects and experiences not deemed appropriate for black writers in the 1940s and 1950s," especially same-sex desire or homosexual identity (313). Like Henderson, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman suggests that the novel's Paris setting and white characters allow Baldwin to escape an imperative placed on black writers to directly address black experience and identity in their fiction. In the midst of the protest tradition, characterized most famously by Richard Wright, there existed cultural, critical, and economic pressure for black writers to critique racism and realistically depict black life. Embedded within this pressure, as Marlon Ross and others have pointed out, was an anxiety about depicting queer desire in black literature. By "expatriating" from such an imperative, as Henderson describes it, Baldwin was afforded new opportunities to depict queer desire in his fiction.

He also, as Abdur-Rahman and Robert Reid-Pharr have demonstrated, used racially-coded characters to explore interracial same-sex desire. Giovanni, these critics

claim, is portrayed as a non-white Other not only because of his dark skin and Italian heritage, but also through his status in a system of sexual currency and exchange. "Like the black female concubine or prostitute," contends Abdur-Rahman, "Giovanni is the constant object of lust and commercial exchange." He is "the dark figure in the novel who serves as a repository for the longings and anxieties of the white characters." More broadly, the "relative poverty and obscurity" of all of the novel's characters suggests that "questions of lineage, privilege, and … national belonging" are explored by the novel. Because his novel explores "race, though not explicitly African American identity," Baldwin is able to articulate the complex ways in which queerness racializes and race queers, the ways questions of desire and racial identity are in fact always intertwined. Baldwin, in short, critiques whiteness "specifically through his subtle allusions to the racializing effects of queerness" (480).

Like Abdur-Rahman, Robert Reid-Pharr emphasizes the ways in which blackness and queerness overlap and intersect in the American cultural imaginary. Yet his reading of *Giovanni's Room* is also aligned with another set of scholars who emphasize the novel's relationship to concepts of abjection. The room of the novel's title has often been compared to the "closet" and read in part as a symbol of David's closeted queer identity or desire. The room is also deeply abject. Filled with refuse, dark because its windows have been painted over, and smelling of old, spilled wine, Giovanni's room is nevertheless a space of sexual joy and pleasure between David and Giovanni, a space of romantic freedom *and* abject claustrophobia. Along these lines, Kathryn Bond Stockton names the novel's treatment of love and desire "decomposition." By decomposition,

Stockton means the way in which time transforms erotic attraction into something bound up in disgust, resentment, and sorrow. In her reading of the novel, Stockton returns abjection to the experience of love, showing how the effect of time and thought on the beloved renders him "decomposed," aligned with a corpse, an abject reminder of violence and death. Critics like Stockton, who focus on the psychic dimensions of the novel, see abjection as an important link between black and queer subjectivity.

As important as this body of work has been for restoring *Giovanni's Room* to canonical significance and unpacking Baldwin's treatment of desire and racial identity, I want to suggest that Baldwin is not only interested in teasing out the relationship between identity and affect, but also in locating violence in that relationship. Through the affective logic of violence Baldwin lays out, he connects personal feelings of shame to larger social apparatuses and places same-sex desire within a nexus of the long history of state-sanctioned violence against black bodies. The novel tells a love story that makes the affective exchanges between lovers explicit and charts the development of love into feelings of resentment, disgust, and rage, ultimately supporting David's sense that his feelings of shame cause Giovanni's execution. The novel traces these feelings through its expression of desire and repulsion directed at Giovanni, and Giovanni's feelings of pain and anger in response.

Baldwin structures his violent love story through two key vectors. The first is David's first-person narration, which offers readers a kind of case study of a neurotic subject, whose gender, sexual, and even racial identities are revealed to be tenuous. The second is the specter of state violence, which frames the action of the novel. As I have

noted, David recounts the story on the eve of Giovanni's execution. Off-stage, as it were, waits the imprisoned Giovanni, nearly dead, or, perhaps, socially dead.[32] The specter of the guillotine, I argue, functions as an expatriate allegory much like the novel's Paris setting and its non-black, but often racialized, characters. By structurally connecting David's feelings of shame, the violence of Giovanni's murder and execution, and the guillotine, with its metonymic relationship to state violence, the novel traces the connections between affective exchange and physical violence and thus defamiliarizes the other "rational" logics of state violence commonly accepted by those of us who accept the necessity of prisons and militaries, of families and marriage, and of clear-cut racial, sexual, and gender identities.

Reading Queer Shame

Shame might be understood as queer theory's key affect. Queer theory's indebtedness to psychoanalytic models, as well as its more recent critical stance toward homonormativity, helps account for shame's central role in the field. Embracing shame has been a way to understand how queer identities are shaped by melancholic experiences of outsider status as well as collective historical experiences of oppression. It has also provided a stance from which to critique a mainstream gay rights ideology that reinforces normative gender roles, family structures, and obedience to capitalism. The history of the gay rights movement has often been narrated as a journey from secret shame to public pride, and a great deal of ink has been spilled to disrupt this narrative and reclaim shame as a key part of queer identity formation that should not be quickly swept aside in favor

of a seamlessly "proud" mainstream gay identity.[33] Here critics have turned to Silvan Tomkins, who contends that shame is impossible without an attendant experience of desire, a feeling of attachment that is either lost or repudiated. Being ashamed of one's desires, or mourning one's impossible desires, are central emotional experiences of queer subjectivity.

For many queer theorists, shame is either a fact of subjectivity—a "deep emotional reservoir on which an adult queer sexuality draws, for better or worse" (Halberstam, "Shame" 221)—or a feeling to be embraced for its liberatory possibilities. Lately, queer theory has been more interested in seeing the good in shame: scholars such as Michael Warner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Douglas Crimp, and D.A. Miller have argued that queers can build relationship and communities through a shared feeling of shame (Love 14). Heather Love grounds her argument about "feeling backward" in the insight that love and desire are constituted by incompleteness, loss, and failure. Although this "assertion is true for everyone, some loves are more failed than others" (21). Her work seeks to acknowledge the historical reality of failed homosexual love in order to offer "impossible love as a model for queer historiography" (24). Like Edelman and Bersani, Stockton seeks to reclaim the shameful position of the "bottom"—which she attaches not only to the position of sexual passivity but of other forms of being socially or personally dominated—as a space through which subjectivity is formed. Feeling shame produces non-normative or resistant ways of being in the world and of imagining a self. Building on this work, Darieck Scott contends that embracing shame and abjection—which he theorizes via an exploration of black male experiences of rape—can enable

subjects to access a not-yet-defined gender; one which is impossible in normative social structures (19). Along with Stockton and Scott, key figures in the discourse of queer shame include Bersani, Sedgwick, Holland, and Reid-Pharr, who has usefully complicated Bersani's arguments about bottoming by emphasizing the way sexual contact enables queer people to express a whole range of feelings—from desire, love, and pleasure to shame, anger, and hate ("Dinge" 85).

Criticizing the tendency to celebrate shame as an emotion that is experienced in roughly the same way for queer people, but that really only speaks out of—and to—white gay men, J. Jack Halberstam has argued that "gay shame stabilizes the pride/shame binary and makes white gay politics the sum total of queer critique." Gay shame "also has a tendency to universalize the self who emerges out of a 'shame formation,' that is, out of the experience of a white and male self whose shame in part emerges from the experience of being denied access to privilege" ("Shame" 223). In my reading of *Giovanni's Room*, David's articulation of his "gay shame" illuminates precisely the limits Halberstam emphasizes. More than a sympathetic portrait of pre-Stonewall suffering, the novel also indicts David's melancholic relationship to white privilege. Indeed, as I will explore in more detail below, the novel interpellates readers into the violence David's shame inflicts on the people he loves.

Shame is experienced as a desire to hide oneself or reject the shameful part of oneself. The language of shame is often grounded in the visual—shame feels like being exposed or seen, and the affective response of turning the head down suggests an attempt to hide the naked source of shame. Cruelly, feeling shame instantiates blushing, so the

body exposes the individual's shame to anyone who can see her flushed face. The phenomenon of blushing also raises questions about how our understanding of affect is shaped by racial and sexual norms: as Melissa Harris-Perry points out, blushing "is so closely associated with shame that some people believed African Americans did not feel shame because their blushing wasn't visible" (105). Thomas Jefferson, who considered visible blushing to be one of many features that indicated the superior beauty of white women over black women, referred to the dark skin of black people as an "immoveable veil…which covers all the emotions" (qtd. Harris-Perry, 105). Blushing works in two ways to mark and exacerbate feelings of shame: it communicates discomfort or shame to observers, but it is also felt as a hotness crawling up the face. Exacerbating the physical discomfort of the blush is the self-consciousness of being seen to blush. Yet we cannot discuss blushing—as a phenomenological or social experience—as universal.[34] Baldwin's literary exploration of "white fantasies of desire" (Ross 13) might thus also be understood as an exploration of "white feelings of shame," that is, an attempt to conceptualize shame in terms of racial hierarchy and difference.

