Rough Notes to Erasure

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The Promise of Composition: Liberalism, Sentimentality, and Critique

(the hope of/for) composition
— Fred Moten, *In the Break*

His need to set himself up as a model of taste, piety, and sensibility before an appropriately enthralled female spectator is so intense as to make his pedagogy suspect.
— Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*

*There’s something wrong with judgment itself in writing classrooms.*
— Asao B. Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*

The semester began under the impress of a new logo (a notable occasion in the seasons of university life). Some will even have said that they preferred the old George Washington, who resembled his oil portraits (his face, in three-quarters view, with that soft, rouged look of the elder statesman and slave-holder at home, familiar as the dollar bill). Now George sports a profile fit for empire — forehead high, chin chiseled, all business — rendered in a kind of high-gloss grisaille. From website and letterhead (where rules prescribe his position) his gaze surveys abstract vistas, a sphinx poised between the nostalgia for Anglo-
American cultural hegemony and a techno-bureaucratic optimism trained on East and South Asia; or a cyborg, part anime superhero, part postage stamp. His facelift suits the university’s neoliberal rhetoric, celebrating the retrenchment by corporate and financial elites as “innovation” (at home) and “development” (abroad), terms that lend a new visage to the perennial appetites of capital and empire. As for this university’s students, those who by privilege or pluck leave college for the orbits of the elite preside over an increasingly immiserated precariat. Those not so positioned join the ranks of a clerical class whose economic and political power is being drained to the dregs by the upward flow of capital to the one percent, or the one-tenth of the one percent, or the one-tenth of that tenth again. Along with its logo, the university unleashed a new slogan: “We Make History.” In such times, how should we regard the promise to “make history” with which an expensive private university markets itself?

I have been writing and revising this essay, which was the germ of this book, for close to a decade. I feel at once too close to the subject matter and not close enough, my subject being the role of composition pedagogy in the contemporary neoliberal university, and the place of white masculinity in that pedagogy. Not close enough, because I am not a composition scholar, nor do I teach composition. But as a librarian, I have spent a lot of time in first-year writing classes over the years, working with teaching faculty to introduce students to the dispositions of research in the academy. The generosity of these teachers in welcoming me as a partner and collaborator has given me occasion to think about how such pedagogy participates in the traffic of affect and the senses, as dispositions are composed and re-composed in acts of thinking aloud and writing things down, in the classroom and on the page. In part, this essay draws on my experiences working with my good friend and colleague Randi Kristensen, a brilliant teacher whose critical praxis has taught me a great deal, as has her refusal to shy away from questions of race, class, and American imperialism. Questions that might otherwise remain only marginally visible in the frequently all-or majority-white classrooms at our university. But this essay is
not about Randi’s course and its pedagogy; that is her story to tell. Rather, following M. Jacqui Alexander and many others, this essay proposes to trace the pedagogical, as a set of discourses about teaching as well as practices of teaching, in its implication with the production of citizens and subjects of the modern liberal state. Which is also, of course, the capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist, settler-colonial, imperialist, carceral state. A state run by the moment’s boardroom buffoon, our racist- and misogynist-in-chief. In the historical present of empire, pedagogy might become an occasion for learning to feel oneself caught up in a certain texture, or a certain fold of space and time, which links the local to other localities that disappear within what we call “the global.” This texture makes the present moment a palimpsest or multiple exposure of occasions that do not fit neatly into the kind of narrative that sells tuition or textbooks. In turn, this essay is a palimpsest of the writer’s efforts to come to terms with (to grapple with, morally and intellectually, but also to find words for) how that learning might transpire in writing, however errant and halting its path. And with what it might mean for the writer’s flesh — freighted with habits that he cannot, by fiat of self-reflection, cast off — to adopt what, following Hortense Spillers, one might call a “critical posture.”


This chapter is about the promise of composition. Which is the promise tendered to students who arrive at the university in pursuit of fulfilling professional and civic lives, hoping to make their mark on the world. And the promise guiding the labor of many of us who, in teaching these students, hope to make our own mark, cultivating through our pedagogy a cohort of informed citizens. In this, the promise of the university (of my university, where as of this writing, the administration continues to neglect calls to abandon its offensive mascot, “the Colonials”) remains of a piece with that of European enlightenment, which has been a promise complicit with the wholesale theft of land and the murder or displacement of its inhabitants, in conjunction with the circum-Atlantic trade in stolen life. A promise protected by an arsenal of erasure and neglect that keeps pristine the conviction that the human being qua white cishet man is the author of his own destiny. The university wields this arsenal through its preference for making history as opposed to reckoning with it. (Although by history the university’s leadership often means little more than increased revenue and a bet-

As I have said, my own practice as a teacher is occasional, a matter of leading one-off sessions and workshops, rather than developing and teaching entire courses. But I am interested, too, in how the call to teach might appear occasional in the etymological sense, as what befalls one. For this essay, the etymological kinship between “occasion” and “occident” proves suggestive. As denizens of the Eurocentric West, “we” — that is, many of us in my imagined audience — have been taught to imagine our positions relative to racialized and class privilege and the settler-colonialist state as something that has befallen us, as a matter of history and destiny, rather than an ongoing work of implication and complicity. This destiny, however, furnishes our “orientation” (or vocation), a figure of intentional agency against the ground of the global, which appears in its under-description as a field of untapped potential out of which we shall reap our future good. In modernity, the subject’s oscillation between intentional agency and inherited or conventional dispositions (or occasion and orientation) generates charged feelings. The effort to resolve to them, as I shall propose, generates the competing modes of the sentimental and the critical.
I say that this promise guides our labor at the university, not wanting to collapse the nuance and complexity of approaches to teaching that remain diverse in their means and ends, nor to efface the work of those (like my friend Randi) committed to more radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist, decolonial, queer, or feminist visions for how the classroom can become a space of solidarity and critique. Likewise, my characterization neglects the important organizing by students, faculty, staff, and some administrators on behalf of making the university as a whole a more inclusive, equitable, and socially just place. But there is, all the same, a liberal template embedded in most university curricula and in much university discourse. And this template enforces a set of dispositions that one must, whatever one’s ideological commitments, at least occasionally adopt and perform. I call that template liberal because it remains deeply wedded to the idea that individuals, by pursuing rational goals and acting with self-awareness, can harmonize with the actions and pursuits of others, jointly and freely producing a common good. As a pedagogy, liberalism frames ways of imagining the future as the progressive explication of a potential that inheres in the here-and-now. A potential, however, that remains centered on the self. This promise links liberalism, citizenship, and the various modalities of modern privilege. For embodiment of the privileged terms (whiteness, cisgendered masculinity, etc.) seems to disclose a promise that the self is destined for a certain status, a

5 Within the last two years, a new administration at my university has taken small but salutary steps toward making diversity and inclusion, at least among the student body, a substantive priority. Whether the promise of this work comes to fruition in structural change, or peters out in empty slogans and spectacular gestures, remains to be seen. But my neglectful characterization hews to the character of the promise as our liberal institutions insist upon tendering it: as the largesse of corporate persons, Hobbesian sovereigns with whom we are supposed to identify, investing our emotional, sensuous, critical labor in sustaining the precarious felicity of the promise itself.
certain level of achievement, and certain kinds of success. And this promise, in the liberal imaginary, represents both the universal destiny of subjects in the abstract, and the just reward for a merit conceived as particular to the concrete person and his accomplishments.

More and more, that promise participates in the brand of optimism that Lauren Berlant, writing of the cultural logic of our neoliberal moment, calls “cruel.” “Cruel optimism” signifies an attachment to forms of life whose pursuit perennially disappoints us, indeed hurts us, without our being able to abandon them. Cruel optimism obtains because we have learned to love the pursuit itself, and because we can fathom no alternative: nothing else to do, nowhere else to turn. But Berlant’s analy-

6 For Berlant, an optimistic structure includes “a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Cruel Optimism, 2, emphasis in the original). Like Freud’s fort-da, optimism depends on both the repetitive or habitual, and the deictic aspects of desire. But its habituation betrays, behind the apparent deixis of “this thing, here and now,” an inductive structure, the attempt to reach from the particulars of site and situation to something that transcends particularity. In this sought-after (and for Freud, always fantastic) transcendence, desire at last sheds habit, as repetition gives way to enduring presence (the universal claim, the general rule). Cruel optimism, then, partakes of the affective and cognitive economy that Freud assigns to trauma, where repetition turns to compulsion, suturing the self to a bad scene or thing such that the desire for avoidance rehearses the harm itself. Berlant, however, distances her work from trauma theory; for her, the latter’s focus on the singularity of the event forecloses attention to the extended temporality of what she refers to as “crisis ordinariness” (9–10), where prolonged exigency calls for a variety of strategies for management and survival in the world.

At the same time, I think Berlant’s work can be productively aligned with much work that theorizes Black lives — and Black women’s lives in particular — with reference to the traumatic afterlife of slavery, where what motivates the analysis is precisely the violent “ordinariness,” the ongoing-ness, of oppression. Where trauma is not only the shrapnel of past violence, enclosed in the compelled, suffering body, but also present in the interface with structures that compel the flesh (as a term for collective, social, interstitial embodiment) to suffer over and over again.
sis of cruel optimism doesn’t make us out to be dupes of the system. Her work, as I read it, practices a form of therapy (à la Wittgenstein). For at stake is a picture of agency, of intentional consciousness, that insists on personal autonomy as its grounding condition. This is the liberal sense of sovereignty, for which freedom is bound to the postulate of an interiority that, as Denise Ferreira da Silva maintains, cannot escape haunting by its dependence on what that postulation excludes. Modeled on the idea of an exclusive right to property, such sovereignty can achieve coherence only through systematic forms of ignorance and neglect, beginning, as Sandy Grande notes, with “the fail-


ure to problematize the issue of (colonized) land.”8 You might say that cruel optimism abounds in this moment because the doctrines and customs of neoliberalism (rational choice theory, hyper-consumerism, the attenuation of solidarity) have rendered such performances of personal sovereignty profoundly lonely, a matter of solitary agents seizing what pleasures and scrambling for what gains they can.9 But if the liberal sense of sovereignty has always been, behind the scenes, a messy affair, involving the machinery of multiple kinds of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence — i.e., settler-colonial theft, murder, and domination; kidnapping, torture, and enslavement; land enclosure; wage exploitation; and then the partial transformation of those techniques into the mechanisms of biopolitical management and control — then it may be that the loneliness of neoliberal subjects surfaces that messiness. Perhaps it exposes,

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8 Sandy Grande, Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 49. For liberalism, “human subjectivity — and therefore emancipation — is conceived of as inherently a rights-based as opposed to a land-based project” (116). But this conception is itself the product of a violent series of transformations, transformations that profoundly altered the relationship between the flesh and its worlds. For the conversion of lands held in common by Native and Indigenous peoples into the exclusive property of European settlers or a European sovereign (not unlike the enclosure of the commons in England and other parts of Europe) grounds a settler-colonial subjectivity in a regime of property rights that abstract from an embodied relationship to the land. Such property rights, as theorized by eighteenth-century bourgeois European men and canonized in the laws of modern nation-states, became the pretext for the violent subjugation of peoples and, ultimately, their conversion into a mass of individuals governed differentially by the reified categories of modern personhood.

