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## The Politics of Racial Abjection

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### Abstract

Building on the theoretical frameworks of both Charles Mills and Juliet Hooker I center race within abjection theory to demonstrate how the lack of concern about the pain and suffering of racial minorities is a link between critical race and abjection theory. The central problematic of this paper is racial abjection—how race creates an altered conceptualization of abjection and what this means for Blacks within the polis. Racial abjection is a powerful mythological, psychological, and physical response to the Black body and Black sexuality. This is the ability and desire of Whites to witness Black pain and suffering. I discuss the relationship among racial abjection, the Black body and Black sexuality. Then I detail the effects of racial abjection on Black masculinity and femininity. Lastly, I offer (dis)identification as a possible starting point for counter-conceptualizing Black identity.

**Keywords:** Racial Abjection; Racial Polity; Racialized Political Solidarity; Political Violence

### Introduction

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was slowly choked to death on a public street by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Officer Chauvin kneeled on Mr. Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds in front of three additional Minneapolis police officers and numerous bystanders (Hill et al., 2020). Mr. Floyd begged for his life, repeating more than twenty times that he could not breathe, and calling out for his deceased mother before passing away (BBC News 2020).

Charles Mills and Juliet Hooker have argued that the racial polity and racialized political solidarity allow Whites to view and ignore the pain and suffering of racial minorities such as Mr. Floyd. I attempt to center their work within abjection theory, arguing that racial abjection produces a desire to witness that same pain and suffering. Elizabeth Alexander (1994) argues that “Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries” (p. 78). The “Black bod[y] and [its] attendant drama are publicly consumed by the larger populace” (p. 79). The line between witness and spectator lies in the ability to empathize with the pain and suffering of the victim. Alexander outlines several instances when pain and suffering was deliberately inflicted on Black bodies. In these and countless other instances, what would ordinarily be objectionable—blood and death—become pleasurable and climactic. In 1940's Louisiana, Klansmen would drive through crowds of Black children with the bodies of dead Black men tied to the fronts of their cars (Alexander 1994). These dead Black bodies were not abject corpses. Like hunters strapping a deer to the hood of their car, these White men were parading through town with prized trophies. Not only did they desire to produce Black death, but they also made it

a spectacle, and Black children were forced to bear witness to and experience their own pain and suffering for the collective benefit of the Klansmen.

In this paper, I build on the work of Mills and Hooker and racialize the problem of abjection. First, I discuss Mills' and Hooker's work on the racial polity and racialized political solidarity. I then discuss the theory of abjection and its connection to defilement, and most significantly, to the defiled corpse—the ultimate abjection. Third, I discuss how, akin to solidarity, when abjection is racialized, the defiled Black corpse becomes the ideal. This differs from general theories about abjection, which argue that the defiled corpse is the most objectionable. Essentially, Black pain and suffering become spectacles and the dead Black body, their climax. Next, I discuss the normative implications of racial abjection on the Black body and Black sexuality, as well as the effects of racial abjection on Black masculinity and femininity. Finally, I offer (dis)identification as a possible starting point for counter-conceptualizing Black identity.

### ***The Racial Polity and Racialized Political Solidarity***

Charles Mills (1997) conceptualizes an epistemology of ignorance and the racial polity in his groundbreaking work, *The Racial Contract*. The racial contract is a set of formal and informal agreements or meta-agreements that privilege Whites, as a group, over non-whites, as a group, and permit the exploitation of nonwhite bodies and the denial of equal opportunities and rights to nonwhites. He finds that all Whites benefit from of the Contract, although some are not *signatories* to it. An epistemology of ignorance is a distinct pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions. It is psychologically and socially functional and makes Whites generally unable to understand the world they created. Mills terms this *White ignorance* because he is speaking to and about a willful, race-based ignorance produced by White supremacy. This includes ignorance about the oppressive conditions experienced by minorities, and the institutions, beliefs, and practices that underlie such inequalities, and conversely, the privileges that benefit Whites. White ignorance rests on formal equality yet denies the need to address persistent inequalities afflicting marginalized groups.

The *racial polity* is the formal recognition of White supremacy as a political system (Mills 1998). Beyond declaring the existence of White supremacy, Mills also argues that it must be demonstrated and the mechanisms through which it operates and reproduces itself detailed. This is crucial because within the racial polity, race is the most important thing about citizenship. Race determines if one does or does not count as a full citizen—a person with the full rights and privileges of the state or someone without. The racial polity is inherently predatory. Predatory regimes establish and maintain unearned inequalities produced through the exclusion and exploitation of marginalized groups (Davis 2021). Within the racial polity, Whites receive tangible benefits and entitlement to differential legal and social treatment and expectations of success (Mills 1998). These unearned privileges produce a racialized moral psychology causing Whites to behave in racist ways *while* believing themselves as being antiracist. Thus, Whites will have great difficulty seeing themselves as racist. Opposing racism is not the same as opposing White supremacy, in that one can genuinely condemn racial oppression while simultaneously believing Blacks are less than equal (Mills 1998). The racialized moral psychology allows Whites to “press the off button, in a way appropriate for a morality where some count for less than” a full (White) person (p. 157).

Mills (1998) finds that “in a racial polity, empathic feelings will travel weakly across the color line; White empathy will refuse to enter Black skin” (p. 157). This phenomenon of divergent ethical, moral, and political perspectives is the foundation of what Juliet Hooker

(2009) terms racialized solidarity. In her foundational text, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, Hooker utilizes Mills' racial polity to conceptualize the racialization of political solidarity. Political solidarity is understood to be the "ability of individuals to engage in relations of trust and obligation with fellow members of a political community whom they may see as inherently "other" in some fundamental way" (Hooker 2009, p. 21). Hooker finds that "political solidarity is about who is seen as entitled to mutual respect and about who is conceived as being able to make claims on our sympathies, and such boundaries are not determined by a shared capacity to will the common good" (p. 26). A fundamental feature of political solidarity is that members of a society care about the *pain and suffering* of other members. The key issue is that solidarity is profoundly shaped by race and racialized thinking. Racialized solidarity is how "racial seeing and thinking trains Whites not to see the pain and suffering of nonwhites and to be less concerned about it when they do see it" (Hooker 2009, p. 40). Racial polities resist seeing and treating minorities as political and social equals on account of conceptions of political membership that are thoroughly racialized (Hooker 2009).

Hooker (2017) also argues that Whites have an asymmetrical view of access to institutions, and as such, view politics as a zero-sum game. The racial syllogism that 'White loss' is unacceptable and 'Black gains' are illegitimate and therefore Black suffering is invisible produces an attachment to the racial polity. When White loss is politicalized, it triggers an existential crisis within Whiteness. The violence that accompanies racism is fueled by White folks' inability to cope with (mostly symbolic) losses, such that the mere concept of Black gain stokes White resentment and anger (Hooker 2017). Hooker (2016) argues that this "disregard for Black life antecedes fatal encounters with the police" (p. 463), and that a politics in which Black suffering is a public act for the common good, performed out of Blacks' special duty to appease White resentment, is dangerous (Hooker 2016).