Eve Sedgwick's seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* argues that shame works on two levels to mark out and construct queer subjectivity: sexual and gender norms are enforced by shaming perverse desires or behaviors, and in turn, people who experience or participate in queer feeling or behavior come to understand their subjectivity through the experience of shame. Shame "performs culturally to mark out certain groups" (Munt 2); it shapes individual experience of one's desire but also reinforces racial, gender, and sexual categories. As Sally Munt explains, "histories of violent domination and occupation are

found frequently lurking behind … dynamics of shame, and the shame, although directly aimed at the minoritised groups, also implicates the bestower" of shame (3). Although it is hardly unique in this regard, shame links private feeling to the broader social world.

Indeed, shame is "peculiarly intrapsychic." As Munt explains, shame "exceeds the bodily vessel of its containment—groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalise the stigma of shame into the tapestry of their lives, each reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities, all with their own specific pathologies" (3). Shame may also be felt on behalf of another, extending from one person to another and, in the process, changing its character. The shame I feel on another's behalf takes me out of myself, but does not replicate that other's sense of shame. Shame's "infective, contagious property … means it can circulate and be exchanged with intensity" (3). Likewise, one can take on the shame that she observes in another, and can learn to be ashamed of her marginalized identity when she recognizes the shame another feels. Seeing yourself in a fictional character who is portrayed through negative racial, gender, or sexual stereotypes, for example, can elicit the shame of being caught, revealed, or seen through, even if you are alone. Readers of *Giovanni's Room* may even experience shame by feeling it on David's behalf.

Shame and other negative emotions have also been important to theorists of racialized subjectivity. In particular, melancholia, and its attendant feelings of shame, loss, and displacement, has offered theorists a model for conceptualizing racial identity.[35] Like queer shame, racial melancholia involves an unresolved mourning for an unattainable, normative ideal—whiteness, straightness—that fundamentally shapes

minority identity. In turn, as Cheng has argued, racial melancholia shapes white subjectivity. Ahmed argues that "queer feelings of shame are … signs of an identification with that which has repudiated the queer subject. In this way, shame is related to melancholia, and the queer subject takes on the 'badness' as its own, by feeling bad about 'failing' loved others" (*Cultural* 107). This melancholic experience of having a "bad" identity brings together theories of queer shame and racial melancholia and suggests the imbricated nature of racial and sexual shame. Seen in this light, shame can also be understood as a reflection on the precarious nature of the "good" (white, male, straight, middle-class, able-bodied) identity.

The description of shame in *Giovanni's Room* aligns remarkably well with Silvan Tomkins's theory of affects, which at once points toward some kind of biological basis for emotion and also resists the Freudian understanding of sexual drives that was so prevalent when Baldwin was writing. Sedgwick and Adam Frank, in a call for renewed critical attention to Tomkins's work, remind us that, for Tomkins, shame is inextricably linked to love or desire. Tomkins argues that shame and interest are linked in a polarity, and shame can only be activated after a subject has expressed an interest in whatever thing will become shameful. That is, you need to feel a kind of attraction to a given object before you feel shame in relation to that object. The popular understanding of shame, which was most strongly present from the 1940s through the 1960s, sees shame as a function for the individuation of the self. You come to understand yourself as a person through feeling shame. As Sedgwick and Frank describe it, Cold War psychology was structured around an assumption of universal heterosexuality and ignorant of its own

homophobia, yet Tomkins resists this founding heterosexism by being uninterested in the object of affects: according to Tomkins, "any affect may have any object" (Sedgwick and Frank 99) and "affect is self-validating" (Sedgwick and Frank 100). Though, as Audre Lorde's description of disgust has demonstrated, some "objects" can become strongly associated with particular affects—indeed, the circulation of affect can objectify groups of people. Affect's self-validating nature, however, also points to its key role in the social organization of racial and sexual hierarchy. David's story thus works like an inadvertent case study of Tomkins' theory of shame: David expresses shame as a fear of being read, discovered, interpreted, or otherwise seen through. Although it often seems as if he fears being discovered as a homosexual man, his anxiety and shame are expressed in language too diffuse to reveal a coherent gay identity hiding beneath the surface of a false performance of straightness. Instead, David expresses shame in relation to his desire for Joey and Giovanni, emphasizing the link Tomkins makes between desire and shame.

The relationship among shame, identity, and queerness thus prompts a series of questions: can David's shame make readers ashamed? Which readers? How does Baldwin use shame to imagine white masculinity? How does shame articulate desire for dark bodies? I track David's description of his own "shame" in order to articulate the novel's theory of affective-exchange-as-violence, of violence as expression of shame, and of how feelings of shame violently deconstruct David's gender, racial, and sexual identity. Baldwin asks readers to hold David accountable for the cruelty he displays, while also crediting that cruelty to the shame David feels in the context of a racist, homophobic culture. David, like Sula, is not a particularly likeable character, and readers

can easily condemn him for his selfishness, his arguably racist contempt for his lovers, Joey and Giovanni, and his misogynistic treatment of Sue. The novel connects David's cruelty to his sense of shame about his desire, but thinking about the novel's treatment of racial identity complicates a simple one-to-one explanatory correspondence. If David is an expression of "white fantasies of desire," Baldwin's imaginative exploration of white subjectivity, then his queer desire and attendant shame are bound up in whiteness and Americanness, as well.

Violent Shame and Queer Desire

Baldwin's novel seeks to embed readers in the neurosis, fear, and shame of an individual whose identity as a straight, white, middle-class man is increasingly threatened by his non-normative desires and affiliations. Indeed, David's self-proclaimed sense of shame seems to express an anxiety about being recognized as a homosexual, but in fact, Baldwin renders David's narration in ironic terms that emphasize his fear of losing his identification with whiteness and with his class status via queer desire. Likewise, Baldwin frames David's confessions of shame in a way that emphasizes his lack of self-knowledge. When describing his first erotic encounter with Joey, during a teenage summer, David expresses fear coupled with interest. He tells us:

> But above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*. … The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood.

> Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. The sweat on my back grew cold. I was ashamed (9).

Here, David links his fear to Joey's gender identity, figuring this queer encounter in passive language ("it was borne in on me"). When David expresses his desire for Joey, and later Giovanni, he articulates shame and a simultaneous fear and attraction of being penetrated by a racialized, violent Other: Joey's body seems, to David, like "the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood" (9). In turn, David begins to bully Joey after they have sex, and the novel aligns this physical violence with David's emotionally violent treatment of Giovanni.

Embracing shame is a key element of Bersani's account of *jouissance*, which associates receptive sex with "humiliation of the self" (217) and, indeed, "losing your manhood." Through *jouissance*, "the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those connected with psychic organization" (217). Importantly, Bersani also links the psychic violence of debasement to a critique of material violence inflicted on gay men, claiming that, "if sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence" (222). The release of ego that comes with *jouissance* is a kind of violence, but it is a violence to the ego formation that maintains

the masculinist symbolic order, which in turn underwrites the real-life violence of patriarchal sexual and social relationships.

Complicating Bersani's discussion of queer "self-shattering," Robert Reid-Pharr's discussion of race and desire illuminates Baldwin's theory of racial-sexual identity, shame, and violence. Reid-Pharr argues that blackness is a metaphorical site for locating anxieties about the kind of dissolution of the self that Bersani associates with *jouissance*. Articulating a historical connection between blackness and abjection, he argues that "the pathology that the homosexual must negotiate is precisely the specter of black boundarylessness, the idea that there is no normal Blackness to which the black subject, American, or otherwise, might refer" ("Tearing" 373). In large part because of the increasing visibility of homosexuals in urban centers, alongside the increase of black immigration to cities after WWII, "the homosexual, and in particular the racially marked homosexual, the Black homosexual, represented for [some post-war Black authors] the very sign of deep crisis, a crisis of identity and community that threw into confusion, if only temporarily, the boundaries of (Black) normality" (379). Anti-homosexual violence, Reid-Pharr argues, "allows for a reconnection to the very figure of boundarylessness that the assailant is presumably attempting to escape" (374). The quotidian violence David inflicts on Joey when he bullies him, and on Giovanni when he abandons him, can thus be read as a manifestation of David's anxiety about racial and sexual boundarylessness. It is not only David's sense of shame about his sexual desire, but his anxiety about his racial and national identity, that fuels the violence of his volatile emotions.

The boundaries of David's ego continually reveal themselves to be fragile, but readers hardly see him surrender to the shame and violation that, according to Bersani, might enable a new, queer subjectivity. Instead, Baldwin effectively traps readers within the very limitations of 1950s culture by focalizing the novel through David. Since the novel is mediated through David's neurotic and self-protective viewpoint, it would seem to simply reproduce the logic of what Bersani would call phallocentrism. Instead of liberating David from the strictures of normative identity, shame is figured as a totalizing filter through which he understands pretty much every interaction he has with Giovanni. As it becomes clear that something is happening between the two young men, David thinks:

> I knew I could do nothing whatever to stop the ferocious excitement which had burst in me like a storm. I could only drink, in the faint hope that the storm might thus spend itself without doing any more damage to my land. But I was glad. I was only sorry that Jacques had been a witness. He made me ashamed. I hated him because he had now seen all that he had waited, often scarcely hoping, so many months to see (42).