9 For a critical history of rational choice theory as ideology, see S.M. Amadae, Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Amadae notes that for rational-choice theorists like Kenneth Arrow, a guiding assumption is that the ideas of collective preferences, a collective will, and the collective good are meaningless. Society, on this theory, is nothing but the aggregation of individuals, whose preferences sometimes align but frequently do not (115–16).
as a perturbation in the sense of self, the fraught dependence on arrangements that the morally autonomous subject is at pains to disavow. And then the elastic dynamics of cruel optimism, in which gestures of egress or flight always seem to snap one back into the same spot, would have, as their spatial and temporal counterpart, the “intimacy” of which Lisa Lowe writes, describing how the “settler-imperial imaginary” produces itself through an entanglement with the others whom, both within and beyond the borders of the nation-state, it excludes from the social contract.10

The intimacies of empire are material, affective, and sensory. Nor does a moment of experience, on this view, represent a single node in a network (however vast). Rather, moments are better described, following M. Jacqui Alexander, as palimpsests, in which the most salient elements cover others whose trace persists, frustrating efforts at clarity that would demand a

10 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 8. These intimacies are both temporal and spatial, tracing the trajectory of the modern capitalist order in its gobbling up of the globe. For Denise Ferreira da Silva, the spatial has a tendency to slide under the temporal in the imaginary of modern liberalism; she writes of “the modern construction of distance as a temporal metaphor,” which serves “to circumscribe the place of emergence of the colonized as a transparent I.” This occultation of space is, to be precise, an occultation of the spatial opposition that obtains between Europe/colonized North America and its “globalized” others. This is an opposition forged by the forms of violence previously alluded to, and sustained today by, among other things, economic restructuring in the service of international debt, trade agreements that serve multinational corporate interests, racist immigration policies, and covert and overt military aggression under the guise of the “War on Terror.” Occulted, the spatial opposition is smuggled into the teleological just-so story we call “civilization” or, more demurely, “development.” What’s at stake, then, is understanding how “the racial and the cultural write the others of Europe as an effect of signifiers of exteriority, of political-symbolic strategies to institute a particularity that does not belong to time, one that threatens history because it recuperates the relationship postponed in modern representation” (*The Global Idea of Race*, 168).
Thus, the rich taste of fair-trade coffee rouses the subject of imperial privilege on their way to the office, where they are vexed by overwork and underpay, taking a brief but sustaining pleasure in their morning cup, which marketing has made to signify a benign image of transnational corporate hegemony. This image depicts hard-working but self-sufficient, *ergo* happy, coffee farmers in Nicaragua or Ethiopia as the counterparts to hard-working white-collar contract workers in the global North who enjoy the ergonomic freedom afforded by the erosion of more stable forms of employment. These imaginary intimacies eclipse others buried in the paper cup, which may have been produced by women and girls working 14-hour days in a *maquiladora* just south of the US border.12 The *maquiladora*, owned by a transnational corporation headquartered in the United States, occupies lands whose original and rightful inhabitants were dispossessed by agents of the Spanish crown. And while the combined carbon footprint of this beverage contributes to droughts that threaten the coffee farmers’ livelihood, the coffeeshop cultivates its lineage as a hub of bourgeois sociability, where the business of state and empire can be transacted on an intimate, informal scale. Where the low-wage staff are trained to smile, and the restrooms are for customers only. Yet a brand, a logo, a ritual gesture accomplish so much precisely because,


within the present’s dense folds, a desire takes hold, a desire for the exemplar, for the symbol that condenses and binds the forces of sensation and affect into a form that feels thinkable. As a figure of moral reasoning, the example partakes of cruel optimism because the effort to smooth the wrinkles of experience only intensifies the unease of dwelling in the polyvalent present. (Some of those women and girls in the *maquiladora*, descendants of the land’s rightful owners, are linked by ties of migration and solidarity to those who keep the restrooms clean at the imperial university.) Like a restless sleeper, tossing and turning in search of that elusive spot that would stay cool, but the warm night air only thickens instead.

The symbol, the simile, the example: these genres appear sentimental beside the rigor that is supposed to be the hallmark of the truly autonomous subject, the “transparent I” freely traversing the abstract, perfectly lawlike, and timeless transparency of universal reason itself.\(^{13}\) In one sense, the transparency of this I belies its visibility in the dominant discourses of modernity. As the default subject-position, available only to certain kinds of bodies, its transparency requires the erasure of other subject-positions (non-white, non-cishet masculine, non-able-bodied). It is, you might say, the un-erased. But if every position is a palimpsest, then every erasure remains partial, just as the profoundly internalized, hierarchical logics of patriarchal white supremacy, in their support for capitalism, guarantee that nobody escapes some degree of subordination. This capture is what domination’s capillary reach absolutely requires. To inhabit po-

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\(^{13}\) On the “transparent I” see Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. It is the protagonist of what Gilbert Ryle calls the “Cartesian myth” of modern self-consciousness. In this myth, the being who can recognize his own thinking (*cogito*) as such claims the right to a self-assured existence in the world (*ergo sum*). Descartes cast the template for liberal moral (and political) agency in its most concise form: the sovereign subject “knows that there is nothing that truly pertains to him but [the] free disposition of the will.” See Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). The quote from Descartes appears in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 134.
itions of social privilege and power under these conditions is to live a dream, a dream of the body itself, on its privy ledge, cradling “the fragile ‘as if equal’ of liberal discourse” like an egg that holds the ego.14 This performance of being somebody rather than nobody, caught between experiences of privilege and experiences of exploitation, might be described as involving modes of sentimental agency.15 The sentimental presupposes a pedagogy, a training of the dispositions that promises to transform the gap between desire and deed, the gap that both constitutes and undermines the modern notion of free will, into “influence.” Influence is a spatially and temporally fattened or thickened version of agency, compounded, paradoxically, of patience. Or it is an agency submerged in the murk of the affects, rather than tracing its meteoric course across the sky.16

16 I am indebted for this definition of sentimental agency, though not for the term itself, to Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). As a set of dispositions wedded to the desire for reform, sentimental agency implicates itself in efforts to justify the alliance between bureaucratic capitalism and patriarchal white supremacy. Such agency is best described as being summoned by a structural position. Thus, while Douglas’s study focuses on middle-class white women in the nineteenth century, an equally sentimental agent, in her telling, was the white male Congregational minister. Once dominant voices in their communities, men of deep learning with significant cultural and social authority, Congregational ministers faced a different world after disestablishment. Shorn of the lifelong tenure that establishment had conferred, such men could no longer expect to lead a scholar’s life, fashioning a congregation in the image of their theology. Now that he was dependent on the financial support and goodwill of his congregants, the successful minister, according to Douglas, had to be an entrepreneur: “Fearful of openly challenging the economic forces of his society, compelled by unbeatable competition to abandon his former monopoly on culture […], he was under a sometimes claustrophobic pressure from his fastidious and not always fervent congregation to be better trained, more skillful, and more versatile, while presenting a smaller number of topics
A pedagogy of sentimental agency is woven into the legacy of liberalism in its enduring compact with empire. Coeval with the rise of circum-Atlantic capitalism and the consolidation of the European nation-state, liberal humanism emerged under the aegis of the imperialist project. The latter established and sustains key institutional sites, including the modern academy, with the spoils of slave labor, colonial plunder, and other forms of primitive accumulation. As a result, this humanism depends on the racializing arsenal that defined the colonized and the enslaved as less than human, as the others of the Western European self (and that continues to define their descendants as such).17

and evoking a slighter intensity of feeling; he was asked to be more agile in an ever-shrinking space” (41).

Douglas’s minister faced the same commandment as the twenty-first-century academic: Commodify thyself. As Tony Scott, Nancy Welch, and others have pointed out, neoliberal retrenchment in the academy imposes the demand “to be more versatile” on increasingly vulnerable academic workers, who are compelled not only to do more with less, but also perpetually to demonstrate their worth. The demand falls hardest, of course, on those who have traditionally struggled for a voice in the institution: men and women of color; queer, trans, and non-binary people (especially queer, trans, and non-binary people of color); people with disabilities; and white women. And the demand expresses itself nowhere more clearly than in the generally unabashed dependence of universities on an adjunct labor force that qualifies for membership in the ranks of the global precariat. In fields like rhetoric and composition, the sense of a public and pedagogical vocation warps under the pressure, as Scott and Welch argue, to “embrace neoliberalism’s privatizing and commodifying market pursuits as somehow compatible with the field’s public ethos and mission” (Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, “Introduction,” in Composition in the Age of Austerity, eds. Nancy Welch and Tony Scott [Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016], 6).

The liberal self is coded, in the first instance, as white, cishet, and masculine, but it relies on the disciplines of the sentimental for a crucial supplement. In the logic of this supplement, white bourgeois femininity frames the sovereign subject in his pursuit of economic and political domination. This frame includes the supposedly civilizing influence of the white cishet woman’s voice and touch, which is required to soften and mitigate the violence of those pursuits. And it includes the seductive innocence of the white cishet woman’s body, the presence of which appears to justify that very violence, summoning it against the hordes, foreign and domestic, that threaten to corrupt civilization itself. Like an eggshell, the imagined fragility of the white feminine encloses what the white cishet masculine subject wants to forget: how the violence that he exerts also produces him.

The sentimental tenders a cruel promise to this subject, that his agency and autonomy are not exhausted by the competitive, acquisitive acts that underwrite his enjoyment of social privilege and power. In other words, the figures of the sentimental serve to contain the vulnerability that such a subject necessarily feels and that he has been taught to disavow. He can safely — with all the safety of dandling a loaded gun — deflect such feelings onto those marked as feminine, who become objects of his desire and protection, his tutelage and neglect, his tenderness and cruelty.


But as feminists of color have long argued, the discursive whiteness of the Eurocentric feminine — bound up with compulsory heterosexuality and a binary construction of gender — effaces the lives of Black women and other women of color, even as it moves violently to smooth out the folded complexities of anyone’s experience of the flesh.\textsuperscript{19} As María Lugones argues, colonial violence marks its targets as “less than” man or woman, hence as something less or other than gendered. Thinking about how this violence was and is “continually resisted,” Lugones proposes that we regard such resistance as “the minimal sense of agency required” to think about the colonial relationship as “an active one” — without imposing the liberal sense of agency as the destiny of the colonized (and thereby recapitulating the very teleological gesture that, for the colonizer, justifies this violence to begin with).\textsuperscript{20} I am also mindful of Saba Mahmood’s critique of liberal feminism, that the conflation of agency and autonomy, and the elevation of that conflation to “the political ideal,” disposposes us to ignore how “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in

\textsuperscript{19} In addition to the sources cited above, see Hortense J. Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in \textit{Black, White, and in Color}, 152–75. On the tradition of Black women’s writing as resistance to the tropes of the sentimental, see Hazel V. Carby, \textit{Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts studied by Carby offer alternatives to the white-femininized representation of agency as influence.

which one \textit{inhabits} norms.”\textsuperscript{21} The intimacy of resistance and subjugation, of agency and habit, of individual acts and the forms of solidarity that they compose or de-compose, disrupts the promised autonomy of the liberal self. At the same time, it’s important to emphasize that many kinds of practical autonomy — such as the capacity to live without violent interference from the police and other parts of the state’s disciplinary apparatus; or to enjoy shared spaces without fear of sexual harassment; or to perform one’s erotic choices or one’s gender as one sees fit; or to navigate public space without obstacles to one’s mobility — remain tightly coupled to the possession of embodied norms of social privilege and power. Having privilege is a form of entangled agency. And this entanglement frustrates the privileged subject’s efforts to reconcile their privilege with moral autonomy, a frustration that may deflate the sense of agency required by the responsibility for change. In what follows, I focus on the sentimental subject of composition pedagogy in order to think about the critical itself as a work of entanglement, and to think through how the erasure of the liberal promise might make space for hopes of another kind.