My contribution begins here. I agree with Hooker that the concept of the racial polity established by Mills is the basis for Whites' inability to extend political solidarity to Blacks. The selective knowing, ignorance, and memory associated with the epistemology of ignorance and a racialized moral psychology make it such that Whites can observe and ignore the pain and suffering of Blacks. I also agree that Black suffering as a public act to appease White resentment is an extremely dangerous politics since Whites can see and ignore the pain and suffering of Blacks; however, Whites can also desire to and derive benefit from witnessing the pain and suffering of Blacks. Building on the theoretical frameworks of both Mills and Hooker, I center race within abjection theory to demonstrate how the lack of concern about the pain and suffering of racial minorities constitutes a link between critical race and abjection theory. A link between seeing and ignoring, and desiring and consuming Black defilement, degradation, and death.

In *Blackness Visible*, Mills (1998) questions whether "feminist strategies for rethinking Western philosophy [could] be emulated by those of us who seek to theorize race and First World/Third World relations;" he concludes that he "believe[s] it can, and that the differences on some points should actually make the task of rethinking easier" (p. 122). I argue, as with political solidarity, that scholars have not sufficiently considered the effects of race on abjection. The central problematic of this paper is racial abjection—how race creates an inverted conceptualization of abjection and what this means for Blacks within the polis.

### **Abjection: Desire and Disgust**

Abjection is related to disgust, but above all it involves exclusion. Julia Kristeva (1982) finds that it is the "logic of exclusion that causes the abject to exist" (p. 65). Abjection is that which

does not respect borders and rules, the in-between, the outside, the nonmember. Abjection is expressed in a person's reaction of disgust. It is that feeling of loathing when encountering defiled matter—vomit, excrement, blood, or death. Defilement can come from contact with substances leaving the body, yet not all expelled fluids carry polluting value (e.g., tears). Defilement is produced by behaviors and habits not associated with the clean and proper social self. We are unlikely to be disgusted when someone cuts themselves washing dishes, but if that person cuts themselves as an act of self-harm, it likely will produce feelings of disgust. Abjection is located at the intersection of fear and lust. It fascinates and draws us in, only to repel us. Abjection, and the disgust it produces, bear the imprint of desire. It is taboo, an object of both repugnance and appeal. Desire and disgust are dialectically conjoined. The taboo catches our attention and produces desire.

Yet, what *kind* of thing is abjection? It is an unconscious reaction to the Other—flesh and culture. Abjection is signified differently depending on the symbolic system within which it exists. Symbolic signification has a separating value peculiar to the symbolic functioning of the culture it resides in (Kristeva 1982). The abject are outside the symbolic order (Keita 2018). There are three categories of abjection: food taboos, femininity, and corporality (Kristeva 1982). Food becomes abject if it crosses cultural or spiritual borders such as eating dogs and cats, insects and horse meat, or pork, shellfish, organs, and blood. Kristeva finds that “food in this instance designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self's clean and proper body” (Kristeva 1982, p. 75). Women, too, are abjected as natural and leaky. The abjection associated with women's discharges is used to separate them from men and devalue their existence. Finally, the dead body is the ultimate abjection—unable to expel defiled matter and separate itself from the unclean, it becomes abjection itself. Nevertheless, not all dead bodies are signified as abject. We are not repulsed at a loved one's funeral. Corporal abjection is signified by the way death is produced: if improper and unclean, death defiles the corpse, signifying the body as abject. For example, dying of HIV/AIDS used to signify the dead as abject. The common theme is the difference, and the ambiguity of the difference, created through abjection.

Yet abjection is not merely the opposite of normality. The abject is not the same as the object. It does not produce the subject, but rather, the space between I and Other. Its relationship to the subject is like that of the outside to inside. The abject are empty copies of the ideals implicit in the internalized dominant cultural model (Mageo 2017). The conceptualization of abjection helps us understand the lived experiences of the abjected and the embodied effects of othering. This is important because to be a human with rights and privileges (a citizen) does not require possessing something but rather being a someone within the polis. Luce Irigaray (2013) argues that any notion of unity remains extraneous to the citizen. The citizen is suspicious of it, moves away from it, and from all that maintains a link with the abject. The abject are structurally, not contingently, cut off from the citizen, from the self-possessed possessor of the world and its things, but that nonetheless, they need the abject to be able to talk about the positioning of human beings as corporal. Abjection is also a process acted out through both individual and group rituals of exclusion (Tyler 2009). In this sense, abjection has a certain *sui generis* character. As the abject differs culturally, historically, and individually, the process of abjection so too differs in its approach to construct the abject (Chanter 2004).

The construction of the nonmember through gender, race, (dis)ability, or sexual orientation symbolizes the degree to which these outsiders will be abjected. The nonmember discovers that within themselves, in the foundation of their own being, there is an innate lack, a difference which is producing the abjection. They are the “foul lining of society” necessary for the creation and maintenance of the member (Kristeva 1982, p. 20). The difference accounts for the inability of the nonmember to fit in or be a part of the political community and receive political solidarity. Abjection is also a political process by

which the space between citizen and anti-citizen is defined. Abjection explains the structural and political acts of inclusion and exclusion which are the foundations of our social existence (Tyler 2009). It is deeply fraught, and its social role is constantly renegotiated based on political context (Margolis 2018). The abject have no politics, because the subjectivity and solidarity needed for a politics is ameliorated by abjection's dissolution of identity. The abject *are* the ambiguity, and the desire and disgust they provoke. We know them through our response to them. The abject disrupt the social order, producing cognitive dissonance, which subsequently creates for the member an acceptable altered form of reality.

The abject provoke violence because they expose the ambiguity of the manufactured difference. This ambiguous space, because of its incongruence and fluidity, needs to be constantly policed and enforced. This policing is accomplished through violence, which is used to intimidate, discourage, eliminate, and polarize, and whose use is rational and effective in reaching these outcomes. Violence that is based solely on the social construction of the victim within the polis is termed identity violence (Kalyvas 2006). Abjection operates either to consolidate group identities in the support of the status quo or to disrupt that stability. Within the racial polity, one's racial identity is pivotal in defining how raced groups relate to political institutions. State violence is often linked to identity violence because states categorize social identities as legitimate or illegitimate, going so far as to rescind their right to exist (i.e., genocide, holocaust, ethnic cleansing) (Tilly 2003).