Pleasure is imbricated with shame—David does not only express shame here, but also giddiness and a kind of relief. David's turn of phrase in this passage emphasizes his perceived passivity. Affects act on David—excitement "bursts" in on him—and he understands other people as agents that cause affective response in him. Jacques "made" David ashamed: this statement is at once a desperate projection of feelings David is

unable to take responsibility for, and an insightful description of the way affect circulates between actors.

This mixture of shame and desire is replicated when David encounters Giovanni. He describes an early intimate moment, after Giovanni and David have escaped the watchful eyes of Jacques and Guillaume:

> I looked at Giovanni's face … I began to see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy; what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever (62).

Here, David hears voices "deep within" him directly shaming him for his "entanglement" with Giovanni, that is, for his feelings of deep desire and pleasure. Yet, intriguingly, David also links his personal shame-desire nexus to a more all-encompassing affective state. It is as though the truly discomfiting or "strange" truth David recognizes is that his experience of erotic self-awareness has a great deal in common with that of most other people. Perhaps shame is not simply attached to queer desire or identity, but is a fact of the erotic. Moreover, the novel will go on to suggest, the "dreadful human tangle" of emotions and bodies is also woven through the social organizations that make some bodies more vulnerable to violation than others.

David often narrates his emotions as though they were happening to his body, not quite in his control, emphasizing the physiological aspects of affect. As he and Giovanni spend their first evening together and become more interested in each other, David says of Giovanni: "Something is burning in his eyes and it lights up all his face, it is joy and pride" (52). He continues: "I am smiling too, I scarcely know why; everything in me is jumping up and down" (53). Baldwin also provides readers with a counterpoint to David's competing feelings of shame and desire. His friend Jacques, an older gay Frenchman, who can read quite clearly the chemistry between David and Giovanni, argues that queer desire is not inherently shameful. In the lead-up to David and Giovanni's first encounter, David spends a great deal of narrative time describing, with disgust and contempt, the sexual-commercial exchanges that are made every evening in the bars between young, poor boys and older, wealthier men like Jacques and Guillaume. Condemning these exchanges, and the complex social dance through which they unfold, David sees both the older and younger men as pathetic and predatory, albeit in different ways. In the midst of a night out at one of these bars, Jacques says to David:

> 'You think . . . that my life is shameful because my encounters are. And they are. But you should ask yourself *why* they are.'
>
> [David replies:] 'Why are they—shameful?"'
>
> 'Because there is no affection in them, and no joy. It's like putting an electric plug in a dead socket. Touch, but no contact. All touch, but no contact and no light.'
>
> 'Why?'

> ‘That you must ask yourself,’ … ‘and perhaps one day, this morning will not be ashes in your mouth.’
>
> [David continues:] Jacques followed my look. ‘[Giovanni] is very fond of you…already. But this doesn’t make you happy or proud, as it should. It makes you frightened and ashamed’ (56).

This scene emphasizes the way shame and desire can be imbricated; shame can often arise when one feels that one’s true desire is exposed, or when one is revealed to desire something taboo or otherwise shameful. Beyond the social conventions that might make same-sex desire feel shameful, there seems to be an element of shame in desire itself, even when the object of desire aligns with social norms.

As Sedgwick and Frank argue, shame can function as a switchpoint for both the creation and fragmentation of a coherent identity. David works as a nearly perfect fictional elaboration of this concept. Although David ostensibly articulates an honest and thorough account of his shame and desire, readers are also encouraged to see the limits of David’s self-knowledge. Often expressed through gaps, refusals, or statements of avoidance (“I felt nothing”), this seemingly-thorough depiction of interiority actually produces an identity that never quite reveals itself, never quite hangs together. This depiction of David’s affective state is inextricably linked with the representation of his racial identity, which has been so beautifully theorized by Marlon Ross, Mae G. Henderson, and others. David’s racial identity is contingent on his gender and sexual identity, as well as on his feelings of shame, desire, and pleasure.

David's violent impulses are another way he articulates shame, raising the question: when is the experience of shame violent, and how does it in turn manifest or uphold structural violence? Seemingly unmotivated violent impulses often function as the language through which David articulates a shameful response to being read. As an effeminate, flamboyantly dressed older man—"like a mummy or a zombie"—approaches David in the bar and seems to recognize David's attraction to Giovanni, readers see the first instance of ostensibly senseless violence emerging as an expression of David's conflicting feelings of shame. The man asks, "You like him—[Giovanni]?" David tells readers: "I did not know what to do or say. It seemed impossible to hit him; it seemed impossible to get angry. It did not seem real, he did not seem real" (39). David seems to suggest here that his immediate response is precisely to hit the man in anger, but expressing his feelings in that way would only confirm the man's "reading" of David's desire. Here, David uses negative language to abdicate responsibility for his feelings and, as he does elsewhere in the novel, to indicate passivity.

Likewise, when Jacques notes the apparent chemistry between David and Giovanni, David's emotional response, as he narrates it, is similar: "I looked down at him. I wanted to do something to his cheerful, hideous, worldly face which would make it impossible for him ever again to smile at anyone the way he was smiling at me" (40). As David's narration sutures his feelings of shame to his desire to injure the person who provokes such shame, readers begin to see such violence not only as a symptom of David's shame, but also as a motivated or rational—according to David's logic—response to those feelings of shame. And indeed, modern readers may think of the "gay

panic defense" in trials including that of Matthew Shepard, and the ideology they reflect—that a sexual advance from another man might send a straight man into a humiliated rage so violent it drives him to murder.[36] Although such an explanation for violence is increasingly untenable, even nonsensical, its changing status points toward the ways in which "senseless" violence is contingent on structures of feeling and social norms. Likewise, Baldwin's novel maps shame onto the affective circuits that help to support, justify, or otherwise enable social designations of violence as either "senseless" or "rational."

Shame is a sense of being "visible and not ready to be visible" (qtd. in Ahmed, *Cultural* 103), that is, of being seen (for what one is). *Giovanni's Room* extends this definition of shame by figuring it as being "read" in the camp sense. David is constantly afraid of being read as queer by gay men in Paris, even by those who know the nature of his relationship with Giovanni. We might find it surprising, then, that David is not afraid of being read by another group: the very readers of the novel. David is an unreliable narrator of his own interiority, but his first-person narration provides a space for him to articulate his shame and, consequently, his "shameful" desires. Indeed, he constitutes a subjectivity through shame. David is preoccupied with being "watched," or seen, as though his very visibility will, with enough time, render him shameful. While he and Giovanni spend time at Guillaume's, David recounts:

> I watched him as he moved. And then I watched their faces, watching him. And then I was afraid. I knew that they were watching, had been watching both of us. They knew that they had witnessed a beginning and now they would not cease to

> watch until they saw the end. It had taken some time but the tables had been turned; now I was in the zoo, and they were watching (38).

As Sedgwick points out, the stance of shame echoes the stance of reading, and the novel explores the tenuous connections between shame and reading (Sedgwick and Frank 114). Other scholars have pointed out that, for Baldwin, publishing *Giovanni's Room* was a risky act of self-exposure,[37] and that the "racial expatriation" Baldwin employs in the novel deflects assumptions about the continuity between David's desire and Baldwin's (possible) desire.

While David continually expresses anxiety about being seen as queer, he seems to worry much less about being "read" by Hella or his father than about other queer-identified members of his Paris scene noticing and identifying his desires. David worries about Hella returning to Paris, because he intends to keep his relationship with Giovanni secret from her, but he does not articulate any anxiety that she will "read" between the lines of his letters to her and uncover the full picture of their time apart. Likewise, David has put physical distance between his father and himself; in person, his father might recognize his queer desires, but on the page, David imagines he can control how his father reads him. When he is mediating his life through language, David feels safe, ironically, from being "read" as queer—even though his writing reveals aspects of himself that he may mean to hide. By contrast, nearly every time David is out in queer spaces, he narrates concern about being recognized as belonging to this subculture. By invoking shame when he moves through queer spaces or articulates same-sex desire, David connects his anxiety about being read with feeling shame. The effect of this

connection is to register a new anxiety: the body is an uncontrollable creature that can betray you at any moment.

The novel thus illuminates Sedgwick's provocative claim that the stances of shame and reading mirror one another. It triangulates David's written communication with heteronormative characters, his embodied communication with queer characters, and his communication with readers, which is at once written and thought, highly mediated and direct. When we compare David's letters to his father and Hella with his interactions with queer characters, we see that David imagines textual space as safe from the intrusion of shame and desire, while interpersonal space is dangerous—David constantly feels at risk of being discovered or hailed as belonging to queer subculture. In writing, David believes he can control his performance of identity, while in person, in his body, the way other people interpret him escapes his control. The third space, David's first-person relationship with the reader, could be understood as offering readers the true story of David and his desires. Except that David, of course, reveals himself to suffer from a lack of self-knowledge. And indeed, his unreliability complicates his portrayal of textual and embodied space. How do we know that David's father and Hella are unsuspecting? Do the men in the bars actually take notice of David, or are we merely seeing his anxiety manifested as paranoia?