\textit{the cruel whiteness of composition}

I focus on composition pedagogy because, as scholars like Robert McRuer and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have pointed out, it func-

\textsuperscript{21} Saba Mahmood, \textit{Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15 (emphasis in the original). I am not asserting that Mahmood’s ethnographic approach to understanding agency and Lugones’s more abstract arguments are compatible in their assumptions. Nor need they be. Lugones’s work theorizes gender in the transnational, transhistorical colonial encounter, while Mahmood’s seeks to render an adequate account of a particular set of women’s experiences in a particular time and place (women participating in the “mosque movement” in contemporary Egypt). I cite them together in order to specify further what’s at stake in the liberal picture of agency that both Mahmood’s and Lugones’s work resists.
tions as a site where teachers are conscripted “to teach the student population how to be composed, contained, and conformist in a society in transition.” More than etymology, the link between *composition* and *composure* suggests a kind of cultural, political, and economic metonymy, expressed in “the flexible body of the contingent, replaceable instructor” and “the flexible body of the student dutifully mastering marketable skills and producing clear, orderly, efficient prose.” At once marginal and central to the academy, composition pedagogy struggles under the demand for student-citizens capable of making themselves legible to our (neo)liberal institutions. Over time this demand has taken many forms. In a current iteration, the demand calls for “critical thinking” as the (self-)possession of subjects adrift in a world riven by financial, institutional, and ecological crisis who must not (no matter what) give up their attachment to the idols of “measurement and marketability.” But I would argue that the disciplining of composition aims at subjects proficient in *explication*, which means more than the production of “clear, orderly, efficient prose.” Explication refers here to the labor of disentangling human agency, recuperating reason’s autonomy, within the circum-Atlantic fold. Given the geometrical progression of precariousness worldwide — through the tangled processes of economic inequality, political instability, and natural and human disasters — critical thought doubles down on that

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24 Including a focus on normative usage and grammar (which remains, for those who don’t teach composition, a kind of default model); a revival of the canons of classical rhetoric as training in deliberative democratic citizenship; and a cultivation of the “true,” authentic, therapeutically expressive self.

25 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 148. This is the “critical thinking” bandied about by university administrators, accreditation bodies, business leaders, and perhaps especially, educational consultants and others peddling high-priced technological “solutions” to a captive academic market.
avoidance of the body’s vulnerability, which McRuer locates in the fear of queerness and disability, and which Ferreira da Silva describes as the modern imperative “not to write the I as an affectable thing.” As autonomous, the “transparent I” would be self-affecting, “self-authenticating,” a presence that writes itself in the erasure of that writing’s trace. But such composure, as Fred Moten reminds us, does not stand alone. For its sovereignty implies a kind of auto-positioning, a positioning of oneself in relation to oneself, an autocritical autopositioning that moves against what it is to be positioned, to be posed by another, to be rendered and, as such, to be rendered inhuman, to be placed in some kind of mutual apposition with the in/human and the animal (the black female servant; the lascivious little cat).

In Moten’s analysis, the posing of the white female figure in Manet’s *Olympia* (or in Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*) “render[s her] inhuman” by “apposition” with other figures in the composition whose inhumanity is taken for granted. Taken together, this ensemble projects the singular humanity of the artist–spectator, who stands before the arrangement in transparency (even if transparent only to himself). If Moten’s argument can survive this violent (and perhaps lascivious) translation, we might conclude that the liberal pedagogue poses his students so that they might see themselves as falling short of fully human agency. This agency can be theirs once they learn how properly to see themselves. As if Olympia were both the model and the spectator of Manet’s painting, a fantastic doubling that does nothing,

of course, to unfix the figure of Black female labor that attends this scene of white feminine dis/composure.29

This pedagogical fantasy exists in tension with other hopes for the critical, which draw not only on traditions of scholarly critique in the humanities and social sciences, but also on radical veins of resistance outside the academy, including socialism and anarchism; various forms of avant-garde practice; feminism; anti-colonial struggles; the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; Black feminist theory and praxis; and queer, trans, and crip forms of resistance and organizing and survival.30

Drawing on these veins, McRuer invokes a pedagogy of “critical de-composition,” attuned to the energy of resistance that rustles around the body’s and the writer’s failures of composure, which is also a radiance born of their falling-short before the norm. Against the sentimental imperative to stretch and bend oneself to fit the present’s ever-shrinking space, McRuer’s vision of critical pedagogy aspires to recover another kind of futurity, which is founded on solidarity, and made more capacious by the embrace of corporeal difference in all its forms.31 But how do

29 I’m suggesting that composition, as an intellectual and corporeal discipline, “at once articulates and disavows the human body” (Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race, 42).

30 In their academic guise, such hopes often recruit the idea that by restoring to all discourses a sense of their partiality — their incompleteness vis-à-vis the actual world — we can avert what Ralph Cintron calls “the violence of fixation.” See “‘Gates Locked’ and the Violence of Fixation,” in Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life: New Directions in Research on Writing, Text, and Discourse, eds. Martin Nystrand and John Duffy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 5–37. But if Cintron focuses on the partiality of discourse, Immanuel Kant inaugurates the critical tradition in a move that insists on the totality of the discursive, i.e., that there is nothing comprehensible outside of the discursive dimensions of human experience (or of human understanding in its synthesis of experience) (Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 205). A question oscillates between these two positions as to what quotient of our experience we can hope to make explicit, if explicitness is taken as the a priori condition of critique.

31 McRuer, Crip Theory, 146–70.
we make sense of such hopes for the critical in light of that liberal optimism circulating under the same name? Is there a way of being critical that lets us distinguish between true and false, spurious and authentic, “good” and “bad” versions of the critical itself? And if there is, how do we teach it? In other words, how does critique escape its own fixations, remain true to its own partiality?32

Phrased as such, these very questions appeal to an ideal of “autocritical” sovereign reason, which would, in virtue of its decisiveness, once and for all escape autonomy’s vicious regress. To get beyond their reductive opposition and see up close the entanglement of the critical and the sentimental, I turn now to a perennial genre of (writing about) composition pedagogy: the case study of the student essay. This genre frames excerpts from student-authored texts with argument and commentary addressed to an audience of compositions scholars and teachers. The arguments are often of a practical nature, illustrating the application of a particular method or approach. Such studies tend to exhibit a familiar narrative arc. We see, in before-and-after panels, a pupil’s progress from one kind of writing to another, exemplary of the passage toward an assumed norm of sophistication, academic literacy, etc. Such narratives evoke a form of sentimental agency, insofar as they enact the presence of the teacher’s influence (however coded in terms of putatively objective standards, communal best practices, etc.) on scenes of striving for the promise of autonomy toward which liberal pedagogies tend. At the same time, the composition case study often highlights the teacher’s and the student’s critical agency in working together, the student on their writing, the teacher on their teaching, each striving to achieve, as the composition

32 Though sympathetic to the critical-pedagogic tradition, Sandy Grande argues that too often “critical pedagogies retain the deep structures of Western thought — that is, the belief in progress as change, in the universe as impersonal, in reason as the preferred mode of inquiry, and in human beings as separate from and superior to the rest of nature” (Red Pedagogy, 3).
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scholar Joseph Harris puts is, a certain “reflectiveness about [their] own aims” in practice.33

On one view, a critical practice need not entail such reflectiveness. As Gilbert Ryle argues, one “applies criteria in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right.”34 But liberal pedagogies, no less than their more radical kin, tend to invoke a more substantive sense of the critical. Here the critical refers to a special kind of striving, one that does not collapse into the effort to satisfy just any old norm. Indeed, such striving might be thought to take aim at the norm itself, opening the possibility of its contestation. But perhaps this distinction hinges on an ambiguity present in the idea of the *criterion* itself. On the one hand, to “apply criteria” might signify a quality of attention, attuned to the embodied (though not necessarily solitary) ways in which the performance of any act unfolds in time and space. Think of the toddler’s struggle to put one foot in front of the other, or of the concert pianist’s constant effort to balance precision and expression. Such forms of attention might be described as involute. They furl inward, along a trajectory of greater intimacy with disciplined capacities of the flesh. On the other hand, one may “apply criteria” in a far more explicit way, via acts specifically intended to result in corrections to another’s (or one’s own) performance. In the first case, the application of criteria, while effective and affective, is *not* transparent. Which is to say, it is not intended to be so. (Would we say that Glenn Gould’s humming was meant to alert us to his feeling for Bach, as opposed to being itself part of that feeling, one of that feeling’s restless, multiply articulated feelers, as it were?) And however normative or rule-governed such performances might seem, the dynamics of attention do not permit sustained reference to a static representation of the norm or rule. In the second case, however, one intends to affect the performance of the other or the self, often

33 Joseph Harris, “Revision as a Critical Practice,” *College English* 65, no. 6 (2003): 575.
from a position that presumes and insists on (perhaps with a rap across the knuckles, or a red pen to the page) the transparency and self-evidence of the governing rule.

I don’t mean to imply that these two meanings of the critical occupy stable positions. Rather, the hinge between them generates a friction, the irresolution of which resonates at the sites of pedagogy with a kind of sentimental background hum. Before attending to a contemporary example, I want to turn to a text where sentiment, critique, and the case study exist in sustained counterpoint: Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Written as a supplement to the project of critical philosophy articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s later text struggles to tame something that escapes the limits of this articulation, something fugitive that unsettles the foundations of that project. This fugitive something is feeling. In the first *Critique*, Kant answers skeptical challenges to Cartesian transparency by positing that all experience, the skeptic’s included, arises within the confines of a subjectivity that produces or, let’s say, composes the phenomenal world. This composition takes place through the application to sensation of the pure forms of intuition (space and time), according to the categorical rules laid down by the discursive understanding.35 By relegating experience to the law-like operations of the human mind, Kant gives up Descartes’s tight suture between thinking and being. Human reason, for Kant, has no access whatsoever to the world as it might exist outside of its mediation by human consciousness. But with this gesture, he manages to retain for consciousness the rights of an “autocritical” agency (which becomes, in the strained logic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, autonomous with respect even to the laws governing its own operation), thereby writing the I as “not […] an affectable thing.” Or he almost manages to do so. For although the awkward forwardness of the flesh remains on the margins of his critical philosophy, Kant does pose the question,

in the belatedly written third *Critique*, of why a feeling (that is to say, a mode of *being affected*) should appear essential to the application of certain criteria. “[A]n aesthetic judgment,” writes Kant, “is that whose determining ground lies in a sensation that is immediately connected with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure.” The account hinges on the “disinterested pleasure” that, as Kant claims, we experience when making judgments of taste. The delicate poise of such judgments between the cog-like operations of cognition and the erratic pull of desire suggests, in turn, the presence of a kind of freedom, a “free play” of the faculties (sensation, imagination, and rational cognition) in their “mutual […] correspondence.”