The abject are found, due to manufactured difference, to be abhorrent in irrational ways. The myths surrounding Black masculinity and femininity and Black sexuality are prime examples. They are deeply ingrained and profoundly racist and sexist and are completely arbitrary and fantastically irrational. The more personal and intimate the source of the ritual symbolism, the more revealing its message. The more the symbol is drawn from a shared human experience, the larger and more certain its reception (Douglas 2003). Abjection theory has made appeals on the body proper for phantasmagoric images because the body is the most intimate and certain of boundaries. The body is the ideal place for the signification of complex sociopolitical structures (e.g., racism). As the body is signified with meaning, the social order is reproduced in small upon it. The body is also an exemplary reference to danger because the social order that creates the body is vulnerable and in constant threat of being polluted (Douglas 2003). Abject Blackness underpins the prevailing social order by confounding its representational logics (Abdur-Rahman 2017). As per the racial polity, members are unable to comprehend racial abjection. The difference, no matter how tangible, goes unseen because it itself is fallacious and hollow and cannot be grasped or made concrete. Thus, the privileged remain ignorant of, and yet benefit from, the pain and suffering of the abject. The veil that makes this possible is the racialized moral psychology of the racial polity.

## Of Racial Abjection

The available literature on abjection does not give sufficient attention to the effects of race. And yet, race is ever-present. America's primordial racial classification is the social otherness of Blacks. Slavery established the permanent, violent domination of inherently alienated and dishonored persons (Loury 2002). The Black body in America has been simultaneously repulsive and desirable in ways that White bodies have not. African Americans have been unable to renegotiate their identity from this degradation because the social and cultural order are affixed to it (Hartman 1997). Extant theories of abjection have not accounted for how race affects the concept of identity. Within the racial polity, Blackness is almost an identity, yet still an abject identity. Identification is complex and involves both identifying with (the sameness) and against

(or disidentification). Identification and counter-identification are synonyms of assimilation and anti-assimilation; disidentification, however, is the subjective process of appropriating new concepts, ideologies, and possibilities (Muñoz 1999).

If understanding race is essential to understanding American politics, then we need a concept to explain how Black exclusion does more than just exclude. Racial abjection [re] creates White identities and the White social order, and consequently, both are connected to and dependent upon the very thing they reject and abhor. At the heart of racial abjection are complex entanglements of disgust and desire. Mills and Hooker explain how Whites can see and ignore the pain and suffering of Blacks. But racial abjection recognizes that, throughout American history, Whites have indeed cared a great deal about the pain and suffering of Blacks—but in the prerogative, while building White racial solidarity around its collective and ritualized consumption. And as with the racial polity, all Whites are beneficiaries, although most are not active participants in its creation.

Concern about others' pain and suffering is a hallmark of humanity. Pain and suffering are experienced by those upon whom it is inflicted (Weheliye 2008). Pain and suffering are the insignia of the abject. Black pain and suffering encompass more than the incidents of extreme violence and murder displayed on the news. Nevertheless, the visibility of Black pain and suffering are central to the ways in which Blackness is abjected. Visual and corporeal marginalization are mainstays of racial hegemony (Sharpe 2010). Black pain and suffering exists in the domain of the mundane and refuses the idiom of exception (Weheliye 2008). It includes scenes such as the humiliation and degradation of the two Black men sitting at a Starbucks and the many humiliations and degradations Black people endure while shopping, working, driving, talking, walking, moving, sleeping, waiting, having fun, fishing, eating, etc. (Huffpost 2022). Such scenes of Black pain and suffering are so familiar that it is unnecessary to elaborate. The astonishingly unexceptional quotidian nature of Black pain and suffering is a defining characteristic of both Blackness *and* Whiteness. Black pain and suffering are the unadulterated standard by which Whiteness is measured.

Racial abjection is a powerful mythological, psychological, and physical response to the Black body and Black sexuality. It is an amalgamation of practices, discourses, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothingness onto Blackness and a continuous process of the erasure of Black presence as nothing incarnated (Broeck 2018). It questions the belief that the body is the place where identities are formed and affixed (Abdur-Rahman 2017). Racial abjection simultaneously constructs racial difference and renders it incoherent by exposing its arbitrary and ambiguous nature. Racial abjection changes abjection from a descriptive category of subjectivity and morphs it into a concept which makes possible a theoretical discourse that enables us to understand what is going on. Its major contribution is that it allows us to signify not only revulsion and attraction but, specifically, the desire to be near and to consume at various levels (literally and vicariously) Black degradation, defilement, and death.

Racial abjection involves the designation of abjection based on racial identity, but most importantly, it alters the central components of abjection theory in fundamental ways. First, racial abjection names the active attraction to, and benefit derived from, Black pain and suffering. In this, the politics of racial abjection run parallel to the racial polity and racialized solidarity hypotheses. Within the racial polity, Whites can see and ignore Black pain and suffering; however, the act of seeing may not be passive. The precariousness of empathy makes the border between witness and spectator uncertain. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman (1997) highlights the ease and casualness with which Whites consume and circulate Black pain and suffering. However, Whites also refuse to acknowledge that White racial solidarity is constitutive and constituted through Black pain and suffering (Sharpe 2010). The subversive performance of Black pain and suffering [re]signifies Blackness as



abject. Whites have not abandoned the whip (Hartman 1997), they have internalized its performance as a mechanism through which White racial solidarity can be built. Whites have desired, and still do, to see Black pain and suffering. They benefit from Black pain and suffering and build White racial solidarity around it, and through an epistemology of ignorance and a racialized moral psychology and an inability to cope with loss, they continue to ignore Black claims on White sympathies.

Racial abjection also inverts the three core tenets of abjection theory: food taboos, femininity, and corporality. Blacks have historically been given defiled parts of animals to eat—feet, intestines, necks, and tails. This created the abhorrent yet desirable Black cuisine we now call Soul Food. Think of the White faces in Soul Food restaurants “experiencing” and desiring to ingest the “defiled” foods. In abjection theory, women’s bodies are used to separate them from men and devalue their existence; yet Black women’s bodies are seen as both sub- and superhuman, sexual and ungendered, and public and private. Black women could be worked like Black men but were also accused of an animalistic sexual magnetism that lured White men against their will. They were thought of as livestock, as capable of bearing children with the ease and frequency of an animal, and as having an animalistic lack of attachment to their offspring. The concepts of defilement through bodily fluids and the corporal body become inverted when race is incorporated. Racial abjection involves a desire to witness the degradation of Black flesh and Black death, as compared to abjection theory which speaks to the degradation of the flesh, the expulsion of defiling fluids (blood and pus), and the corpse as being the most objectionable. The dead Black body, and the pain and suffering that have gone into producing this spectacle, are desired and pleasurable. Some lynchings, for instance, in which Black people were tortured, dismembered, and burned alive for the enjoyment of spectators, were advertised in advance. The centrality of necropolitics on the contemporary political stage focuses on the politics of death and contests over the meaning of the dead bodies in the wake of the production of dead Black bodies (Threadcraft 2017). The realpolitik of racial abjection is not desire and disgust; it is a desire to experience the disgust. A desire to eat the defiled, to copulate with the subhuman, and to produce gory Black death.