Baldwin's Affective Logic of Violence

David's interiority comes into being in part through eruptions of violent desire, and in narrative relation to a core of state violence, signified by the guillotine. Aliyyah

Abdur-Rahman has argued that *Giovanni's Room* demonstrates how "the experience of exile, of living as a stranger in an unfamiliar country, powerfully parallels—and analogizes—the social alienation and psychic fragmentation that African Americans and/as sexual outsiders experience at home in the United States" (478). Similarly, Mae G. Henderson suggests that the novel brings together "geographical expatriation and literary masquerade, or 'racial expatriation,'" in order to "provide a space for the articulation of the homosexual dilemma within the context of postwar American culture" (313). If, as Abdur-Rahman argues, Baldwin sets the novel in Paris in part as a strategy for analogizing U.S. social formations (particularly racial formations), then we might think of the guillotine as an analogy, as well. Not associated explicitly with police presence, the military, or the electric chair, the guillotine serves as an icon for the French revolution and the late days of revolution run amok, of a corrective, purifying violence taken too far, of justice perverted. For many U.S. readers, at least, we might say that the guillotine in the novel signifies a hazy, imprecise, American sense of both the French revolutionary spirit and the Reign of Terror. The guillotine, then, literalizes the knife-edge relationship between state and senseless violence.

In order to elaborate the novel's affective logic, I want to juxtapose David's violent impulses with Giovanni's murder and execution. At first glance, readers might see David's violent impulses as senseless, illogical, or unmotivated. I hypothesize that these impulses characterize David's shameful self-loathing, while also providing a link between the senseless violence of shame in the context of a racist, homophobic society and the mechanisms of state violence that underpin social norms. As Henderson argues,

"the murder of Guillaume by Giovanni only appears to be the crime. The real crime, which leads to Giovanni's actions, and to the destruction of three lives, is David's deception and dishonesty. David, like Giovanni, is culpable; and, like Giovanni, he suffers for his offenses" (326). By connecting David's emotional suffering to Giovanni's death, Baldwin gestures toward the unequal material effects of shame. Readers might also imagine Giovanni's murder of Guillaume as rational, in a sense: Guillaume sexually assaults Giovanni, insults him, and reminds him of his social power over Giovanni. In response, and in a fit of passion, Giovanni strangles Guillaume. When Giovanni is discovered, he is tried. For readers, his trial seems to take place in the court of public opinion—David relates newspaper descriptions, but not trial proceedings. Found guilty, Giovanni is led to the guillotine. We might say that Guillaume's murder is an act of "senseless violence," but Giovanni does have a motive. And, of course, as Stuart Hall has demonstrated, the "senselessness" of a violent act is largely determined by the way it is framed in media narratives (50-1).

Through its depiction of the affects that take shape within David, whose gender, sexual, class, and even racial status is tenuous, *Giovanni's Room* emphasizes the link between ostensibly interior emotions and the larger social structures through which they come to be. Moreover, the novel does two things to illuminate the literary phenomenon of senseless violence. It scaffolds seemingly-senseless or unmotivated impulses towards violence in an affective context that makes a kind of sense out of them, and it emphasizes the ways in which narrative rendering dictates an audience's understanding of a violent act as "senseless" or as legible. The promise of the guillotine, which hangs over the novel

from start to finish, makes central the forms of state violence that present themselves as rational, just, and ostensibly dispassionate. Yet by tracing the affective chain of events that leads up to Giovanni's violent attack on Guillaume, as well as their social implications, *Giovanni's Room* collapses senseless violence onto state violence, and posits shame as a key element in the forms of violence—interior, structural, and quotidian—that suffuse our emotional and social lives.

Shame and State Violence

The field of American Studies has theorized state violence extensively, examining U.S. neoliberal global dominance as a formation that relies on material oppression and repressive violence in the global South in order to maintain the economic dominance and perceived peace of the United States.[38] Another line of inquiry focuses largely on the prison-industrial complex and the violence of policing. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis have theorized prison abolition and critiqued imprisonment for perpetuating the violence from which it ostensibly protects subjects. Michelle Alexander calls prison "the new Jim Crow," arguing that policing, sentencing laws, and the violence of prisons replicate the legal oppression of black Americans in the Jim Crow era. Alexander does more than identify uncanny similarities; she convincingly illustrates that a similar intention to repress black people through legal discrimination and violence informs both Jim Crow and the contemporary prison system.

Shame and state violence can be closely connected. As Sara Ahmed observes, a state might adopt an official stance of shame about historical acts of violence perpetrated by the state. Writing about Australia's mistreatment of its indigenous people, Ahmed

argues that public declarations of shame can "bring 'the nation' into existence as a felt community" (*Cultural* 101). The performative act of shame identifies the state with a particular feeling vis-à-vis its own historical wrongdoing and, at the same time, absolves it of other forms of guilt or responsibility. By naming shame as national, state officials attach shame to the nation, detaching it from individuals. Though this shift may offer an important acknowledgment of past violence inflicted on a subaltern group, it also conceals the ways a legacy of injustice might continue to play out between individuals in the contemporary moment. National shame absolves individual guilt (*Cultural* 102). Although Ahmed's discussion of shame is distinct from the interpersonal, violent affect that David expresses throughout the novel, her discussion of the cultural politics of claiming national shame illuminates David's culpability for Giovanni's death as it relates to racial, class, and national identity. Aligned with whiteness and Americanness, David can articulate his own sense of shame to the reader, even as he ultimately leaves Giovanni to die, in effect, for his sins.

Since shame is also linked to normative ideals—and recognizing oneself as failing to live up to a norm can induce shame—it plays a crucial role in the relationship between social hegemony and official power. Particularly in relation to queer desire, personal feelings of shame can underwrite the logic of state prohibitions on homosexuality. Indeed, the spatial logic of pre-Stonewall police brutality provides a kind of metaphor for the way shame is felt as at once intensely private/secret and intensely public/exposed. Bars like the Stonewall Inn, cars, bathhouses, parks, or homes, could be spaces to "be" queer—to be out with other queer folks, to be visibly interested in people of the same

gender, to dress non-normatively, or even to have sex. These spaces were, if not private, then hidden from mainstream society and, importantly, law enforcement. Michael Warner has explored how places like bars trouble our sense of private/public and sometimes constitute "counterpublics" (65-124). Yet as Kevin Mumford describes, these spaces were not so much secret to the police as accommodated by them. Vice districts were often in African American communities, and constituted a space for sexual "deviance" that was allowed by, but always threatened by, the state (14-16). The spatial and material association between deviance and blackness signaled by vice districts is echoed in the way David associates queer desire with darkness.

Just as the spatial arrangement of queer life traverses and troubles the boundary between private/public, shame works to continually realign one's sense of inside and outside the self. Police raids into ostensibly private queer spaces thus offer a kind of violent metaphor for the way shame seems to move violently between the "inside" and "outside" of the self. Shame thus also has both emotional and material effects: shameful "perversion" justifies the state's violent intervention into the lives of non-white, non-straight poor people. Just as the police could invade a queer space at any moment, shattering the sense of safety, privacy, and community found in that space and enacting violence on queer people, so can the feeling of shame flood the body at seemingly any moment, seeming to turn the self inside-out, eliciting a sense of exposure and vulnerability in the shamed individual. Shame's relationship to the self and the state's relationship to queer life, however, are more than analogous—they also help constitute one another.

The phenomenological echoes between the "precarious lives" (Butler, *Precarious*) of minorities vis-à-vis the state and the shamed self offer a kind of logic of shame and violence that, I argue, Baldwin explores more deeply in *Giovanni's Room*. Its narrative—structured around Giovanni's absent-presence and imminent death—suggests a link between David's account of his relationship with Giovanni and the state violence inflicted on Giovanni. Within the world of the novel, Giovanni's death at the guillotine reinforces the ideology of state violence and broader systemic violence. When Giovanni dies, heteronormative order is ostensibly restored: violent and anti-social queers are policed, a patriarchal vision of family and genealogy is symbolically restored, and the state continues to operate "rationally." David carefully describes the increased police presence in Paris's gay neighborhoods in the wake of Giovanni's murder of Guillaume, who, in all the newspaper reports about the crime, is insistently characterized as a member of the French aristocracy, and the last of his line. Baldwin thus connects national identity to heteronormativity, policing of sexuality, and the death penalty.

Although the French media tell a story of a "senseless" act of violence that is finally resolved by the state's necessary violence, David's competing account of Giovanni's death encourages readers to find him culpable for the violence that turns out to be quite legible, after all. The story unfolds as a series of flashbacks David recounts as he sits in his empty house on the day of Giovanni's execution for the murder of Guillaume. Early in the novel, David explicitly states that he is responsible for Giovanni's death. While pondering his earlier days, "before anything awful, irrevocable, had happened to me," David introduces Giovanni's character by stating, "people are too

various to be treated so lightly. I am too various to be trusted." If this were not the case, he says, "Giovanni would not be about to perish, sometime between this night and this morning, on the guillotine" (5). Immediately linking Giovanni's death at the hands of the state to his own moral failings, David also sets up a major structuring conceit of the novel: he will explain exactly how he could be responsible for two deaths, neither of which he was present for. This conceit also explicitly links state violence, in the form of the guillotine, to the enigmatic power of emotional exchange between characters and even the powerful feelings of shame David will articulate throughout the novel.