This freedom exists in a strange tension with the pleasure that occasions it. It is as though Kant will sanction play only if it can be made to express a pedagogical intent. The latter emerges from what the free play of the faculties teaches us about the subject:

The consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers of the subject in the case of a representation through which an object is given is the pleasure itself, because it contains a determining ground of

36 Kant locates this class of judgments midway between two extremes. On the one hand, a “cognitive judgment” (i.e., that this figure represents a rabbit or a duck) is objective, meaning, in Kant’s critical lexicon, that the laws of the understanding fully determine its validity, because they alone allow the object to appear. On the other hand, there is the purely subjective case of our sensuous interest in the object, e.g., when we find, as Kant says, something “agreeable” in it. Such judgments are equally determinate, though they lay no claim to objective validity, being entirely the product of bodily needs or irrational whims. In either case, judgment serves at the behest of a higher faculty: cognition in the one case, desire in the other. But “the feeling of pleasure and displeasure,” which provides the “determining ground” of aesthetic judgments, is not a faculty, nor is it strictly explicable in terms of the other two. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29, 64.

37 Ibid., 103.
the activity of the subject with regard to the animation of its cognitive powers, thus an internal causality (which is purpo-
sive) with regard to cognition in general, but without being restricted to a particular cognition, hence it contains a mere form of the subjective purposiveness of a representation in an aesthetic judgment.\textsuperscript{38}

Through its harmony of form alone, the beautiful object broad-
casts the presence of what feels like an animating intention. This \textit{purposiveness} lies latent in the object, seeking its complement in the labor of our imagination. But on this other intention, the mind can get no determinate purchase. For pleasure, qua aesthetic, stems from the mind's own agency in contemplation, from its enjoyment of the dance in which it leads the world's giv-
en forms. Or, as Kant writes, from “an internal causality (which is purposive) with regard to cognition in general, but without being restricted to a particular cognition.” The beautiful object, or the object of taste, seems to disclose a surplus of purpose, on which the beholder can capitalize. In truth, beauty only awakens the mind to its own reserves of intentionality. We find it pleasing, Kant suggests, to learn that our ordinary, determinate pur-
poses and striving do not exhaust our capacity for experience.

Moreover, his discovery of this purposiveness at play bolsters his critical project because Kant makes the former the vehicle of a “subjective universal communicability.”\textsuperscript{39} It is “subjective” because, of course, no one can hope to prove that what appears beautiful to them appears so to everyone else. Nonetheless, in a curious modal chain, Kant insists that the subject of the judgment of taste must insist that it \textit{should}.\textsuperscript{40} And indeed, one might extend this claim to many varieties of critical argument. Without the requirement of either empirical warrant or formal logic, critique nonetheless adduces its own necessity. Sustained by

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 121.
their feeling for the relevance of the particular case to the general idea (or for the intimacy between the two), the critic expects the assent of others. The critic (including the critical philosopher) expects their own feeling to be communicable, and this communicability validates the feeling itself. Thus, the theory of aesthetic judgment discloses an optimism, which we might call the promise of a *felt transparency*.

For what affects the subject in aesthetic judgment is ultimately only the interior purposiveness of the subject itself, via a detour through the external object that provides the occasion for this judgment.

Why should this detour furnish the narrative arc of so much thinking about the pedagogical? Consider, for instance, the case studies presented by Joseph Harris as “interchapters” in his influential book on composition pedagogy, *A Teaching Subject*. Harris, who elsewhere describes “discursive agency” as the hallmark of “critical practice,” proposes to show how this agency emerges when “beginning college students” navigate “the paradoxical task of both forging their own voices and writing in a way that their teachers find interesting and familiar.” Here we meet Heather, author of a personal essay about her involvement in a high-school newspaper. Heather is a competent writer, capable of writing with “some real care and intelligence.” Not without an aesthetic sensibility of her own, she is clearly “trying

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41 Certainly, Hannah Arendt reads it that way, making the third *Critique* central to her analysis of Kant’s political philosophy and to her definition of “critical thinking.” For Arendt, the communicable purposiveness of aesthetic *cum* critical judgments means that in performing such a judgment, one “always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account.” The pedagogical function of aesthetic judgment allows one “to think with an enlarged mentality.” It “trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (*Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, trans. Ronald Beiner [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 43, 67).


43 Harris, “Revision as a Critical Practice,” 577; and Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997), 46.
Her first draft, however, fails to do “anything” with its source material. Anything, that is, other than make what Harris calls “the weakest possible” use of the assigned text, Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary. Heather’s draft merely poaches quotations to fill out a narrative that isn’t critically attentive to Rose or his subject matter. Nor is Heather critically attentive to “her own experiences.” In thrall to “one of the key narratives of American culture,” her first draft presents both her own story and her source text in a kind of textual taxidermy, producing a tidy but glassy-eyed tableau, “a straightforward narrative of success.” The narrative of Heather’s first draft is straightforward in its bid to achieve transparency as a piece of prose — and indeed, in its bid to achieve a certain feeling that can signify the communicability of the subject’s experience. (Heather writes, concluding her essay, “I believe my story, of my first front page article, would definitely be in Rose’s book, because it shows how I struggled to overcome my obstacles to achieve what I wanted.”)

But the student writer’s desire to succeed at the assignment apparently blocks her ability to communicate (the validity of) her experience. Harris, her teacher, can discern there only the lineaments of that desire:

[For all the work she seems to have put into this draft, Heather really only manages to give a sense of herself in it as a kind of typical good kid and good student, who has already taken to heart much of the advice about writing her high school teacher gave her, but who is still eager to learn more. What she hasn’t come up with yet is anything [...] that would mark what she has to say as distinctively her own.45]

On the one hand, Harris represents Heather’s draft as saturated with a certain kind of purpose (“to give a sense of herself [...] as

44 Ibid., 48–49.
45 Ibid., 49.
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a kind of typical good kid and good student”). At the same time, the draft lacks that discovery of purposiveness, that “discursive agency,” that “would mark what she has to say as distinctively her own.” For Harris, positioned here as the critical subject, seeking in the object a summons to transcend his own interests and enlarge his common sense into a feeling for human commonality, Heather’s bid for agency fails by being conventional. As the performance of a “typical good kid,” its striving bears the stamp of what Kant calls the “common human understanding,” i.e., the rule-bound cognition that Kant associates with the “vulgar” sort, whose understanding is “merely healthy” but “not yet cultivated.”

Kant’s elitism is at pains to distinguish the sensus communis that defines critical judgments from its vernacular version, the latter being “the least that can be expected of anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being.” Harris, of course, does not frame his narrative in such terms. For him, Heather’s case demonstrates how the student writer’s agency can emerge in revision. This means acknowledging how her experience—presumably white and middle-class—differs from those “lives on the boundary” of literacy and privilege represented in her source text. And it means surpassing the tendency toward “ventriloquism” that characterizes her first draft. In her second draft, Heather

draws on [Rose] not merely to support but to complicate what she has to say. Rather than simply suggest […] that she and Rose have had similar experiences with writing, Heather

46 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 173.
47 Ibid.
48 Lester Faigley trenchantly notes the preference in “expressivist” composition for “student selves […] that achieve rationality and unity by characterizing former selves as objects for analysis” (“Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” College Composition and Communication 40, no. 4 [1989]: 411). Though avowedly not expressivist in his pedagogy, Harris’s comments on Heather’s draft and revision betray a similar preference.
now imagines herself as part of a scene he has described and shows how it would be different for her [...]. Through this contrast between her own anxiety and the easy pride of the kids Rose talks about, she achieves a kind of distance and control over both her and his stories, which means she now has something to say about each.49

Like many composition theorists today, Harris is critical of “expressivist” theories that locate the “writer’s voice” inside the writer, in some radically private store of experience to which the writer alone has access. Part of the problem with such theories, he argues, is that they make it difficult to specify, to be explicit about, what qualifies as truly (or “authentically”) expressive writing. For what textual features can distinguish authentic expression from writing that merely reproduces the conventions of personal expression, which are exactly as generic as those guiding any other kind of discourse?50

In contrast to the Cartesian transparency promoted by expressivist pedagogies, “distance” and “control” appear as key terms in Harris’s account. His praise for her revised draft takes pleasure in imagining Heather’s imagination of herself vis-à-vis Rose’s text. This positioning signals also that she has “achieved,” via a detour through a newly disinterested feeling for the object of her critical judgment, a different kind of relation to herself. Kant might call it “cultivated.” For Harris, Heather “now has something to say.” Aesthetic–critical distance militates against attachments that cling too close. It teaches a pleasure disrup-

49 Harris, A Teaching Subject, 51–52.
50 Ibid., 33–34. Like the Cartesian myth at which ordinary-language philosophy tilts, expressivism refers judgments to the truth-content of a hypothetical set of propositions: what the writing subject really had to say. Not only does writing remain an insolubly solitary act (since the writer alone knows what she has to say), but it also involves an impossibly recursive series of translations into a private language. For how shall the writer (much less the reader) know when they have reached the real content, such that no further translations are necessary, unless by fiat of an intuition that cannot itself be expressed in discourse?
tive of those more conventional promises (like the desire to be a “typical good kid”) that stunt one’s potential to engage with others’ judgments on one’s own terms. It grants one possession of something intangible but crucial to liberal subjectivity: “something to say.” A mode of self-possession, this composure heralds the subject’s readiness to participate in those purposive relations among strangers mediated by objects of taste, i.e., commodities. But as a supplement to the pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace, the disinterested feeling of critical thinking entails a readiness to “put [one]self into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judging.”\(^{51}\) And this supplement ensures the transparent, autonomous communicability through which a collection of individuals, atomized by market relations, becomes a public, insofar as “everyone is willing and able to render an account of what he thinks and says.”\(^{52}\)

The public toward which aesthetic-critical judgment orients us remains a potential public, a public in abstraction (abstracted from the particular but also conventional judgments of the members of the vulgar crowd).\(^{53}\) But what about those “lives on the boundary” who provide the occasion for Heather’s writing and Harris’s critique? In the latter, they barely figure, or they figure as a framing device, delineating the space in which Harris’s pedagogical pleasure attaches to Heather’s coming into her own. They are not the objects of pedagogy, for they do not receive the solicitation, the solicitous gaze, that invites them to be cultivated (to become subjects). And yet, not unlike the Black maid in Manet’s painting, the explicitness of their bracketed presence is (somehow) required.\(^{54}\) What, in other words, do composition’s

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51 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 174.