To maintain a political community that feels so little solidarity with Blacks, and that desires to experience their pain and suffering, there must be an institutionalized blindness, a racialized moral psychology, built in to support and hide the true motivations for the community’s lack of solidarity. Racist mythologies are central to this process. These myths are fluid, and they adapt to attempts by marginalized groups to resist the oppression. The creation of a marginalized group requires a clearly identifiable group than can be consistently denied access to resources and political institutions (Cohen 1999). Racial mythmaking requires four components: (1) the stigmatization of the marginalized group’s social identity; (2) an ideological framework to justify the marginalization; (3) political and social institutions that enforce the marginalization; and (4) individuals to buy into maintaining and reproducing the ideology (Cohen 1999).

For the racially abject, this process carries with it an element of constant crisis and threat. The sheer profundity of hatred that racism needs to sustain itself is difficult to comprehend. Racial abjection is persistent fear and anxiety based on constant bodily threats aimed at instilling terror and compliance. It is an ideological set of ideals, beliefs, discourses, and practices that create, reproduce, and justify subjugation. The racial polity has established racism as implicit and normal. Racialized solidarity removes from the member an obligation to care for or be concerned about the pain and suffering of nonmembers. Racial abjection goes a step further by making the pain and suffering of Blacks not only distinct but desirable and at times pleasurable and beneficial. Black suffering is the car wreck that White motorists rubberneck to see. Yet as Mills suggests, White supremacy must be demonstrated and the mechanisms through which it operates and reproduces itself detailed. As with

abjection theory, racial abjection is corporal, but it is also highly sexualized. Next, I will discuss the relationship among racial abjection, the Black body, and Black sexuality.

### ***Racial Abjection and the Black Body***

The body is a discrete object, the site of a complex ideological struggle of competing power structures. It is also the site of subjectivity and identity. The body is public and private, self and other, natural and cultural, physical and social, intrinsic and learned, and genetic and environmentally determined. People never just have bodies; bodies are signified with racial, sexual, cultural, and class distinctions that mark the body as such. In America, discourses on race have taken the form of debates about the body. Race itself is concentrated in the flesh (Spillers 1987). The Black body is a political, social, and cultural product.

The Black body is never individual, but rather, representative of the Black collective. The devaluing of Black bodies goes together with the exclusion of Blacks from full citizenship. In America, slavery designated the Black body as ugly, subhuman, and sexually available, requiring regulation and correction. The Black body is the perfect picture of abjection: dark, dirty, and not White. The Black body represents a triple loss—absolute domination, biological alienation, and social death (Mbembe 2003). Black slave bodies were living laboratories of total objectification.

The Black body exists outside the polis in an ambiguous space between subject and object. Existing outside society has serious social and physical consequences. Nonmembers are tolerated but highly regulated. This cultural pathology is evident in the history of violence against Blacks. Racial borders are the manifestation of the clash between the cultured, civilized, tolerant Whites and the uncultured, primitive Blacks. The Black body is thus subjected to a constant state of suspicion. This is evident in the salience of calls to police regarding Blacks doing everyday mundane activities (*#[Activity]WhileBlack*) (Ortiz 2018). Blacks are subject to high levels of scrutiny, and severe, even capital, punishment can be levied for the slightest infraction. The myths surrounding Black sexuality have been used since slavery to justify these means. Slaves were economic tools of production and irresistible, destructive sensuality (Spillers 1987). In fact, gender and gender theory have been conceptualized through the dispossession of the Black body (Broeck 2018).

### ***Racial Abjection and Black Sexuality***

Sexuality is not simply biological function, but a system of ideas and social practices (Collins 2004). Sex and sexuality are dependent on the cultural conditions and deep symbolic significations of any given society. Sex is complex and multidimensional, and sexual norms change over time. In general, the sexuality of the socially privileged is seen as respectable and worthy. However, sexual differences falter on the mountain of racial difference because race is deeper than gender (Chanter 2004). Being sexual and performing sexuality involves the sexing of race and racing of sex. Blackness is a repository for (White) fears about sexuality. It is a product of cultural, social, and economic processes and is the archetype of non-normative gender and sexuality. There is a powerful link between sexual and racial anxiety and there are multiple trajectories of desire and identification mobilized by Black sexual mythology. White supremacist mythology views Black sexuality as an existential threat to Whiteness. They believe that White genocide will be carried out through race-mixing, whose result will be the mongrelization of the White race. To them, interracial sex is seen as the ultimate racial annihilation. Thus, Whites are “burdened” with the need to control the sexuality of Blacks.



America fears Black sexuality (West 2002). This fear is an essential ingredient in racial abjection, as it provokes a desire to consume and control Black sex. Racial abjection is erotophobic. Erotophobia is an irrational reaction to the erotic which makes individuals and society vulnerable to psychosocial control in cultures where pleasure is strictly regulated (Patton 1986). Sexual practices, desires, and identities constitute a specific type of relationship between the individual and society, providing opportunities for different forms of sexualized subjugation. Myths about Black sexuality have shaped laws and customs under the guise of protecting White sexuality from Black sexual excess. Sexual myths have strategic value in perpetuating oppression. Sexuality is a path to oppression and is not reducible to one specific gender. The modern emancipatory discourse on gender carries with it the baggage of the racial abjection. This baggage needs to be addressed from within White gender studies, the understanding of which points us towards a realization that anti-Blackness is inherent in the very category of gender (Broeck 2018). Hence, the use of sexualization to oppress both women and men of color. Thus, there is a relationship between the sexualized and their low social status.

Hortense J. Spillers' work (1987) highlights the link between suffering and Black flesh, and particularly so, Black suffering and sexuality. Pornotroping signifies the Black body as a sight of pleasure which draws us to the spectacle of its suffering. As a pornotrope, the Black body becomes a source of irresistible destructive sexuality (Spillers 1987) and, as a result, Black sexualities become an expression of abjection. Black subjectification equals objectification, and the process through which Blacks enter subjectivity is rife with sexual violence. Sexualized violence and its associated trauma are remade into tropes of pleasure and indifference towards Black sexual subjugation through the sadomasochism of everyday Black life (Sharpe 2010). This concept makes visible the desperate violence and the quotidian routines of domination, which characterize Black life but are obscured by their commonness (Hartman 2002). Racism is quotidian in nature. Everyday racism is racism but not all racism is everyday racism. Racism is an individual problem, a question of to be racist or not to be racist. The distinction between racism and everyday racism is that the quotidian form of racism involves systematic, recurrent, and generalized familiar practices, and socialized attitudes and behaviors that provide cumulative instantiation (Essed 1991). Racism is a systemic performance that cannot exist outside of everyday practices. Embedded within the social relations of everyday life, both White and Black sex are [re]produced.