The frame story posits the affective logic of violence as a code that David's story of the Paris love affair will unlock. Soon after the first mention of Giovanni, in the frame story, David claims that, "when one begins to search for the crucial, the definitive moment, the moment which changed all others, one finds oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors" (10). He is speaking of his "flight" from America and from the truth of his desires. Associating this flight with his first homosexual experience with Joey, he implicitly links the "definitive moment" of his shameful desire to the moment that ultimately causes Giovanni's death. Although David is an unreliable narrator, he does finally produce the "key" that unlocks the logical connections between his own behavior and Giovanni's death: "I was lying to myself" (163), he claims near the end of the novel, at the beginning of a complex narrative chain that I will describe momentarily. This lie, David understands, has set in motion subsequent events that ultimately lead to the guillotine.

At the novel's end, Baldwin constructs a narrative chain that finally makes the affective logic of violence clear. I noted earlier that David's shame is articulated, in part, through metaphors of reading and writing: he seems to confidently present a unified, heterosexual subjectivity to his father and Hella through his written letters, while he consistently worries about his queer desire being "read" on his body and through his actions by other queer men. Mediating the written/closeted-embodied/exposed dynamic is his first-person narration, which expresses shame. Echoing this dynamic, another kind of letter frames Baldwin's final linkage between David's shame and Giovanni's death. In the novel's last scene, as David prepares to walk out of the now-empty house to return to Paris and, ultimately, America, he mentions a "small, blue envelope, [which is] the note from Jacques informing [him] of the date of Giovanni's execution" (166). This envelope will return in the novel's last paragraph, symbolically writing Giovanni's death on David's body. David narrates:

> The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me (169).

Try as he might to take "flight" from Giovanni's death, to discard the writing that marks his death in time and serves as an implicit request for David to finally return to Giovanni, David cannot escape the envelope's symbolic weight. Scraps of the envelope drift back onto David; written evidence of Giovanni's death attaches to David's body. Baldwin

ultimately collapses David's perceived distinction between the self expressed in language and the embodied self.

Framed by the two mentions of the blue envelope, David looks at himself as he imagines Giovanni's death, solidifying the link between his feelings of shame and desire and Giovanni's ultimate death at the hands of the state. As he gazes at his own reflection (echoing the novel's first paragraph, which, as others have noted, emphasizes his European heritage and mentions his "ancestors [that] conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" [3]), David begins to imagine Giovanni's slow walk to the guillotine. Paragraph by paragraph, Baldwin shifts between David's movements through the house and Giovanni's movements toward death, underscoring the similarities, and the intimacy, between the two men. As David moves to stand in front of a mirror, which he is "terribly aware of," "Giovanni's face swings before" him "like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night." When he looks in the mirror, David sees Giovanni. Moreover, Baldwin links the bodies of the two men in this section, thus reminding readers that the body is the site through which affect is felt and expressed, and on which the state inflicts violence. David "see[s]" Giovanni's "legs buckle, his thighs jelly, the buttocks quiver," and wonders whether Giovanni is "sweating" or "dry" (167). Soon after, David states that his "own hands are clammy, [his] body is dull and white and dry." Returning to Giovanni, David claims, "[Giovanni] wants to spit, but his mouth is dry. He cannot ask that they let him pause for a moment to urinate—all that, in a moment, will take care of itself." Shifting back to his reflection in the mirror, David looks at his own body, "which is under

sentence of death. It is," he claims, "lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching" (168). Legs, thighs, buttocks, sweat, spit, urine—it is through the body, finally, that David and Giovanni seem to become united in imminent death. David imaginatively inhabits Giovanni's body, ultimately connecting himself to Giovanni's death.

Yet the novel's ending is ultimately ambiguous: does David merely appropriate Giovanni's physical suffering to explain his psychological anguish? Even at this moment of seeming clarity, does David merely use and discard Giovanni in a new fashion? Although the ending, as I have argued, figuratively maps the affective logic of violence that has been woven through the novel, it does not finally clarify the mysteries of connection David mentions at the novel's beginning. Indeed, David's own body, and its connection to others, remains mysterious to him:

> I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh (168).

In my copy of *Giovanni's Room*, I've written a large question mark beside this section. The "key" is opaque and confusing, not a key at all. But perhaps this is fitting: as carefully as Baldwin traces the connections between David and Giovanni, he is ultimately mapping a phenomenon that exceeds representation. He has, after all, taken on the task of articulating how emotional exchange between people leads to action in the world.

D. Quentin Miller insists that for Baldwin, unlike other African American writers and activists of the period, for whom prison could be a generative, if violent, space for developing political consciousness, prison was strictly a "desolate" awful place. His "experience in a Paris jail, far from being the catalyst for his writing life, nearly killed him" (164). This link between prison and suicide is reflected in *Giovanni's Room*'s treatment of affect and violence. Baldwin traces the connections between Giovanni's subject position as a poor, racialized, queer man, his abuse at the hands of Guillaume, his murderous reaction to it, and his death at the hands of the state. He also connects the double imprisonment of Giovanni's "prison" of a room and his literal prison cell. Not a suicide, nor a lynching, Giovanni's death at the guillotine nevertheless echoes Baldwin's suicide attempt by literalizing the causal relationship that Baldwin saw between the law's control over his life and his decision to end his life.[39]

Immediately after David recounts Guillaume's murder, he describes the police roundups in the gay bars that follow news of the murder, and the newspapers' reconstruction of the story that describes Guillaume as an honorable, kind man from a noble family who becomes a "symbol of French manhood." A silence surrounds the initial mention of Guillaume's murder: a chapter ends with the information that "Guillaume was found dead in the private quarters above his bar, strangled with the sash of his dressing gown" (148), and the next chapter begins, "It was a terrific scandal." Before retelling the details of Guillaume's murder, David describes its meaning in terms of its potential to "rock the very foundations of the state." Unpacking the state's logic of rational violence, David claims that "it is necessary to find an explanation, a solution, and

a victim with the utmost possible speed," and in pursuit of this goal, "plainclothes policemen descended on the quarter, asking to see everyone's papers, and the bars were emptied of *tapettes* [derogatory term for homosexuals]" (149), many of whom were arrested. According to the novel, state violence appears to offer a necessary solution to the threat of violence against noble Frenchmen. The arbitrary violence inflicted on poor, queer people is rationalized in the name of the nation.

Giovanni's Room uses expatriate allegories to make continuities between Baldwin's articulation of American "incoherence," state violence, and emotional violation. Baldwin's thoughts about his contemporary Richard Wright further illuminate Baldwin's complex approach to the emotional life of state violence. As I suggested in the introduction, Bigger Thomas's violent impulses in *Native Son* have often been understood as a direct manifestation of the hardships he has suffered under white supremacy. Bigger is a clear-cut symptom of an unjust society, and readers can diagnose that society in large part through the novel's depiction of violence. Although it also might be emotionally difficult to endure, Bigger's violence is, according to my rubric, sensible, because it does explicit political work.

Baldwin found fault with Wright's portrayal of Bigger because it reduced his characterization to his social circumstances. His essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" critiques *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for a sentimental portrayal of black slaves that not only reifies "white" ideals through black figures, but also, and more damningly, reproduces precisely the white supremacist beliefs that it sets out to critique. The sentimental deployment of black suffering in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is what Baldwin calls a "theological

terror" that, as a deployment of affect, "is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob" (18). For Baldwin, *Native Son* is like a mirror image of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He explains:

> All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through this violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel there lies, it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle (22).

By reducing Bigger to a symptom of inequality through the framework of racial, gender, and class categorization, Baldwin argues, Wright concretizes the social meaning of those categories, foreclosing the possibility of a more complex depiction of black humanity.

What is most dangerous about the protest novel, according to Baldwin, is that "so far from being disturbing," it is often "an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised," he continues, "are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (19). The protest novel is not merely

inefficient to the work of dismantling racist belief or forcing readers to confront the injustice all around them; rather, it often shores up "innocent" readers' sense of themselves as righteous for daring to read protest fiction at all. Because the form of the protest novel is familiar, its mode of critique is defanged.

More important and worrisome, for Baldwin, are the limitations the protest genre places on the complexity of individuals and the emotional life of power. The promise of the protest novel, he argues, relies on an "ideal of society" as "a race of neatly analyzed, hard working ciphers" (19). People don't work like that, Baldwin claims. I contend, moreover, that *representations* of people don't work like that, either. The belief that protest novels like *Native Son* can diagnose and resolve the structural, symbolic, and state violence of white supremacy relies on a faulty understanding of the connections between real and fictional people, and between readers and texts. Clearly, Baldwin is invested in the cultural politics of black fiction. But he imagines the work of fiction to address the messiness of inner lives in relation to the social world. By imagining that the diagnosis of a sick society is also its remedy, protest fiction can only serve as "a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American Dream" (19). In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin attempts a different approach to social problems like state violence: taking advantage of the imaginative possibilities of fiction, he emphasizes the many aspects of daily emotional life and affective exchange that cannot be linked directly to injustice. At the same time, however, his affective logic of violence draws a strange new map of feeling's relationship to material injustice.