52 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 41.

53 It is also a public of individuals whose conditions of being are grounded in the abstraction of property rights, which represents a kind of haunted privacy, a deracinated relation to history, land, labor, and the flesh.

54 On the idea of bracketing in the western philosophical tradition, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham:
critical judgments have to do with racialized and class privilege? Writing about the hegemonic role of “Standardized Edited Academic English” (SEAE) in the North American classroom, Asao B. Inoue describes the performance of critical agency, the performance of having something to say, as follows:

It is a self-reliant voice that is focused on itself as a cool, rational, thinking self in the writing and in its reading of [the] writer’s own experiences or ideas. This isn’t to say these are bad qualities in writing, only that they are linked to whiteness and this link often has uneven racist consequences in classroom writing assessments.55

Inoue argues that these “racist consequences” are “not usually produced by conscious intentions, purposes, or biases of people against others not like them.”56 Rather, as he puts it, it is quite possible that the demand for performances of SEAE, grounded in the “abstract liberal principle […] to teach all students the same English,” will have a racist “function” without its being articulated as part of a racist “purpose” on the part of the teacher.57 Inoue’s formulation suggests how aesthetic–critical judgments can serve as a supplement to the social power that white bodies accumulate in moving through the world. The whiteness of these bodies performs a certain function, as does the white person’s insistence that performances intimately linked to whiteness, like performances of SEAE, represent universal norms of cultivated behavior, having nothing to do with the violence of white supremacy. Relative to these functions, the purpose and purposiveness appealed to by critical judgments promise to transform abstract liberal principles into felt possessions. They

56 Ibid., 53.
57 Ibid., 55–56.
promise to make one’s composure as a subject of white privilege and power signify more than the social and political functions of whiteness itself.\textsuperscript{58}

The critical and the sentimental encounter one another in the thoroughly hierarchical space or scene where the racializing and gendering structures of dominance interest the self, and where one accedes to the position of a subject by inhabiting one’s place, performing one’s function, vis-à-vis those structures. Explication’s fraught work is to retrieve subjectivity, as an interiority that can be home to rational purpose in its transparency, from

\textsuperscript{58} As Michael McKeon argues, in the formulations of eighteenth-century European aesthetic theories, “the capacity for disinterestedness” exposes a side of objects that remains obscure to the multitudes, conferring on the privileged subject “a kind of ‘possession’ that improves upon the merely sensible grossness associated with the rude, uncultivated literality and interestedness of actually owning ‘real’ estate” (The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009], 364). McKeon describes taste as “one of those quasi-somatic terms that was fashioned by eighteenth-century writers to replace, within a culture increasingly skeptical about the literal and bodily innateness of nobility but increasingly taken with arguments from the natural, the honor that traditionally distinguished those of noble birth” (359). Taste, in other words, sublimates the “innateness” of nobility, locating it in a faculty of the mind, rather than in a whole ensemble of dispositions more obviously linked to the circumstances of breeding and education.

Paradoxically, this effort to transpose the justification for economic, social, and political privilege from the “literal” and the “bodily” to the “natural” doubles down on innateness, granting the latter a flexibility and power in direct proportion to its refusal to be specified. As the vehicle of the aesthetic, taste became aligned with what Sylvia Wynter calls “the new eugenic/dysgenic sociogenic code, as the code in whose terms the Western bourgeoisie, unable hitherto to legitimate its role as a ruling class on the basis of the noble blood and birth model of the landed aristocracy, was now to legitimate itself as a naturally selected ruling class, because the bearers and transmitters of an alleged eugenic line of descent” (quoted in Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 148, emphasis in the original). At the same time, the “metaphorical” possession implied by aesthetic judgment does not repudiate the interest in real estate. Rather, in reflection, one explicates one’s interests, untangling them from the pure operations of (the leisured, privileged) consciousness.
what threatens to entrammel it in conditions external to itself. In the explicative work of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant displaces the problem of the subject’s affectability, making subjectivity a “function” of interiority itself. According to Kant, the internal coherence of experience, immured within the laws of cognition, answers to “a hidden art in the depths of the human soul.”\(^5^9\) For although his analysis of the Categories of the Understanding aspires to exhaust the basic criteria according to which anything can be said to exist, the profoundly abstract Categories cannot, on pain of infinite regress, prescribe the rules for their own application. In the first *Critique*, judgment — as the power that marshals the particular and concrete under the understanding’s facultative government — inscribes the limits of Kant’s own critical explication, locating the depths from which an affectability threatens to overwhelm the I after all. The theory of aesthetic judgment posits a “free play” that buoy the I, playing on the surface of that opacity. I have argued that we should understand this play as a kind of laboratory for liberalism, a playground for taking pleasure in the latter’s insistence, to quote Saba Mahmood, on “a detachment between the inner life of a self and its outward expressions wherein the experience of the former cannot be adequately captured in the latter, and where its true force can only be felt within the valorized space of personal self-reflection.”\(^6^0\) Evading “capture,” the “true force” of this self is projected beyond the body, not in the form of “outward expressions,” but as a feeling for its own universality. And I have suggested that the valorization, by modernity’s dominant idioms, of this “space of self-reflection” comports with principles of hierarchy and exclusion that police that space. Indeed, it even requires them. If the “vulgar” — an appellation that might as easily be applied to bourgeois philistines as to proletarians — do not partake of the *sensus communis*, they can, at least, “[lay]  

\(^{59}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 273; See also Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 62.  
\(^{60}\) Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 147.
claim to the name of a human being.” This is not a privilege that Kant extends to non-Europeans, especially not to the peoples targeted by European colonialism. The latter represent, in Fred Moten’s words, “the not but nothing other than human.”

Mirroring that “valorized self-reflection” theorized by Kant under the heading of aesthetic judgment, the composure of the white liberal subject is policed internally by what it projects, a de-humanizing and othering gaze that poses the non-white body, and in particular the Black body, as existing outside of that potential universal community of selves to which this subject, by virtue of a social positioning that can neither be relinquished nor avowed, enjoys access. Frantz Fanon calls this projection or projectile of white supremacy the “white gaze”:

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of uncertainty.  


In Fanon’s narrative of his journey from the Antilles to France, the “burdened” composure offered to the colonial subject as the price of their admission to “the white world, the only decent one,” is revealed to be a fraud. In the eyes of the European whites around them, the colonial subject can never hope to measure up, never transcend their Blackness. Under the heat of the gaze, the Black subject—in Fanon’s text, the Black man—stands caught in a catch-22. As Lewis Gordon puts it, “Try as I may, whenever I choose, no matter what I choose [...] the fact of the matter is that it always turns out to be a black man who chooses.” The judgments of white subjects truncate the agency of people of color, consigning their character to caricature, their flesh to token, fetish, stigma, anathema: when the white child encountered by Fanon leaps into his mother’s lap, terrified that “the Negro’s going to eat me”; when the white woman riding the elevator with a Black academic philosopher involuntarily broadcasts, by a web of subtle gestures, her conviction of his “dark body’s ‘intention’ to do her harm”; when the justices sitting on the nation’s highest court tacitly endorse the “language of Indian savagery”; when the university’s administration of “diversity” means that “people of color were classified, moved around, counted, recounted, and overcounted, [their] bodies extended across each of the School’s seven divisions,” according to “the nonconsensual agreement [they] had presumably made to remain within those proscriptions.” Like the anti-racist and decolonial literature it has inspired, Fanon’s account of racism and colonial violence begins from a phenomenologi-

64 Lewis R. Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 133.
65 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 93; George Yancy, Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America, 2nd edn. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 41; Robert A. Williams, Jr., Like a Loaded Weapon: The Rehnquist Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal History of Racism in America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 34; Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 130.
cal insistence on the flesh as the site of judgment. Exposure to the white gaze occurs against the background of that “implicit knowledge” to which a person ordinarily has recourse in navigating their surround, like what guides the hand in reaching for a pack of cigarettes. But in Fanon’s account, judgment is neither the determinate outcome of the laws of cognition, nor the valorized play of reflection. For judgment does not arise within an atomic consciousness, but it occurs within a deeply embodied tissue of social relations. Fanon confronts white people’s suspicions, condescension, and revulsion, and these judgments divide him from his own body. As Fanon describes it, they cut his color out of his flesh. For the presence of whiteness, hence white supremacy, in Fanon’s social milieu violates his “bodily schema,” intruding an “epidermal racial schema” that warps his ability to trust what his body knows. The body’s implicit knowledge is undermined by, or entangled in, the countless ways in which Fanon is forced, as a matter of survival, to make explicit to himself the racist judgments of whites:

I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y a bon Banania.

66 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 93.
67 “Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body” (ibid., 92).
68 Ibid., 92. Along one dimension, this “epidermal racial schema” clings to the surface of the flesh, but along another it pierces the present, reopening a traumatic historical depth. Because unacknowledged by the white world, which nonetheless keeps the violence of this history alive, the latter becomes the sole burden of the Black body, which is conscripted into a double duty: representing both the racialized and undifferentiated historical present of oppression, and the individualized, atomized subject whom this oppression disables from fully assuming the rights and duties of the liberal social contract.
Fanon’s account highlights instances of racist aggression, large and small, that awaken him to the positioning of the Black colonial subject in France. But white supremacy operates even without the presence of identifiable aggression (which is to say, aggression that white people might identify as such). Its judgments saturate the milieux where whiteness dominates, seeding the atmosphere with a question: “What stigmata do they see?”

These judgments discompose Fanon, weighing him down with the sediment of “racial-historical” relations for which he is, perversely, made to assume responsibility.

To be clear, I am not opposing Fanon’s lived phenomenology of racism to Kant’s aesthetic theory in order to show where the latter falls short. Doing so would have the perverse effect of treating Fanon’s account as the case, thereby replicating the logic of liberalism that positions its colonial others as standing outside the trajectory of Western progress, stuck in a phase of pre-history. Thereby re-inscribing the colonizer’s civilizing ped-

69 Inoue, Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies, 38.
agogy as the teleology proper to the colonial subject. To borrow from Moten again, I am suggesting that we read Kant and Fanon in apposition. I am suggesting that Fanon’s experience of racialization reveals another side of the aesthetic as delineated by Kant, a fold, as it were, inside the very structure of feeling that, for Kant, is at once universal and the special province of suitably “cultivated” subjects. Instead of distance, we are dealing with an intimacy that confounds autonomy and dependence; freedom and domination; taste, appetite, and disgust. Under the white gaze, Fanon “cast[s] an objective gaze” over himself, aestheticizing himself, splitting himself into both subject and object of reflection. But what fills the frame is not even the representation of a body reduced to an invitation to dominance (like the figure of Olympia in Manet’s painting, see fig. 1). For Blackness here functions as the frame, the parergon. As the overdetermined signifier of “cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y a bon Banania,” Fanon is forced, as Sylvia Wynter writes, “to make himself into a fact of negation, which alone enables the experience of being ‘white.’” What fills the frame, then, is only

71 See Moten, “Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis”: “But blackness, even though it is the sensuality that negatively bodies forth the supersensible, precisely insofar as it is ‘merely’ sensual, is not subject to the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste that it could be said to ground. Rather, as mere sensuality, it occupies and quickens a series: the stupid, the irrational, the deformed and/or deformative, the unfinished and/or disruptive, the driven and/or transportive, the irregular and/or anti- and ante-regulative, the blurred and/or blurring, the curved, the arabesque, the parergon, the outwork and/or mad absence of the work, the outlaw, the would-have-been-outside, the thing of nature that defies or defers, rather than presupposes, representation. That series will have always been inseparable from a natural history of inequality that it animates and by which it is animated” (221–22).
the empty itinerary of the other’s gaze as it colonizes the racialized subject’s self-reflection. Agonized, parergonized, the flesh is cut off, not only from its milieu, but from the affective agency of its material being: “I hailed the world, and the world amputated my enthusiasm.”

Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 42. Wynter continues: “And for this to be done, within the plotlines of the narratives which alone makes it possible, he must experience the corporeal reality of his body, as one that has always already been transformed by the negative stereotypes placed upon it, into a subhuman reality.”

73 Of the role of the parergon in Kant’s aesthetics, Derrida writes, “one cannot do without it. But in its purity, it ought to remain colorless, deprived of all empirical sensory materiality” (The Truth in Painting, 64).

74 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 94. In these encounters, instead of a reflection on the object in which the subject pleasantly discovers an enlarged perspective and purposiveness, breathing in a generality that encompasses other autonomous agents like himself, both parties find themselves locked in a narrowing field of perception, bombarded by painful interests: fear, anger, contempt, and repressed desire. As a modality of judgment, the white gaze collapses the agency of both the judge and the judged. Their reflectiveness stands at the mercy of ingrained reflexes; their autonomy falls captive to an autonomic response. For the white person, this capture results from their own habits of judgment, which may present themselves symptomatically, as a pervasive but free-floating unease. For the racialized other, the situation is, of course, far more acute. It bears an edge that, even in mundane situations, can all to easily slide into verbal or physical assault, even murder. Thus, Fanon’s use of visceral metaphors to render the emotional consequences of racism reminds us that the threat of racist violence is what makes racism such a powerful tool of oppression.

It is also true that the white gaze can become a source of pleasure to the person who wields it, especially when they pursue a conscious and intentional relation to their dominance. The power of the gaze, then, reflects and re-affirms that dominance. I am thinking here of the pleasure white people have taken in the spectacle of minstrel shows and other degrading depictions of Blackness (which persist, in different forms, to this day), as well as in the perpetration of heinous acts of anti-Black violence and terror. Such cases illustrate that the racializing gaze of white supremacy is not incompatible with the structure of aesthetic judgment. Indeed, the white gaze gives access to the sensus communis adduced by Kant, the sensus communis being defined, in this case, as a property appertaining exclusively to whiteness.
Fanon’s encounter with the white world figures in his text as a profound emasculation. But as Hortense Spillers reminds us, the materiality of the flesh maintains an impossible intimacy with the question of its maternity. And in the case of the flesh marked as Black and female, this intimacy remains the zone of a double negation, or of a negation folded in on itself, in which the subject is not only objectified twice over (as Black and as female), but also barred from the femininity that serves as the white woman’s patriarchal wage and racial alibi. Both Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman have written carefully and incisively about how the Black female body can, in the same moment of violent fixation, function as both object and frame, as Moten writes, “always crossing the borders between invisibility and hypervisibility, seriality and aesthetic criminality.” It is as though the detour of reflective judgment got caught in a recursive loop, vertiginously supplementing itself. But as Moten and Hartman in their separate ways insist, the closure of this figuration harbors fugitive possibilities. A fugitive agency that resists, and survives, the multiple fronts of violence marshaled against it, violence meant to deny Black women and girls any agency, any purpose. For as Spillers insists, “[t]he subject is certainly seen, but she also sees.” It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at

75 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” See also Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void”; Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique,” PhiloSOPHIA 8, no. 1 (2018): 19–41; and Moten, In the Break, 14–24. With the exception of one chapter, “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” Fanon’s text is silent about the other colonial Other. On Michelle Wright’s reading, this silence performs the disappearance of Black women, positioning the Black subject, in the first place, as implicitly male; and in the second, as standing in opposition or conflict with white women: “[W]hite women are deployed to symbolize the rejection of the Black male as a citizen/subject by the white nation” (Becoming Black, 128).

76 The occasion for these analyses is a late nineteenth-century photograph of an anonymous Black child, a girl, posed nude in the style of Manet’s model, and probably taken by Thomas Eakins. See Moten, “Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis,” 231; and Hartman, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, 24–30.
every point a space for living.”77 If the racializing cut disables the subject, casting its I out of transparency, it does not exhaust the subject’s capacity for resistance, for looking back in defiance, but also for seeing with a knowledge that eludes the position of a weaponized autonomy, a treacherous transparency.78 The survivors know too well that purpose is a sieve, a convenient mesh for the flesh that the singular subject does not control. Denied the wages of whiteness and masculinity, they know, too, when it comes to the promise of freedoms bestowed from above, whose money is where the mouth is:

not everybody knows my name, but everyone knows what I taste like. salt after malt liquor. vault where the soul is kept. everyone knows my sweat under their tongue when they try to say free market. wet wild wick when they try to spark it on the fourth of july again. mildew of what i do for you. everyone knows the bloom of the brackish floor of the living room America. i taste like hysteria sedated with a case of the blues. i taste metallic like tap shoes Morse coding no. i taste like dirty city snow that can’t stay white. i taste like your morning breath after waking up all night afraid your stuff is gone. i taste like sparrow song and hunger, taste like blackened coal mined lungs. i taste like military blunders limping up and

77 Spillers, “Interstices,” 163.
78 Fanon’s own text multiplies the dispositions available to the writer (and the reader) into a series that undermines the impoverished binary between “black skin” and “white masks.” As Katherine McKittrick writes, “[e]ach site Fanon encounters gives rise to a different sense of identity, a different kind of self, and a different sense of place. His positionality and status shift from moment to moment, comprising some, or all, of his identities and identifications as a black man, an activist, a poet” (Demonic Grounds, 27). And as a white reader and auditor and citcer of voices and texts that speak from and to multiple and irreducible moments of Black lives, not to mention the silences and gaps that haunt us with their muted ability, I must learn how to open myself to being moved by more than just the vicarious experience of the violence that situates the Black in a/opposition to the white. For my capacity to be affected becomes, in such a case, a part of that very violence, its reduplicative after-effect.
down the street. i taste like used rag fermentation that gets used again another week. can i speak? 

In a poetic work celebrating Black feminist praxis, Alexis Pauline Gumbs voices a fugitivity that “spills” over the containerized aesthetics of patriarchal white supremacy. At the root of those events we call the senses, which are the site of our history, the flesh exceeds the judgments of “taste” that preach a hierarchy of bodies and police their pleasures. Barred from that nominative membership in the sensus communis that full and unburdened citizenship requires, Gumbs’s poetic speaker performs a labor of taste that is copulative, not transitive. Her speaker “tastes like,” performing the position of the object of taste. And yet, in its figurative abundance, this performance disrupts the power of aesthetic or critical judgment to fix objects in the circuit of the subject’s autotelic pleasure. For the creative powers of survival, Gumbs’s prose suggests, are due to the mutability of the flesh where a thousand cuts do their work. The fugitive’s flesh, in particular, disrupts the performative economies of capitalism and liberalism that their labor makes possible (“my sweat under their tongue when they try to say free market”). Just as the over-determination of their flesh by sexist and racist stereotypes (“wet wild wick”) frustrates the coherence of the national project (“when they try to spark it on the fourth of july”). To the fugitive belongs a resistance encoded in performances that play to such stereotypes (“tap shoes Morse coding no”). And theirs, too, is a resilience throwing into relief what those I’s indentured to the ruses of whiteness and cishet masculinity would rather not know that they know. The fugitive’s flesh, desired and disavowed, dispossesses them (“afraid your stuff is gone”), indexing the otherness that whiteness cannot do without. Indexing, too, that labor thanks to which even the white laborer’s body “can’t stay white,” maimed by “military blunders,” ailing with

“blackened coal mined lungs.” A sort of linking agency, the fugitive’s “tastes like” entangles the transparent I’s with their own flesh, which they are afraid to bear, whose “song and hunger” accuse them.

**global intimacies and guilt over ignorance**

“Can I speak?” Subalternity’s untimely question haunts the composure of the “typical good” liberal subject. It threatens to discompose the optimism that locates a kind of universal destiny in what one has to say, a phrase suggestive of a possession or property that doubles as a duty or imperative. “I feel very strongly about the way I write,” writes Joseph Harris’s Heather in her revised draft. “Whatever I write on that piece of paper you know it’s me. […] My writing is my identity.”

80 Harris, *A Teaching Subject*, 50.
81 Harris, “Revision as a Critical Practice,” 577.
(imagined) assent: to her argument, yes, but also to her body and its presence.

In what follows, I explore the entanglement of the composing subject with the otherness that often figures, in the classrooms and elsewhere on the campuses of the neoliberal North American university, as a globality summoning this subject to her desti-ny in the world. I use the cis-gendered female pronoun here on purpose. For the posing/positioning of this subject by neoliberal pedagogies draws on liberalism’s traditional construction, at the hands of elite white men, of bourgeois white femininity as the embodied site for the management of affective tensions unleashed by capitalism and empire. Her labor of “true feeling” makes space and time for the pleasure he takes in his exercise of distance and control. Furthermore, this arrangement requires, if not the subaltern’s silence, then the latter’s halting (i.e., halted, forestalled, suppressed) efforts to be heard. In this triangular structure, performing whiteness involves performing one’s dis-identification from the position occupied by the racialized, globalized other. And performing white femininity requires a supplemental appeal to the position that refuses to identify with the gendered/feminized (white) other (“you know it’s me”). At the same time, I am mindful of the fact that these subject positions, abstractly delineated, do not fix particular bodies, no matter how strenuously the biopolitical apparatus tries to tamp them down. The subject remains a palimpsest, its fleshy folds a trap for the particulars of history and fantasy, the traces of suffering and desire. I am also mindful that, as one who has been taught to identify with a dominant position in the structure, I cannot hope to disinterest myself in that identification or suspend its violence. I write, I persist in writing, this, therefore, from an attitude of general, critical optimism but quite particular pes-simism, while striving not to let what I feel for my own case

collapse the space of resistance required if we are to imagine the future otherwise.