Black sexuality touches upon that aspect of racist practice that cannot be accounted for as racist practice. It must be understood as something else altogether. Slavery has altered the very nature of sexuality for everyone in America. In fact, White sexuality is dependent upon the existence of Black sexuality. Abject Black sexuality is actively shaping, forming, and reproducing White sexuality in fundamental ways. However, the hyper sexualization associated with racial abjection is not the same thing as a fetish. It is, rather, a set of fetishistic discourses which are incorporated within the epistemological process.

Black sexuality is blamed for Whites' sexual arousal and desire for Black sex and the actions taken to indulge in it. This is demonstrated in Whites' libidinal excesses and the ways in which Whites' desire and fetishize Black sex while simultaneously wishing for their White racial boundaries to remain intact and undefiled (Mason 2016). The dominant myth of Black sexuality portrays Whites as being seduced, tempted, and overcome by Black sex, as is aptly depicted in the rape of the slave woman Patsy by the slave owner Edwin Epp in the movie adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen 2013). Sexuality is not purely an expression of potency; it is also a sign of social superiority (Bersani 2009). The classification of sexual behavior in terms of activity and passivity, with a correlative rejection of the passive role, creates cognitive dissonance for Whites. To be sexually passive is to abdicate power, it represents (White) loss. In essence, the sensationalizing of Black sexual prowess

creates an unresolvable dilemma and puts pressure on Whiteness to reclaim its *sui generis* superiority.

Another major consequence of sensationalizing Black sex is that the object of desire, the Black body, becomes fetishized. Fetishized Black sex becomes a cause that no Black body in any form, life or death, can ever satisfy. The fetishization of Black sex is about pleasure, abjection, and otherness. One's own otherness or that of the abject. It is both lust and desire and both inhere within the Black body's opacity (Musser 2018). The envy of and the desire for fetishized Black sex only nourish the violence associated with racial abjection. Violence against Blacks is highly eroticized. Lynchings often included mutilation of the sexual organs of both Black men and Black women. The violence is sex to the perpetrators, a sexual pleasure which sex alone cannot satisfy, and to which sex is irrelevant and power is central (Bersani 2009).

The racial border between Blacks and Whites is more sexualized, surveilled, and scrutinized than any other racial border (Nagel 2000). Here, sex baiting and race baiting become one and the same, forming a powerful and effective tool in the production of violence (Nagel 2003). The matrix of desire is raced, classed, gendered, and mediated through technologies of looking at and gazing upon Others. Taking seriously the sexual desire and longing for racialized others is essential to understanding eroticism (Mason 2016). For example, in the early 1900s, White women who had consensual relationships with Black men sacrificed their lovers to avoid public shame. Some White women engaged in the coercive rape of Black men. For example, Willie McGee, a Black man, was forced to have sex with his White employer in the 1940's, and when her husband found out, she accused McGee of rape. He was subsequently tried and executed (McGuire 2011).

The sensationalizing of Black sex is part of the political economy of desire which depends mightily on the commodification of the Black body. The sexualization of the Black body produces a racialized sexual border which is frequently crossed, and yet also vigorously and violently policed to ensure that the traffic remains unidirectional. If Black masculinity and femininity can only be reached via sexuality and violence, then sexuality and violence become implicit in the very definitions themselves (Collins 2004).

## Of Black Masculinity

White supremacist ideology is deeply conflicted by the concept of masculine sameness and shared male superiority (Wiegman 1993). The refusal to acknowledge inconsistencies within the patriarchy highlights the ambiguity inherent within racial abjection. Black masculinity represents a sovereign sensorium—a threat to the imaginary and symbolic social status of White masculinity (King Watts 2017). In this lies the origin of the fetishization of the Black penis. The Black penis is a physical threat, a phobic object (Marriott 1996). It is bestial, elephantine, ugly, barbarous, and over-sexed (Marriott 2000). The Black penis is endowed with a negative power. It defiles and pollutes. It will make your babies brown. It is big and scary! The Black penis is key because according to the concept of masculine sameness, White men fear femininity *and* masculine sameness. White masculinity is chiefly interested in maintaining patriarchal and racial dominance through the denial of nonwhite masculinity.

Black masculinity is non-normative and deviant masculinity (Lewis 2019). The anxiety associated with Black masculinity is connected to the eroticization of Black male sexuality. Black maleness provokes within Whites an unconscious fear of being socially and culturally penetrated by Blackness (Marriott 2000). During slavery, Black men faced sexual exploitation, sodomy, rape, and sexual assault as means of emasculation (Foster 2011). Post-slavery Black male sexuality was no longer under the explicit/legal control of White men, but their desire to regain control of it resulted in the myth of the Black male rapist. Black

male sexuality has come to represent a mix of various cultural fantasies and sexual myths (Marriott 2000). In White sexual mythology, the Black man has been established as a virulent sexual predator, armed with a large penis and a rabid desire for White female sex. Black masculinity cannot be easily dissociated from these myths, and the fear and anxiety they produce are acutely linked to the desire to produce Black male death.

Paranoia and fear surrounding Black male sexuality reduces Black men to their sex (Marriott 1996). The Black male is consumed by the mythologies surrounding his sex and ultimately becomes his sex. The artwork of Robert Mapplethorpe (1988) exemplifies this phenomenon. Mapplethorpe presents the Black male body in pieces, focusing on the Black penis. His photographs of Black men often depict only the groin area and exposed genitals. He said of his infamous “Man in Polyester Suit” that it is was “an ill-fitting and tacky suit—a suit which...only a nigger would wear” (Marriott 1996, p.22). Here Mapplethorpe exemplifies racial abjection by simultaneously eroticizing the Black male body and devaluing it with racist insults.

Black masculinity is targeted because in a patriarchal system, penetration symbolically, politically, and socially disgraces the penetrated. Whiteness is never penetrated; it is always penetrating others through war and conquest or economic systems. Penetration is isomorphic with subjugation; only the inferior are penetrated. Through penetration, the inferior become objects of desire and fetishization (Bersani 2009). Lynching a Black man becomes a communal rape of Black masculinity (Wiegman 1993), an alleviation of the threat of Black male sameness, the political function of which is analogous to that of rape (James 1998). Surprisingly, less than a third of lynch mobs accused Black men outright of sexual misconduct—simply being a Black male was enough. From 1865 to 1895, there were more than 10,000 Black lynchings and castrations (Tolnay et al., 1989; Wiegman 1993) and for the vast majority of them, an explicit accusation of rape was not needed. Regardless, rape was just an excuse that stuck (Threadcraft 2017). The heinousness of rape was used to hide the desire of Whites to make a spectacle of Black male death. Attaching the label “rapist” to dead Black male bodies legitimized the gory methods used to create them.