The novel's narrative structure allows Baldwin to consider the continuities between the "rational" violence of the law and subtle, everyday instances of violence. The ways David injures Giovanni—by abandoning him, by lying to him, and even by narrating his death—operate on a continuum with other forms of more explicit violence the novel depicts. By forging causal connections between David's shame, his violent emotions, Giovanni's acts of violence, and Giovanni's death, the novel also articulates the violence of interpersonal relationships, especially in a context of racism and homophobia. By foregrounding affect as the point of connection between acts of violence, Baldwin helps readers see how the law shapes everyday life. The novel's depiction of prison emphasizes this point: by comparing Giovanni's room to a prison and interjecting descriptions of prison and the police throughout the novel, Baldwin highlights the law's often invisible reach into private life and its power to shape emotional life.

David's repeated insistence on his own "shame" raises questions about the signifying power of the word "shame" in relationship to reader response. Do readers of the novel feel shame? If not, what affects might the novel provoke? Perhaps the stance of reading offers insight into the relationship between David's shame and the reader's own potential feelings of shame. Through shame, the novel aligns the reading of bodies with the reading of texts. The distance between the sign of shame and the feeling of it mirrors the distance between representations of violence and experiences of it, and the novel's structure distances readers from its own represented violence. Giovanni's death is never fixed in diegetic time, but is always imminent, imagined, in the future, or in the past. As I

have argued, the novel's framing device of David's narration on the eve of Giovanni's execution emphasizes David's responsibility for Giovanni's death. It also constructs a link between David and the reader. As a narrator, David is both unreliable and largely unsympathetic. He treats Giovanni, Joey, Hella, and Sue cruelly. His confessions throughout the novel seem to ask for understanding, if not forgiveness, but they do not, for the most part, encourage empathy in readers. They may, however, provoke shame. Some readers may identify with David, sharing in his shame or beginning to feel shame because they recognize an as-yet-unacknowledged violence in their own treatment of others. Alternately, readers may "catch" David's contagious shame without necessarily identifying with him. By recalling Baldwin's imaginative leap into a "white fantasy of desire," however, we can understand how he also foregrounds the relationship between reading and identity. The novel works against the assumed alignment between an author's racial status and his subject matter; in doing so, it prompts readers to reflect on the way their own racial, sexual, and class status might shape their reading practice. By developing an "expatriate" vocabulary for identity, *Giovanni's Room* redirects readers' attention toward the power of shame to shape relationships between lovers, within communities, and with the state.

Conclusion: Senseless Aesthetics and Reading Identities

Baldwin's affective logic of violence marks a turn from the major concerns of this project so far. Rather than deploying aesthetic strategies that blur the political or cathartic effects of represented violence, Baldwin outlines the networks of affective connection and structural violence that enable the ostensibly senseless act of Guillaume's murder. Baldwin structures *Giovanni's Room* around the guillotine, a metonym for rationalized state violence. He is concerned with demystifying the logics that operate even in acts of violence that look arbitrary, unmotivated, random, or unjustified. In this conclusion, I bring Baldwin's affective-political logic to bear on my definition of senseless violence as an aesthetic strategy that negotiates affect and marginal identity. Embedded in the concept of senseless violence, and in this project as a whole, is a tension between the notion that culture, even in its seemingly apolitical gestures, always has a politics, and the limiting belief that some identity categories are de facto political (Deleuze and Guattari 17), and critical reading practice should always and forever make "politics" its central category of analysis.

By ending with *Giovanni's Room*, I hope to highlight this tension. Baldwin's novel complicates the very picture of "senselessness" this project has painted, offering a way to make affective sense of "senseless violence." There are a series of tensions in play when we consider senseless representations of violence in minority fiction: one is between senseless violence and rational violence; another is between represented violence and real violence; and another is between literary and visual representation. In

my argument, I have related senselessness most directly to issues of reading, hermeneutics, and intelligibility. Although I argue that many acts of violence in literature and art foreclose interpretation by erasing motivation for a violent act or blurring the distinction between victim and perpetrator of a violent act, my focus on unmotivated, non-cathartic, or arbitrary scenes of violence is not simply an exercise in highlighting this phenomenon in work by racial and sexual minorities. These representations of violence also challenge familiar practices of sense-making.

As *Giovanni's Room* demonstrates, strategies of sense-making are deeply bound up in structures of feeling and their ideological underpinning. The novel emphasizes feeling and the violence of emotional exchange in order to make sense of Guillaume's ostensibly senseless murder and to render Giovanni's death at the hands of the state less rational than it might usually appear to be. Writing about *Another Country*, Ernesto Javier Martínez argues that Baldwin explores the theme of incoherence as a "paradigmatic feature of systemic oppression" and an "epistemic and communicative crisis that Baldwin seeks to render intelligible" (64-5). Using the language of senselessness, I have made similar claims about Baldwin's project in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin insisted that "incoherence" was an essential and unavoidable feature of his writing because it reflected the crisis of racial and sexual politics in the United States (65). His writing reproduces much of that incoherence, but also disambiguates it in order to reveal the relationship between objective violence and structures of feeling. Martínez points to the moments of intelligibility that Baldwin creates out of the context of incoherence in *Another Country*, writing against a critical tendency to reduce representations of racial and sexual

marginality to case studies in the social construction of identity and the ultimate unknowability of the self or the Other. Instead, Martínez argues, Baldwin articulates incoherence as the product of social forces that reproduce hierarchy. Baldwin, as I have shown, emphasizes the role affect plays in reproducing such notions of incoherence and the objective violence that supports them.

Morrison, Walker, Acker, and riot grrrl artists render violence senseless in order to open up new interpretive possibilities that depart from predictable connections between ideology and affect, but Baldwin's exploration of violence remains grounded in the cultural politics of emotion. Insisting that, in Martínez's terms, writing from the margins can make sense of senselessness, Baldwin articulates the political stakes of senselessness that the other artists in this study approach from different angles. By turning to Baldwin at the end of this study, I raise questions about the relationship between the aesthetic strategy of senselessness and the politics of naming an act of violence "senseless." If "senseless violence" can describe nearly any act of subjective violence, then perhaps we should be less concerned with pinning down a clear-cut definition of a "senseless" act of violence than with interrogating the linguistic and ideological work the term does. In political and media discourse, calling an act of violence senseless also makes a value judgment about legitimate and illegitimate uses of force.[40] Senselessness is contingent, not ontological. As Baldwin claims, calling an act of violence "senseless" often says nothing about the nature, meaning, or effects of violence, but reflects instead on the limited perspectives of the people doing the naming. All the writers and artists discussed in this thesis are deeply concerned with politics, but

Baldwin's earlier writing reflects the urgency of illuminating systemic violence in the midst of the Civil Rights moment. By contrast, Morrison and Acker bring an attention to the ways represented violence might be doing work that is not social commentary.

The contingent nature of senselessness, however, is also what makes it an apt term to describe a literary strategy that emphasizes and exploits the lag between representation and interpretation. Artists use an aesthetics of senselessness to manipulate interpretive possibilities for readers, and sometimes to push back against reading paradigms that associate particular identity formations with particular affects and thus arrive at familiar conclusions about the politics of representation and real-world violence. An aesthetics of senselessness encourages audiences to consider how violence makes them feel, rather than what claims it makes about the world. Through aesthetic choices such as Walker's silhouettes, Morrison's alignment between Sula and readers, Acker's drawings and "stupid writing," and riot grrrl's collages and aggressive voice, artists can provoke or foreclose certain affective responses. Instead of displaying violated black bodies to provoke a sympathetic disgust, Walker and Morrison evacuate familiar aesthetic cues that provoke such disgust, turning our attention instead to the very overdetermined relationship between disgust and blackness. Rather than fixing an identity formation to a particular affect, senseless violence breaks down or refuses the familiar relationship between disgust and blackness, shock and feminism, and shame and queerness, introducing other possible feelings.

Senseless violence also points to an odd intersection between theories of reading and theories of marginality and difference. Reader-response criticism and narrative

theory tend to overlook questions of identity in favor of more universal claims about narrative structure and ideal readers. Although many scholars examine specific reading communities, there is little reading theory that deeply considers the relationship between identity and the phenomenology of reading. As Michael Awkward asks, "What is the nature of the relationship between oppressed 'minority' racial status and reading?" (5). Textual representation, by nature, removes visible signifiers of race; instead, race is signified linguistically. What effect does such an erasure have on the phenomenological experience of reading race or sexuality? By erasing visual signifiers of skin color, literary representations are capable of sidestepping a visual regime that enforces racial categories and hierarchies. As Linda Alcoff explains, "the realm of the visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible (which is how the ideology of racism naturalizes racial designation), is recognized as the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight" (126). Reading offers an opportunity to think about racial and sexual difference with a different relationship to the regime of the visible. Furthermore, if reading is a phenomenological experience that heightens readers' awareness of the relationship between mind and body,[41] and reading violent literature offers the most visceral experience of such a mind-body imbrication, then encountering new arrangements of identity and affect can profoundly shape readers' understandings of racial and sexual difference.