The cruel optimism of whiteness consists, for those identified as white, in an attachment to the white world’s promise. This promise is that its transparent supremacy indefinitely extends in space and time. Certainly, the prevailing milieux of North American and Western European societies reinforce the sense that, as Shannon Sullivan puts it, “for a white person, *qua* white, the world presents no barriers to her engagement with the world.”83 Relative to people of color living under the white gaze, white people enjoy an untroubled relation to their agency as *whites*, whether in their occupation of public space, or in their identification with dominant narratives of national belonging. At the same time, the white world remains a fraught place, for the ambitions of capitalism and empire have never permitted this world to exclude its racialized others *tout court*. Indeed, as Lisa Lowe has shown, the world of empire is composed of transnational, trans-generational intimacies created and sustained by human trafficking, resource extraction, migration, and trade, no less than by the diverse lineages and multiple trajectories of resistance to colonial violence and capitalist exploitation.84 Denise Ferreira da Silva explores the “ontoeipistemological” side of this intimacy, arguing that in “post-Enlightenment” Europe, the privileged attributes of autonomy and transparency, becoming less self-evident, more volatile, pressurized by the “sciences of man” and the needs of capital, could be preserved only by scientific “strategies.” In particular, the disciplines of evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and anthropology arrived on the scene to redefine these attributes. Or more precisely, to redefine their exclusivity, making them the properties of the dominant subjects of European empire. But these subjects were

84 Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 1–42.
themselves now racialized and historicized. The white European or “Western” subject henceforth was to enjoy an autonomy produced, not by laws interior to consciousness, but by “exterior” laws governing organic and/or sociocultural development. Thus, autonomy’s prize and transparency’s treasure signify only in relation to a global context populated by those who have yet to earn or discover it, the peoples colonized and exploited by European imperial designs. And these others, of course, are marked by racial difference and divergent historical trajectories. The “white world,” then, is the globalizing figure of that projective dis/identification, that “engulfment” (in Ferreira da Silva’s words), as well as of its economic and material conditions and supports.

But the white world “can’t stay white” for the simple yet profound reason that it’s not the world. As sentimental subjects, “persons who shop and feel,” what we consume promises to realize our participation in a phantom community of people like ourselves. Thus, although nearly everything that we consume bears the traces of its transnational circulation, we who are identified as white still identify ourselves, through our possession of these objects, as subjects of a Western nation or civilization. Taste is the exercise of that claim to sovereignty. And yet, as the sense most intimate with acts of consumption, and host to the corporeal pleasures of engulfment, taste is also the sense that is most palimpsest. The intimacy of taste with otherness remains a problem inviting moral re-education, moral and aesthetic discipline. Such is the pedagogical import of much sentimental

85 Ferreira da Silva’s argument is complex, and I strain to do justice to it here. See Toward a Global Idea of Race, esp. 115–51. This text extends a line of thought found in Sylvia Wynter’s work, in particular in the essays “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” “1492,” and “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.” See also Alexander Weheliye’s reading of Wynter’s work in Habemas Viscus.

literature: a training in what Lauren Berlant calls the “juxtapo-
itical,” signifying a nearness to the complexities of domination
and power but also a desire for “relief from the political.”87 That
desire is nowhere more conspicuous than in the literature of hu-
manitarian philanthropy, which presents “global” crises, which
have their roots in transnational capitalism and settler-colonial
institutions, as amenable to resolution through the generosity of
Western consumers. Such a text is Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl
WuDunn’s *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for
Women Worldwide*, which our imperial university one year laid
a copy of on the pillow of every incoming undergraduate. Under
the auspices of the university’s “First Chapter” program, the dis-
tribution of *Half the Sky* was meant to foster a classically liberal
exercise in community among the incoming class by providing
occasion for critical discussion and debate. But more than that,
the choice of this particular text (and its placement in the inti-
mate space of sleep and sex) seems to have been intended to in-
vite performances of the kinds of feeling appropriate to subjects
who are positioned not only to “make history,” but also to culti-
vate their moral agency through their desire for a better world.

*Half the Sky* is not a call to organized resistance to trans-
national violence and inequality. Nor is it a work of policy or
scholarship, nor a narrative of oppression told by the oppressed.
It comprises a series of case studies, as written by an American
journalist and a banker, and with the participation of women
and girls in India, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of the
Congo, and elsewhere. These case studies concern the preva-
ience of “sex trafficking and forced prostitutions; gender-based
violence, including honor killings and mass rape; and maternal
mortality.”88 Though they do not stint on harrowing details, the

87 Ibid., 10. Berlant describes feminized performances of the sentimental as
arising from “a sense of […] collective sociality routed in revelations of
the personal, regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded
through mediating institutions and social hierarchy.”
88 Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression
into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
authors position their book “not as a drama of victimization but empowerment,” where the empowerment in question is primarily entrepreneurial: “transform[ing] bubbly teenage girls from brothel slaves into successful businesswomen.” As critics have pointed out, Kristof and WuDunn’s book has little to say about the institutions and policies that constrain the lives of neocolonial subjects, creating poverty and insecurity in the global South as the condition of privilege and comfort in the North. Its focus on gender-based violence and sexual exploitation acknowledges neither the role of capitalism and empire in forging modern hierarchies of gender, nor the ways in which neoliberal economies are implicated in sustaining sex work. Rather, Half the Sky’s narratives deploy the rhetoric of what Ferreira da Silva calls “engulfment.” The women and girls whose suffering lies sensationalized and exposed in its pages appear as victims of “underdeveloped” societies, the implication being that these societies still require our tutelage. For instance, while the authors ac-

2009), xxi–xxii.


90 On the neoliberal contexts of modern sex work, see Patty Kelly, Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

91 However unintentionally, this representation rehearses classically liberal apologetics for the exclusion of the “territories” of empire from the social contract. On the history of the latter, see Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal

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knowledge “the complexity of gender roles in the Islamic world,” they conclude that “the best clue to a nation’s growth and development potential is the status and role of women. This is the greatest handicap of Muslim Middle Eastern societies today, the flaw that bars them from modernity.” When “a nation’s growth and development potential” is legible only in capitalist terms, it is ironic that one of the primary engines of primitive accumulation—a gendered division of labor that devalues women’s roles—here becomes the “bar” to that modernization. But an exclusive focus on gender permits the more troubling element to fade from view: the devaluation of these women’s lives by the racializing logics of coloniality. As their juxtaposition of brothels, businesswomen, and “bubbly teenage girls” suggests, the authors appeal to an image of femininity familiar to their intended audience, an image that signals the universality of white “Western” values (i.e., the innocent ebullience of childhood and adolescence). Contact with the (racialized) “global” tarnishes this femininity, provoking moral outrage, but it also provides occasion to relieve that outrage through the re-inscription of the heteropatriarchal logic of capitalism as the engine of innocence redeemed. (In this world, of course, the categories of businesswoman and sex worker are mutually exclusive.)

The university’s selection of this book to promote the imagined community of its incoming class is a gesture both banal and ambivalent. Does it mark the entrance to adulthood of the “bubbly teenagers” who found it waiting on their pillows like a bible of liberal hopes and bad dreams? Does it signify the pain-

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72 Kristof and WuDunn, Half the Sky, 154–60.
73 On femicide, the gendered division of labor, and primitive accumulation, see Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch (New York: Autonomedia, 2014).
ful, if not necessarily traumatic, end of their innocence, as they prepare for a precarity for which, by comparison with the traumas on display in this book, they should, presumably, be grateful? Gratitude, with a dash of guilt: that, at least, seems to be the book’s recipe for social change. For both the power of its exposés and the appeal of its solutions imply the reader’s assent to a narrative about the superiority of the white world, i.e., a world (presumably) free from violence against women.94 A world of citizen-subjects, morally autonomous agents whose responsibility for “global” suffering stems from their benevolence and magnanimity, rather than from their complicity in the political and economic structures that cause suffering to proliferate.95 But having said that, I must also admit that, for somebody even modestly acquainted with the discourses of post-colonial and/or transnational feminist critique, taking down *Half the Sky* is an easy task. Too easy, I would say, when that somebody is a white, well-educated cishet male worker in the academy. At issue is neither fairness to the authors’ intentions, nor the critic’s intellectual honesty. At issue is whether the performance of such critique actually deepens the critic’s engagement with his own complicity, whether it furthers his “accountability to the person defined as nobody” or not.96 In my case, complicity includes the fact that I was a member of the committee that selected *Half the Sky* for our “First Chapter” program (even if it was not my choice). I was also involved in a project to solicit and antholo-

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94 This narrative is one according to which, in the words of M. Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, “patriarchy was irrelevant to modernity and […] ‘traditional patriarchy’ had only a single archaic source, which Western modernity automatically dissolved” (188).

95 As Rebecca Dingo argues, while “the book should be commended for offering information about women’s struggles in places that are often discounted in common, everyday reporting,” the authors “do not offer any real solutions to the problems, nor do they offer a cogent analysis of how audiences might holistically understand problems that women face—they do not network each woman’s story to wider contexts” (*Networking Arguments*, 151).

96 The phrase is from Gumbs, “Nobody Mean More,” 254.
gize responses to this book written by incoming (first-year undergraduate) students, a project that framed its work in terms of the cultivation of discursive or critical agency. So whatever affects Kristof and WuDunn’s text helped to circulate in this case, my labor is entangled with that circulation, too. The challenge is to expose my own entanglement with the whiteness of this work and its feminizing disciplinary force, in the hopes that, by disrupting its self-evident texture, we might weave this entanglement otherwise. I propose to recruit as my interlocutors in this work a couple of student writers whose responses to *Half the Sky* sustain a certain intimacy with my thinking here.

These pieces, albeit brief, position the writers in relation to the text and its narratives as subjects of complicity. In her essay, Julia contrasts her own privilege, as a “rich white girl” in the United States, to the harms that befall the women and girls in *Half the Sky*:

> After I read the story of Dina, the seventeen-year-old girl from eastern Congo who was brutally raped by a gang of Hutu militia members, I felt a little sick to my stomach, not only because of the sheer goriness and brutality of the rape, but because I had been ignorantly taking my safe walks home from school for granted.97

“Sick to my stomach.” This writer’s response performs what seems to exceed a disinterested feeling. The narrative of genocidal rape provokes a visceral interest. But if the details of the incident incite disgust, this disgust prompts the writer to pivot, to turn toward herself. Her essay relates an upsurge of dis/identification with the figure of Dina, noting how their vulnerability to patriarchal violence is inflected differently (by the racializing forces of empire) with respect to its likelihood and severity.98

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97 Excerpts are used with the author’s permission.
98 That the stories in *Half the Sky* stimulate a species of lurid pleasure is no doubt crucial to the book’s appeal. I am not claiming that this pleasure
Her “safe walks home” come to signify a fact about the writer’s standpoint, and Julia endeavors to make explicit the role that race and class play in shaping that standpoint, thereby complicating *Half the Sky*’s approach to gendered violence. In response to another moment in the book, she writes: “And yet another wave of guilt over ignorance washed over me. If I went missing, one could be sure the police and probably FBI would work tirelessly to find the rich white girl.” Here she centers the fact of her conscription to the ranks of white femininity, exposing, too, how membership in those ranks is, quite literally, policed.99 A pedagogically optimistic reading of Julia’s essay, à la Joseph Harris, would amplify the ways in which the writer signals her difference from the subjects of Kristof and WuDunn’s narrative, thereby discovering that she “has something to say.” And this discovery, as we have seen, orients the (occidental) subject toward the universal liberal public of “merely possible others” with whom one identifies, not in virtue of common conditions of embodiment, but because, like them, one possesses a singularly identifying discourse. But what interests me is how Julia’s writing, like Heather’s, attests to her embodiment of that something.