Lynchings are the personification of racial abjection; an intimate, lurid, and leisurely cruelty (Mbembe 2003). They were public spectacles advertised in local newspapers (Davis 2011). The relationship between the victim and mob is exacerbated by the eroticism of the photographs—smiling pictures of White men, women, and children. Here we witness an inversion of abjection theory. The living Black body is abject; however, the Black corpse is *not*. Whites gathered and celebrated the expulsion of bodily fluids through torture, mutilation, and dismemberment. The consumption of death is related to the political and is linked to the production and disruption of identity within the polis (Podoshen et al., 2017). Body parts of Black corpses—teeth, nails, bones, flesh, skin, and penises—were kept as mementoes (Marriott 1996). This ritual stands in opposition to traditional abjection theory, wherein bodily fluids defile and dead bodies are the ultimate abjection. These rituals reinforce the social status of both the living (Whiteness) and the dead (Blackness) and strengthen the processes of racial abjection in societal culture and mores (Podoshen et al., 2017). Blackness was first envisioned as on the rampage, it was then inverted and made to suffer and exclaim the forcing of the transgression, to give voice to the abjection (King Watts 2017).

One spectator at a lynching testified that the castrator took the Black male genitals in his hands and “stretched them, cradled them, [and] caressed them” (Marriott 1996). Through castration, the mob confronts conflicts within the patriarchy and their intrinsic, unquenchable desire for both Black sex and death. Intimately related to desire, castration is a structured process by which identification gives way to symbolic functioning. White masculinity metaphorically reclaims its primacy through the literal, and figurative, castration of Black men. It symbolically, if temporarily, assuages the cognitive dissonance created

by male sameness. Lynching replaces the hypersexualized Black male body with a powerless, feminized image (Marriott 1996, 2000). Removing the penis, shoving it in the victim's mouth, discarding it on the ground, or keeping it as a souvenir symbolically, and literally, prevents Black masculinity from claims of male sameness. Deprived of the penis, one cannot effectively be male or "do" masculinity, either physically or symbolically. Key to this is the inversion of defilement and death within abjection theory. There is a desire to observe pain and suffering being inflicted upon Blacks and the expulsion of defiled fluids through torture, mutilation, and the production of Black death are *not* abject. The dead Black body was so climactic that Whites posed for pictures with it, created postcards to send to friends and family, and took the body parts home as prized, not abject, objects. Of all the trophies and mementoes, Black male genitals were the most coveted.

### Of Black Femininity

Labeling the feminine as soft and natural has structurally devalued it (Ahmed 2013), and associating femininity with the natural has separated women from both men and cognition. The natural is physical and associated with bodily pleasure. The leakiness of women's bodies, menstrual blood, and birthing create a gender-based abjection (Kristeva 1982). The feminine body is signified as marginal, beneath, and passive. Patriarchal societies define woman as the inessential correlate to man, a mere object (Young 1990). By this measure, femininity that occupies a devalued societal position gives meaning to all maleness (Collins 2004). Essentially, the signification of the feminine justifies female oppression, and to maintain this system, women must be periodically shown their vulnerability through transgression (Ahmed 2013). As a result, women are often subjected to scrutiny and subjugation. Because of this, women have been conditioned to perceive their own bodies as objects (Young 1990). Misogyny disdains and silences the pain and suffering of women, and women are made to feel responsible for their own victimization. The spectacle of misogyny is the public denial of female autonomy. Nevertheless, the abjection of Blackness is the basis from which the category of woman and consequently of the gender binary was constituted as a framework to negotiate the position of White Euro-American women. Becoming a woman is a social, cultural, political, and material process which involves the unbecoming or ungendering of Blackness (Broeck 2018).

The category of Black woman is a *sui generis* gender identity, as the Black woman must contend with both sexism *and* racism. As historically propertized female flesh, Black women have articulated practices and discourses which criticize Western modernity in the most incorruptible ways (Broeck 2018). Through the amalgamation of racism and sexism, Black women have become a symbol of the lowest form of Black: Black and female. No Black woman is ever only a woman; she occupies multiple positions and is claimed by several cultural identities (Crenshaw 1990, 1993). Black women represent a more ambiguous threat from a more primitive sexual appetite. The qualities of Black female sexuality are innately licentious, and they personify a deviant hyper-sexuality. Their historical legacy of exploitation creates sexual expectations that, in turn, define behavior, identities, and desires.

The fragmentation caused by the sexual objectification of women's bodies is compounded by race. If women are reduced to body parts, then Black women are even further reduced. Black women become functions of their respective bodily parts, from labor to sex and reproduction, to the nursing of White children. The burden that women of color endure is not merely a further burden of oppression in a sexist society; it is a specific and different burden in addition to sexism. Race and gender are not analogous. White feminist theory understandably draws on a shared legacy of marginalization, but the analogy enables White feminists to displace racism into a safer notion of feminine similarities while

retaining their Whiteness (Schueller 2005). A contemporary example of this is the oft-used phrase: Women and people of color (POC). This is a very loaded statement since people of color (Black, Latino, Asian, indigenous, etc.) are also women. So, who are the “women” referred to in this statement? I would argue White women. This statement exemplifies the drawing on or coopting of marginalization as it subtly equates White women’s marginalization with the marginalization of all peoples of color, rhetorically places White women before peoples of color, and un genders *all* people of color. I argue that White female solidarity is built around the collective consumption of Black women’s pain and suffering. If Black women did not exist, White women would have to invent them (Spillers 1987).

The pain and suffering of Black women is also *sui generis*. As much as Black males have been and are made a public spectacle, Black females have been made a spectacle both public and private. Subject to a litany of injustices more in line with necropolitics than biopower, Black women are victims of disproportionate levels of sexual assault, community violence, and public sexual aggression. The social order intersects within the Black female body, creating its preferred form of Black femininity: one assailed and terrorized, but also less likely to become a corpse (Threadcraft 2017). During slavery, Black female sexuality, maternity, and pleasure were thrown into confusion (Spillers 1987), and to this day they remain uncertain. By making Black women public, Whites were able to strip them of their feminine signification and protections. A public woman exists in male space and the transgressions beset upon her, and even her death, are seen as restorative to the social order (Threadcraft 2017). Say her name: Sandra Bland, Tanisha Anderson, Miriam Carey, Darnesha Harris, Michelle Cusseaux, Shelly Frey, Kayla Moore, and Breonna Taylor. Like the label “rapist” that has been attached to the dead Black male body, terms such as “licentious,” “promiscuous,” “angry,” and “emasculating” have been attached to the Black female body to legitimize its living abjection. Black female flesh is both ungendered and sensual, lustful, and sordid, and unprotected yet highly policed. The Black female body is the prototype of racial abjection, the source of powerful sexual excess and lust and the womb of abject Blackness. Abject Black femininity produces the desire to copulate with and dominate that which creates the very thing you abject: Black flesh.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1999) posited that the full weight of slavery fell upon Black woman. Under slavery, Black women suffered uniquely cruel oppression as both chattel and sex slaves. The byproduct of this was a new status for White women, who became the ultimate symbol of White male superiority. To assert their newfound authority, White women resorted to the brutal punishment and torture of Blacks. Some White women were also removed from the workforce and from the sexual aggressions of White men (hooks 1981). Black women took their place, both economically and sexually.