African American, feminist, and black feminist literary criticism share a concern with the politics of reading that has often been imbricated with the politics of representation (Awkward 12). "Reading," for these critical formations, has been about

developing interpretive strategies that account for the particular aesthetic gestures made by marginalized artists and that work against critical paradigms that have historically marginalized literature by non-white, non-male authors. Across these formations, "reading" can be largely equated with "hermeneutics," whereby to read is to offer an interpretation of a given set of signifiers and narrative strategies. Elizabeth Abel exemplifies such a conception of reading in her discussion of "black writing, white reading." Abel illustrates the ways in which racial identity shapes a reading practice by comparing her interpretation of Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif"—which narrates the friendship between two girls, one white, one black, while manipulating racial codes to make it impossible for readers to definitively determine the race of each girl—with the interpretation of black feminist critic Lula Fragd. Abel carefully demonstrates how her mode of reading the story leads to her assumption that Twyla, the narrator, is white, and how Fragd differently interprets the story to conclude that Twyla is black. Abel's example is particularly interesting because she suggests that embodied experience shapes reading practice, even when reading practice is largely understood as intellectual, rather than phenomenological: Abel states that her reading "privileg[es] psychology," while Fragd's emphasizes "politics" (475). She also makes the "embarrass[ed]" admission that she relied on a conception of black womanhood as excessively embodied in order to conclude that Roberta, the other girl in the story, is black (472).

While "Recitatif" is a unique example of a literary work that represents racial difference even as it prevents readers from determining the race of its characters, it offers provocative implications for the reading of race, gender, and sexuality more broadly.

Indeed, the story is an excellent example of what one might call a senseless aesthetics: by erasing unambiguous racial signifiers for her characters, but provoking readers' impulse to decipher the characters' races, Morrison manipulates readers' hermeneutic impulses while foreclosing familiar interpretive strategies that would locate race discretely on bodies. The relationship between embodied experience and reading, Abel suggests, has profound implications for feminist theory: "If white feminist readings of black women's texts disclose white critical fantasies, what (if any) value do these readings have—and for whom? How do white women's readings of black women's biological bodies inform our reading of black women's textual bodies?" (477). The senseless aesthetics of "Recitatif" provoke Abel's questions about identity's influence on reading practices, and points toward the ways reading is deeply embodied, as well as deeply bound up in everyday life. Although designed to reflect on feminist interpretive strategies that pay adequate attention to race, Abel's argument points toward the need for increased attention to the phenomenology of reading as it is shaped by racial identity.

Likewise, "queer reading" has been largely defined as a hermeneutics grounded in psychoanalytic models of desire and repression and the social phenomenon of the closet—Sedgwick's reading of "The Beast in the Jungle" is paradigmatic. Queer interpretive strategies seek to hear the silences and codes that dare not speak same sex desire. Queer reading also has ties to a kind of willful misrecognition; reading queerly can entail imaginative play with form, signifiers, and narrative to produce new, unintended, queer stories. Fan fiction that "ships" two characters of the same gender produces a kind of queer reading; so does a reading or viewing experience that finds

campy humor in an ostensibly straight story. "Reading," of course, is also a key term in a vocabulary affiliated with queer subcultures. As E. Patrick Johnson describes it, "To read someone is to set them 'straight,' to put them in their place, or to reveal a secret about someone in front of others in an indirect way—usually in a way that embarrasses a third party" (177). People read one another by pointing out a hypocrisy or flaw, or critiquing some aspect of their self-presentation using humor. Unlike the critical strategies I have described, this mode of reading is interpersonal and often related to comportment and self-fashioning.

Senseless violence both builds on and subverts the hermeneutic strategies of sexual and racial difference exemplified in feminist and queer reading strategies. The texts in this study are, in a sense, historically divided by the turn to feminist, black, and queer reading practices: though *Giovanni's Room* appears at the end of this project, it is the earliest work in terms of its publication, and was written before identity-based interpretive frameworks gained traction in the academy. *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Sula*, by contrast, were published during the early stages of African American and Women's Studies courses on college campuses.[42] *Giovanni's Room* concerns itself with "reading" the affective logic of violence in part because Baldwin was at the forefront of the anti-racist and anti-homophobic critique that would become recognizable in African-American literary criticism and queer studies as the century progressed.

Senseless representations of wounded and marginalized bodies also have implications for how culture might negotiate "wounded attachments." In Wendy Brown's theory, identity groups that come into being through a shared sense of woundedness,

historical trauma, or oppression must remain attached to such models of identity in order to make claims for rights or justice. That is, "politicized identities generated out of liberal, disciplinary societies, insofar as they are premised on exclusion from a universal ideal, require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence as identities" (65). Brown critiques a model of social change that relies on appeals for justice to the very state and cultural organizations that are responsible for oppression in the first place. Although I can hardly claim that senseless violence disrupts, in some direct way, the wounded attachments Brown describes, senseless violence *does* disrupt familiar reading strategies that make literature by a marginalized author an inevitable reflection on their marginal identity. By expanding readers' sense of the range of meanings that can attach to representations of racial and sexual minority identity, senseless violence complicates familiar visions of wounded racial and sexual identities.

Senseless violence thus encourages a paradoxical reading practice that articulates possible circulations of affect, but doesn't pin down a representation with a specific, predictable response. The artists in this study encourage unfamiliar emotional responses to represented violence, which expands cultural and personal "archives" of feelings (Cvetkovich 2003). New feelings can, in turn, enable new modes of self- and community-understanding that might enable new political strategies. Riot grrrl artists, for example, offered readers a broad emotional vocabulary for responding to violence, in addition to a clear articulation of everyday and structural violence inflicted within the patriarchal family, education system, dating world, and punk music scene. Breaking down the imperative to be a "good victim" of sexual violence, riot grrrl zines depicted a whole

range of emotional responses to violence. This project, I hope, has made clear the limits of modes of reading that emphasize ideology at the expense of aesthetics and affect. The literary moments that upend readers' familiar sense-making strategies can also help them reflect on those strategies. Senseless violence can jolt readers out of familiar interpretive strategies that reduce marginal people to bodies that suffer, offering, paradoxically, new political possibilities that are grounded in embodiment and feeling.

Notes to the Introduction:

[1] http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/obama-cant-allow-senseless-violence-silence-the-world; http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/nilegardiner/10217347/obama-administration-calls-london-terror-attack-senseless-violence-the-same-language-president-obama-used-over-benghazi/

[2] https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/27/statement-president-international-holocaust-remembrance-day

[3] See also Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject*.

[4] Žižek defines objective violence (2) as the structuring violence of everyday life and the symbolic system that represents it. Žižek names two types of objective violence, "symbolic" and "systemic." Symbolic violence is "embodied in language in all its forms," an invisible form of violence that inheres in the way representation justifies injustice and, in a more totalizing fashion, imposes a "certain universe of meaning" on life (2). Systemic violence describes the "often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2). If its opposite, "subjective" violence, is "performed by a clearly identifiable agent," then objective violence is "a violence that sustains our very effort to prevent violence and promote tolerance" (1).

[5] For recent overviews of queer negativity and the anti-social thesis, see the PMLA Forum "The Anti-Social Thesis in Queer Theory" and Halberstam's "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies."

[6] See, for example, Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers* and Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*.

[7] Analogously, cultural theories of emotion, emblematized by Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, are, by their own account, less interested in explaining what an emotion *is* than how it works in relationship to culture and ideology. Ahmed is interested in how people invoke emotion, where it is said to circulate, and the stories we tell about emotions. By tracing these formations, Ahmed can make claims about politics and ideology at a key site of its formation and movement—the everyday, lived, and felt experiences of a society.

[8] My discussion here is necessarily truncated, but for more on this topic, see Barrett, "African American Slave Narratives;" Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*; Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation*; Foster, *Written by Herself*; Gates, *Figures in Black*; McDowell and Rampersad, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*; and Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*.

[9] Jerry Bryant demonstrates, through an exhaustive reading of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American writing, that "white violence against blacks produces a victim," and "black violence against whites [produces] a hero." The unequal humanity afforded to blacks and whites, however, circumscribes the ways African American writers can depict violence committed by black heroes. Consequently, African American fiction grapples with a "persistent tension over how to represent violent acts" (Saunders 402-3). Saidiya Hartman, in *Scenes of Subjection,* takes up the question of how images of black suffering circulate and invite particular forms of spectatorship in nineteenth-century U.S. culture. "At issue" in confronting representations of black suffering "is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator" (4).

[10] See also Giles, *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel.*

[11] See also Kuribayashi and Tharp, *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing* and Sielke, *Reading Rape.*

[12] Groeneveld 77. Likewise, Roderick Ferguson argues that "the academy became the 'training ground' for state and capital's engagement with minority difference as a site of representation and meaning" (*Reorder*, 11). Identity-based rights movements in the 1960s and 70s sought to reimagine the order of academic knowledge by expanding "archival conventions" so that previously excluded groups might gain entry into intellectual legitimacy. Civil Rights activists thus extended their political aims by diagnosing the academy as a value-granting and knowledge-producing institution and attempting to reorganize concepts of knowledge, truth, and legitimacy by instituting departments of Women's Studies, African American Studies, Chicano Studies, and the like. However, recognition in the academy also meant that minoritized groups subjected themselves to "new and revised laws"—new modes of managing and "disciplining" minority subjects (12).