Black women, as public women, worked alongside Black men and were treated with no greater compassion or less severity (Collins 2004; James 1998). Today it is seen as a success for women to choose to enter the workforce, but for Black women, work has been a part of life since they disembarked (hooks 1981). In this space, coopting feminine similarities has been used to advance women’s issues. One example can be found in discussions about the gender wage gap. There are real disparities between men’s and women’s pay, and this is a legitimate injustice. However, compared to White men, White women make above the average for *all* women. In 2020, women overall made 83% of what men made. White women made 80% of what White men made, as opposed to Black and Hispanic women who only made 63% and 54%, respectively (AAUW 2021). By coopting feminine similarities, White women are using the pain and suffering of women of color to highlight gender disparities but not necessarily to highlight that the most significant disparities are both gendered *and* raced.

Women should be paid as much as men and should be free to enter any sector of the economy they choose or that their talents allow. It must also be said that White women, as a



group, have benefited *the most* from affirmative action policies (Crenshaw 2006). Yet despite the benefits they have received, there has been an alarming silence on their part to the dismantling of affirmative action policies. In fact, 58% of White women voted for California's Proposition 209 which ended affirmative action in state hiring, contracting, and college admissions (Wise 1998). White women's support for racial hegemony is not a new phenomenon. A majority of White women supported candidate Donald Trump in 2016, and President Trump received an even greater share of their support in 2020 (Chapin 2020; Rogers 2016). White women also supported Alabama senatorial candidate Roy Moore, the subject of several credible allegations of sexual misconduct with underage girls (Cooney 2017). Moore won 63% of White women's votes, including 52% of college-educated White women (*Washington Post* 2017).

By making a public spectacle of the pain and suffering of Black women, White women can take pleasure both literally and figuratively in the degradation of Black flesh. White women desire to witness Black pain and suffering such that they can make use of it to benefit their social position relevant to White men. Black women are uniquely useful for this purpose because of their feminine similarities and their history of sexualized oppression.

Mythologies and eroticisms have been attributed to Black women's sexuality. In slavery, Black women's bodies were sexually objectified and purchased for the explicit sexual enjoyment of White men (Collins 2004). The Black female body was marked as the primary commodity of exchange and commoditized bodies are overly eroticized. The value of Black women was not based solely on their labor, but also on their sexual and reproductive value. Fertility, motherhood, pleasure, and sexuality were removed from their control. The signification of Black femininity as biological, sexual, and procreative made Black women vulnerable to sexual violence. The myth of Black women as breeders signified them as less than human, as only animals are bred against their will.

Throughout U.S. history, Black women were terrorized in such a way that they would submit passively to the will of Whites. Many Black female slaves arrived in America already impregnated by slavers (hooks 1981). Hartman (2008) found that sailors were allowed to rape Black girls as young as ten years old. Rape, in its various hideous forms, happens to women regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation. The satisfaction of sexual urges has little to do with rape in general and has even less to do with the system of institutional rape established under slavery (James 1998). Like lynching, the rape of Black women was a tool, ruthlessly applied, of political and social domination, a mechanism for policing abject Black female sexuality. Sexualized violence is motivated by a desire to produce the most egregious form of female pain and suffering, a form both public and private. A sexual assault does not end at the cessation of the sexual performance, but rather persists, reminding others that a similar fate may befall them as well. The collective White solidarity derived from this kind of pain and suffering echoes throughout history.

In the early- and mid-1900s, in both the south and the north, Black sexuality was policed through various methods. However, there began a shift away from Black male sexuality and towards Black female sexuality. Black female migrants to the north incited "fears of a rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; fears of miscegenation; and fears of the assertion of independent Black female desire that has been unleashed through migration" (Carby 1992). In New York, Black women were considered a sexual threat to soldiers of the first World War and were purposefully targeted for arrest (Hicks 2010). Black women were characterized as sexually degenerate and socially dangerous. In the 1900s, Frances Kellor, director of the Inter-Municipal Committee on Household Research in New York City, went on record saying that she did not believe Black women had any moral fiber or will of their own that could be mobilized in their defense. This line of thinking spawned the opening of lodging houses and training schools as morally and socially acceptable methods of controlling Black female sexuality (Carby 1992). The State of New York declared Black



women a national security threat and actively pursued them for arrest. Black women and girls were entrapped and jailed for up to three years for merely having a sexuality (Hicks 2010).

Stories from the Detroit riots of the 1940s have emerged that detail many horrendous sexual assaults on Black women (McGuire 2011). These instances of sexual abuse expose the hypocrisy of the threat of Black sexuality. Records from Detroit show that Black women were raped and sexually assaulted on a near-daily basis. White men would trick Black women into their homes with promises of work and attack them, abduct them at gunpoint, and sexually assault them in public spaces. The kidnapped women reported having to perform abnormal sexual acts (McGuire 2011).

The Civil Rights Movement can be understood through the long and relatively hidden history of sexualized violence in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Black community's efforts to protect Black women. The Montgomery bus boycott was more than a movement for political rights. It was a Black woman's movement. In Montgomery, accounts were numerous of Black women who were raped by White attacker(s) who were never held accountable. Rosa Parks professed that she believed sexual violence was at the core of White supremacy (McGuire 2011).

In the 1970s, federal government-sponsored programs coerced thousands of poor Black women to get sterilized (Roberts 1997). In the 1980s, the policing of Black female sexuality turned toward reproductive rights. The feminist movement at the time was overlooking the importance of racism in shaping the narrative surrounding reproductive rights. Dorothy E. Roberts (1997) posits that Black women's reproductive rights have been central to racial oppression in America and that controlling Black women's reproductive decisions has shaped the narrative surrounding reproductive rights in America.

The assumption that one can separate sex from race has hindered the understanding of Black femininity (hooks 1981). Images of and narratives surrounding Black women have been used to make their abjection natural, normal, and inevitable. A social hierarchy that ranks White men first, White women second, though sometimes equal to Black men, who are third, and ranks Black women last has dictated that Black women will be the most abject within that society (hooks 1981). Black women have still not been allowed to fully inhabit the category of woman. The definition of a lady, the feminine ideal, excludes Blackness. Whiteness, and more importantly White femininity, has declared that Black women cannot be ladies and thereby receive gendered solidarity. Again, this highlights the subtlety of the phrase "Women *and* POC." There is a social identity (or gender) defined as woman (which is more narrowly signified as White) and there are people of color (who are without gender).

Racial abjection allows White women to view, ignore, and coopt the pain and suffering of women of color to advance gender issues that disproportionately benefit themselves, without acknowledging that they are benefiting from the oppression of other women. For Black women (and other women of color), racial abjection produces a cloaked system of oppression in which White femininity exploits feminine similarities to gain greater parity with White men at the expense of and delight at Others' pain and suffering.