Notes to Chapter One:

[13] Especially in the early years of her career, Morrison was often criticized for her negative portrayal of black men. For more on this, see Hilton Als's 2003 interview with Morrison, "Ghosts in the House." The two most vocal critics of Walker's art are

Howardena Pindell and Betye Saar. For an overview of critiques of Walker, see Pindell, *Kara Walker Yes / Kara Walker No / Kara Walker ?*.

[14] Recent work has explored the visuality of race; see in particular Fleetwood, Nicole, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*; Mitchell, W.J.T., *Seeing Through Race*; Smith, Shawn Michelle, "Visual Culture and Race: Guest Editor's Introduction;" and Neary, Janet, "Representational Static: Visual Slave Narratives of Contemporary Art."

[15] See, for example, Scott, Darieck, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*; Sharpe, Christina, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*; Holland, Sharon, *The Erotic Life of Racism*; Quashie, Kevin, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*; Stockton, Kathryn Bond, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer;"* Stephens, Michelle Ann. *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*; and Young, Harvey, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*.

[16] Clare Hemmings, for one, has also laid out a critique of the affective turn, arguing that scholars such as Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offer the precognitive, relational experience of affect as a panacea to the shortcomings of the earlier linguistic turn. According to Hemmings, this stance overlooks feminist and postcolonial critiques of the subject that already foreground the corporeal experience of the social world in precisely the way Massumi and Sedgwick claim affect is uniquely capable of. Moreover, Hemmings points out that in order to make the claim that affect provides subjects with a

way to break free from the oppressive structures named by poststructuralist theory, scholars like Massumi and Sedgwick must imagine affect as moving randomly between subjects and objects, ignoring the ways affect is socially regulated and produced. Affect often works to reinforce social norms, especially regarding racial and gender hierarchy. Hemmings describes Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde's biographical recounting of their own experiences as the racialized objects that provoke affect in white subjects, reminding us that racialized subjects "are so over-associated with affect that they themselves are the object of affective transfer" (561). Also see Leys, Ruth, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique."

[17] See in particular "Camptown Ladies" (1998) and "Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace" (2004).

[18] Critics have amply examined the coterminous rise of modern Western aesthetic philosophy and the category of "race." Kant appears to be the first figure on record to use the term "race" in roughly the way we understand it today. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, of course, played a key role in reshaping Europeans' conception of their place in the world and their identity. It also, as scholars have demonstrated, shaped the discourse of aesthetics that came to full fruition in the eighteenth century. As thinkers like Linnaeus, Buffon, and Bernier were reimagining scientific categories of people, Herder, Hume, and Kant were outlining strategies for discerning natural and artistic beauty. See, for example, Siebers, Tobin, "Kant and the Politics of Beauty"; Berger, David, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: The Beautiful and Agreeable*; Bindman, David, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*; and Gilman, Sander, "Black Bodies, White Bodies:

Towards and Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature."

[19] Scholars have demonstrated the ways this legacy plays out in the racist aspects of normative standards of beauty. See, for example, Burchill, Richard, *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, and Politics* and Leeds, Maxine, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*.

[20] See Menninghaus, Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* and Korsmeyer.

[21] This is hardly the only place Morrison addresses lynching iconography in her work. Her little-known play, *Dreaming Emmett*, has Emmett Till return to the scene of his lynching and confront the murderers. As Sandy Alexandre has pointed out, *Beloved* takes up lynching through tree imagery, and, as Chuck Jackson has noted, *Sula* "borrows from and rearranges objects and actions typically found in lynching narratives," and is set during a period of rampant lynchings (374-5).

[22] See Bhabha 1994, Davis 1998, Bouson 2000, Duvall 2000, Young 2001

[23] Sara Ahmed, writing about happiness, has named this experience "affect alienation." ("Happy Objects").

[24] Carbonell, Bettina, "The Afterlife of Lynching: Exhibitions and the Re-Composition of Human Suffering." It is also worth noting, of course, that a lynching postcard could have precisely the opposite effect on its recipient than the one I have described here. Although a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, my argument about the wide range of emotional responses to violence applies to the circulation of lynching postcards, as well. Recipients could feel a number of things in response to the image, from delight and

recognition, to moral outrage, to mild discomfiture, to indifference. For more on lynching photography, see Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs*; Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*; Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*; and Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s."

Notes to Chapter Two:

[25] See Huppatz 2007, Milletti 2004, Friedman 1989, and Sweet 2009.

[26] Felski and Eburne, v-vi. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde*, Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, and Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*.

[27] See, for example, Gabrielle Dane, "Hysteria as a Feminist Protest," Hawkins, "All in the Family," Suzette Henke, "Oedipus Meets Sacher-Masoch," Kathy Hughes, "Incest and Innocence," Arthur Redding, "Bruises, Roses," and Carolyn Zaikowski, "Reading Traumatized Bodies of Texts."

[28] For more on this, see Jordana Greenblatt, *Words Like That*.

Notes to Chapter Three:

[29] Scholars have often compared Giovanni's room to the closet. See Armengol, "In the Dark Room."

[30] Baldwin described America's racial and sexual inequality in terms of "incoherence;" instead of a shared, usable past that could serve as a resource for Americans across racial and sexual categories, American norms hid the violent truth of history and rendered any understanding of social inequality incoherent. Baldwin articulates this most explicitly in "Notes of a Native Son."

[31] Writing in the *New York Times*, Granville Hicks called the homosexual content of *Giovanni's Room* "delicate enough to make strong demands on all of Mr. Baldwin's resourcefulness and subtlety," and lauded Baldwin for rendering his "grotesque and repulsive" characters with a "dignity and intensity" that saves the novel from "sensationalism." By contrast, Saunders Redding, writing in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, had nothing good to say about Giovanni's Room: while its topic was ostensibly love, he claimed, "the best that Baldwin can make of love is lust. And lust will not do, especially when it is the lust of one man for another."

[32] Here I refer to Orlando Patterson's landmark study *Slavery and Social Death*, which charts the way slavery dehumanized enslaved people, leaving them without identities and thus socially dead.

[33] David Halperin and Valerie Traub's *Gay Shame* offers the most comprehensive collection of these critiques. For an overview of activist critique of gay pride, see http://gayshamesf.org/about.html.

[34] For an extended discussion of blushing and shame, see Elspeth Probyn's *Blush*. Elsewhere, Angela Rosenthal argues that eighteenth-century portraiture began to portray

women with exaggeratedly flushed cheeks as a way of making whiteness legible and negotiating anxieties about racial mixture ("Visceral Culture").

[35] See especially Butler, *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble*; 1999; Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*; Eng, *Racial Castration*; and Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*.

[36] Cynthia Lee provides an overview of the "gay panic defense," which has now been outlawed in California and is increasingly untenable in the courtroom. In recent years, discussions of the "gay panic defense" have begun to include "trans panic," as well ("Masculinity on Trial").

[37] See Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire" and Abdur-Rahman, "Simply a Menaced Boy."

[38] In particular, Rob Nixon has characterized the "slow violence" of environmental devastation as an effect of global capitalism. Lawrence Bobo and Ryan Smith have described "laissez faire racism" as "colorblind racism" that enables material oppression and subsequent violence.

[39] In addition to his formative experience with police and prison, Baldwin also had an extensive FBI file. For a detailed discussion of his relationship with the FBI, see William Maxwell, *FB Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, and Maxwell's online archive of the FBI's files on Baldwin (http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fbeyes/baldwin).

Notes to the Conclusion:

[40] See Hall, *Policing the Crisis*; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; and Blok, *Honour and Violence.*

[41] The phenomenological tradition, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, offers a corrective to the Cartesian conception of the body as an inert container for the mind. Merleau-Ponty claims that "perceptual habits are formed in the embodied person" and shape what the mind perceives (*Sense and Non-sense*, xii). Indeed, phenomenology suggests that "mind" and "body" cannot be disentangled, and its emphasis on the body has been useful for theorists of identity. Most notably, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is informed by Merleau-Ponty's claim that "not only [is] the body is an historical idea but [also] a set of possibilities to be continually realized." Butler continues, explaining that, "in claiming that the body is an historical idea, Merleau-Ponty means that it gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities" (Butler, "Performative Acts," 521).

[42] For an overview of the development of African American and Women's Studies departments, see Wiegman, *Object Lessons*.

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Appendix

1. Kara Walker
Detail of *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995
Cut paper on wall
Installation dimensions variable, approx. 156 x 420 inches (396.2 x 1066.8 cm)

2. Kara Walker
Cut, 1998
Cut paper on wall
88 x 54 inches (223.5 x 137.2 cm)

3. Kara Walker
Burn, 1998
Cut paper on Wall
92 x 48 inches (233.7 x 121.9 cm)