### Of [Dis]identification

Racial abjection is rooted in the functionality of racial order and should be interrogated as a contradictory ideological discourse, with normative implications. The intra-discourse of members determines the subject's identification and counter identification positions (Muñoz 1999). The ability of Whites to observe, contribute to, and receive benefit from Black pain and suffering is an epistemological process, and as much as knowledge is a process, it is also a spoken and unspoken discourse. Knowledge gives authority to some

knowers over others and is systematically and structurally connected to the political socialization process. Political socialization is the specific institutionalization of knowledge creation. It institutionalizes knowledge and transmits what is *worth* knowing from generation to generation. We are socialized from birth as to our place or identity within the political community. Examining this ideological discourse from a critical epistemological approach, we can focus on what knowledge is included and what is excluded from the political socialization process—factors that reproduce the racial polity and the racialized solidarity that underpins racial abjection.

The power of knowledge to guarantee wholeness and identity for Whites is a mechanism of the racial polity used to maintain unearned inequalities, and in doing so, it identifies Blacks as Black. The extension of political solidarity is the site of identification, yet the fiction of identity is that subjects access it with ease. Identification is intersectional, and intersectionality consists of critical areas where ethnicity, sexuality, race, class, and gender exist simultaneously within one individual. Intersectionality is structural, political, and representational identity-engineering (Crenshaw 1993).

Disidentification is a mode of analysis which acknowledges social construction as manufactured and contradictory, and I argue a fruitful starting point for counter-conceptualizing Black identities. To be abject is to be simultaneously not quite an identity, yet still a negative identity (Mageo 2017). It is the process of taking up of a non-subjective position, an abolition of the subject. Michel Pêcheux (1982) argues that one becomes a subject of different practices because there is no practice of the subjugated. Disidentification is the materialization of a subjective process of the appropriation of new concepts and ideologies (Pêcheux 1982), which can create new Black identities. It negotiates resistance within the power of privileged discourse (Muñoz 1999). This is accomplished through the development of new ideologies and ideological interpretations. The subject's appropriation of new knowledge works against the reproduction of racism as knowledge. In doing so, the subject develops concepts which help us recognize and understand a world in which subjugation is neither the exception nor its sole feature, but simply one path to humanity (Weheliye 2008).

We must empty our consciousness of that which is contradictory and most especially that which disallows our diversity, to create Black identities with political rights that Whites are obligated to recognize and respect; in short, to gain political solidarity with Whites. Anything less would be insufficient within a racial polity that sees, ignores, and benefits from the pain and suffering of Blacks and depicts them as deserving of it. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) argue that this subversive work can be done in the undercommons. The commons, as a theoretical concept, is a place of communal investment and benefit. The undercommons is the relationship between those who have been denied resources, who have been excluded, and from whom benefit has been derived. It is not a physical place. It lies between locating ourselves and dislocating ourselves. The undercommons is where the subversive work gets done. However, those who seek to make a more perfect union must realize that they are not just doing this work for themselves. The structures opposed to liberty and full inclusion are not just harmful for racial and ethnic minorities, they are harmful for everyone. Racism is illiberal, irrational, and nonsensical, and it must be opposed by the raced and all who benefit from it. Harney and Moten (2013) argue that “the coalition emerges out of [Whites’] recognition that it’s fucked up for [them too], in the same way that [Blacks have] already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need [Whites’] help. I just need [Whites] to recognize that this shit is killing [Whites], too, however much more softly...” (pp. 140-141).

Disidentification can be this needed reworking, remaking, recycling, and rethinking of encoded identity (Muñoz 1999). Properly signified ideologies can encourage good object choices and identification. Yet, a desire for White standards would be self-defeating and

compromising; therefore, Blacks must disidentify with the White ideal (Muñoz 1999). Disidentification is a process of resisting the socially narrow economies of racial identification. It is the middle ground between assimilation and counter-identification (Muñoz 1999). The process of assimilation involves the desire to approximate an idea that one already failed; it is to identify as a failed subject. Not assimilating to society means that the nonmember is incomplete and in need of regulation. Systems of race, gender, and sexuality exert tremendous social pressure to normalize subjugated bodies. However, assimilation is not a choice available to all individuals. It is, in effect, an example of how some cannot [re] produce the dominant culture (Ahmed 2013), which only justifies the exclusion of the subjugated. Nonmembers are encouraged to imitate the dominant culture, but this only reaffirms their abject status. The belief that cultural assimilation will alleviate abjection and will secure one's inclusion is a false hope. Assimilation is the stylization of identity occupying an alien space with the false hope of fostering solidarity. This fantasy of happiness is a ridiculous form of optimism (Ahmed 2013). Blacks cannot escape abjection via assimilation, which will only reinforce racial borders. The goal, then, should be counter-identification.

Insofar as the process of abjection is racialized, it is also both symbolic and differential. A refusal to move toward identification with a new Blackness reinforces the trope of Black inferiority, which symbolizes an unconscious surrender to dominant racial narratives and hierarchies (Blake 2018). The process of counter-identification reflects a Black political desire for something, which at this point, does not yet have a concrete or coherent articulation (Abdur-Rahman 2017). Where dominant discourses seek to develop new notions of humanity, they summon methods of liberation which can be imagined but not yet defined (Weheliye 2008). Yet Fatoumata Keita (2018) has aptly demonstrated how Toni Morrison has been deconstructing “the long-standing social abjection of Blackness by drawing attention to abject felonies like child molestation, rape, and infanticide” (p. 51). Morrison teaches us that “it is not colour or social class that should define abjection but evil and gruesome deeds and crimes,” and in doing this, “Morrison makes Blackness to symbolise positive things” (p. 52). To find a true Black identity, Blacks must deny the publicly signified Black-self produced through racial abjection. Disidentification is the strategic recognition of this truth (Muñoz 1999).

James Baldwin (1998) believed that as a nation, for better and for worse, we are bound together in a unique and inseparable manner. Our endeavor “to create one nation has proved to be a hideously difficult task,” but “if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as [a nation]” we must accept the fact that we will not be truly free until we are all free (Baldwin 1998, p. 342). Baldwin (1998) argued that “no one in the world—in the entire world—knows more—knows Americans better or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than [African Americans]” (p. 220). He believed that we could and must create the first nation without minorities. The extreme situation that created Blackness was also a source of the most intolerable anxiety in the minds and the lives of its creators (Baldwin 1998). Americans have this in common; we have no other identity apart from the identity we create here. The need for Americans to achieve an identity is an individual and historic fact and this is what links White and Black Americans. Baldwin knew that we deeply needed one another but also knew Blacks needed to reconstruct their identities such that a new American identity could emerge (Baldwin 1998). Blacks must employ a conscious effort to resist the oppressive, normalizing dominant ideology. Through disidentification, Blacks can make new and different representations of ourselves as truly ourselves.

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