With regard to neoliberalism/neo-imperialism, the “global” functions as the other to the universal public imagined by the liberal text. As Ferreira da Silva writes, “the racial subaltern sub-

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99 For the idea of “conscription” to the racializing embodiment of whiteness, see Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 140.
ject is placed before (in front of) the ethical space inhabited by the proper national subject.”100 This placement stages an awkward confrontation that “the proper national subject” struggles to find a vocabulary and a syntax for. In describing her parents’ ability to provide for her college tuition as a “smart decision,” and describing herself as “fortunate” and “blessed,” Julia’s essay situates its author in that context wherein, as Fanon notes of “Europe […] and every so-called civilized or civilizing country,” “the family represents a piece of the nation.”101 In this context, the “ethical space” of nuclear family and nation are continuous, while the intimate dependence of both on the spoils of empire remains veiled by its own aestheticization in the commodity-form. In Julia’s essay, the predicates of empire appear obliquely, as a passive construction, when the writer describes herself as “truly spoiled.” Many of the other student responses we anthologized — mirroring, it should be said, the book’s reception in mainstream media — either celebrate reading Half the Sky as a consciousness-raising event, or take up the book’s invitation to the techno-bureaucratic ploys of policy analysis and recommendation. Unlike those responses, Julia’s essay seizes the occasion to perform a critical self-reflection. At the same time, the feelings that this reflection surfaces, rendered primarily as shame and guilt, exceed the composure proper to the critical, attaching themselves to a sentimental lexicon. Lacking the address to a specific prior fault, liberal shame or guilt appears as a melancholy in the face of structural imbalance. It arises in the gap between the shape of one’s optimism — as a typical good liberal subject, wanting to believe that everyone is rewarded according to her merits — and a world order marked by injustice and inequality.102 For young people with racial and class privi-

100 Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race, xl.
101 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 121. The white family is also that thing, per Spillers, “pledged to maintain the supremacy of race” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 219).
102 For a trenchant genealogy of liberal guilt that doesn’t dismiss its critical potential, see Julie Ellison, Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American
lege at the imperial university, being relatively insulated from the causes and consequences of the privileges they enjoy, and having been raised in an environment of highly structured permissiveness, the shock of confronting such failure can be acute. But note the ambiguity of Julia’s phrase “guilt over ignorance.” Is this guilt awakened by the failure to know a certain thing? Or by the failure to exhibit the capacity for certain kinds of thinking or awareness? Does it suggest the moral value that critical judgment holds for somebody who has been taught to attend to the particularity of her own social position? If so, this guilt testifies to an intention to compose the self through reflection on the suffering of others.

But liberal guilt frequently seeks relief for its pangs in philanthropic discourse, which no less than the scientific and naive.

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103 Alain Ehrenberg argues that the drift of capitalism during the last several decades has replaced the neurotic dynamics of guilt with the depressive dynamics of an anxiety over one’s abilities and capacities. We might extend this point to the kinds of moral capacities prized by liberalism: sympathy for the plight of the racialized and gendered other, and awareness of the political and economic determinants of one’s own position (The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age [Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010].

104 As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in Provincializing Europe, the moral vocation of the modern liberal subject depends on “the capacity […] for a generalized picture of suffering,” i.e., upon an intimacy with others’ suffering at a distance. The distance between the sufferer and the observer — “even if,” remarks Chakrabarty, “it be one’s own suffering” that one observes — permits “a certain moment of self-recognition,” in which the observer observes their capacity to “notice” the other’s suffering, and in this observation, they (the observer, not the sufferer) discover their participation in the teleology of the “abstract, general human being.” As an observer, one does not suffer, or not in the way that one does in sharing the burden of a loved one’s illness or distress. Rather, one “documents […] suffering in the interest of eventual social intervention […]” (119). See also Berlant, The Female Complaint, 35.
Rough Notes to Erasure

Tionalist discourses analyzed by Ferreira da Silva, constructs the global as the site of the non-white other’s engulfment. As another student author, Chiara Corso, writes in her response to *Half the Sky*:

A huge stumbling block for every breed of activism tends to come from an unacknowledged sense of privilege—a sort of well-meaning ethnocentrism that paralyzes altruism and keeps sympathy from evolving into empathy. We’re not “saving” the women described in *Half the Sky*. We’re cooperating with these women to better the world as a whole, and we need to do this in a way that respects different cultures instead of stripping them bare in favor of plasticized, “superior” Americanization.¹⁰⁵

Corso’s trenchant observation that “we’re not ‘saving’ the women described in *Half the Sky*” reminds us, too, of the role that a racialized gender plays in this engulfment. For the figure whom Chandra Mohanty calls “the Third-World Woman,” flitting through the pages of *Half the Sky*, appears to need saving because she functions rhetorically to assert the agency of the (presumptively) Western reader.¹⁰⁶ Such a reader is thereby invited to indulge in what Scott Richard Lyons calls the “persistent, uniquely American, and imperialist notion of recognition-from-above.”¹⁰⁷ The subaltern’s “need,” in other words, indexes

¹⁰⁷ Scott Richard Lyons, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?” *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 3 (2000): 452. As Glen Coulthard explains, “There is no mutual dependency in terms of a need or desire for recognition. In these contexts, the ‘master’—that is, the colonial state and state society—does not require recognition from the previously self-determining communities upon which its territorial, economic, and social infrastructure is
her silence, and her silence is required, lest she have something to say about her situation. Something, perhaps, that might indict the ways in which, as María Lugones insists, colonial violence has “fractured” social relations by its inscription of gender as a normative category that is always already racially marked. The “Third-World Woman” needs “saving” in order that she might become, in a future perpetually deferred by the needs of transnational capital for her lands and labor, a Western, i.e., transparently human, woman. A rehearsal of this claim in the interest of decolonial critique should not minimize or efface the very real threats everywhere (inflected by the structural positions of sexuality, race, class, and bodily ability) to cis and trans women’s bodily, social, and political autonomy and security. At the same time, the representation of need in mainstream philanthropic discourses dovetails with a picture in which the structural position of the philanthropic agent, as implicated or complicit in these threats, remains disguised. Corso’s image of “stripping [other cultures] bare” aptly suggests how philanthropic reason recruits the subaltern as a foil for the white gaze, which denudes the former of her cultural situation in a gesture that joins aestheticizing prurience to biopolitical control. And Corso’s reference to “plasticized [...] Americanization” suggests something else, too. In the figuration of the subaltern as culturally affect-

constituted. What it needs is land, labor, and resources” (“Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 [2007]: 451). Lyons and Coulthard are writing about the settler-colonial state in its relationship to Native and Indigenous peoples. Their analyses further expose just how fictive and fraught with internal contradiction this “Western” perspective is, which tucks a structure of political domination and violence behind a putative fact of geography.

108 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 749. See also Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, on “the colonial division of humanity” (189). Andrea Smith, writing about this dynamic as it plays out in the settler-colonial context, points to the rhetorical construction of “the Native as the infantile ‘citizen’ that enables the future of the white, settler citizen” (“Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 51).
able, laden with the remnants of what resists modernization, the white world encounters an indictment of its own cultural etiolation by white supremacy and the demands of capital.109 (And wouldn’t a department store mannequin, demonically animated, insist on its superiority to all those poor things of flesh and blood?)

To understand that we should be “cooperating with these women” whose struggles are limned in *Half the Sky* requires an acknowledgment that the “global” comprises sites of collective resistance to the violence of capitalism and empire.110 That this book has nothing to say about women and girls laboring in the *maquiladoras* owned or hired by North American corporations, nor about the women working for much less than the minimum wage as farm workers or domestics north of the border, etc., is no accident. (The index to *Half the Sky* contains no entry on “labor” and only a handful of references to “sweatshops.” One of these is the unqualified assertion that “sweatshops have given women a boost.”111) The text traces a careful outline around its subject, such that the only violence that counts is intimate violence (rape, forced prostitution, honor killings), and the only intimacies that count are those that reaffirm the nuclear family as the seat of liberal selfhood and mirror of the nation-state. This focus would suggest that harm against (cishet) women and

109 “*Y a bon Banania*”: A figure of endless, restless patience, the subaltern is also a figure of consumption whose bottomless appetites, like that of the grinning Senegalese on the cocoa ad cited by Fanon, provide fodder for Western laughter, pity, and disgust. Or the subaltern is the victim of barbaric cannibalism, like a bolus in the lily-white throat of civilization. Of course, this cannibalism is only that of imperial capitalism itself, with its vampiric appetite for natural resources, cheap labor, and consumer goods. See also David Marriott, “On Racial Fetishism,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 2 (May 21, 2010): 215–48.

110 Alexander notes that the “local circuits that secure transnational profits [...] are simultaneously the very places that collectivize women’s labor and provide the contexts in which women come to understand the meaning of exploitation” (*Pedagogies of Crossing*, 102).

girls persists because of the underdevelopment of explicit norms and rights around gender. It also suggests that Western societies are superior because of their explicit commitments to such rights and norms, even if the philanthropic text cannot exactly afford to be explicit about this suggestion. What results is a sentimental narrative, full of the fort-da of a rhetorical imperialism struggling to keep its own promise up in the air.  

No wonder, then, that a close reader like Julia, interpreting the text within the frame of its philanthropic logic, can conclude that although “world leaders and charities strive to give greater balance to the world in terms of social and economic equality,” there may not “ever be a time when the world will be completely equal.”

Whereas Half the Sky yields vicarious despair between the mitten of market rationality, Julia’s response sits closer to that despair’s serrated edge. The proposition that “world leaders” (e.g., the banker-backed governments of the EU and the US) and “charities” (many of them funded by these same banks) would collude in a “balance” other than that of their bottom lines is, in her words, “far-fetched.” But that distance turns fetching insofar as philanthropy’s appeal to a feminized influence depicts inequality itself as a natural order (an order inherently out of “balance,” but natural nonetheless):

112 I mean in part what Dean Spade dubs the “empty promises of ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘safety’ underwritten by settler colonialism, racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and xenophobic imprisonment, and ever-growing wealth disparity” (Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law [Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011], 41). As Spade’s work shows, such promises target populations within the Western nation-state, too. For instance, queer and trans people in the US are invited to participate in “the liberal rights-focused framework” through narratives of opportunity and safety that center “incidents of intentional, individual negative action, discrimination, and violence,” neglecting the structural causes of disproportionate harm endured by queer and trans people of color, especially those lacking economic means (102). “Rhetorical imperialism” is Scott Richard Lyon’s phrase, which he defines as “the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of the debate” (“Rhetorical Sovereignty,” 452).
I believe this inequality is necessary to connecting the world \textit{sic} at a deeper level. Perhaps the reason some girls like me are born into well-off situations is so we can reach out and help others around the world who have less money and rights than we do. Giving always leaves a better feeling in your insides than receiving.

Like Kant’s critic, seeking in nature a shape and purpose that prove elusive to the rigors of the rational understanding, the writer finds within the suffering described by philanthropic discourse a “form of purposiveness.” In place of a causal nexus that implicates the possession of material and social privilege in the deprivation that others suffer, this operation makes “inequality […] necessary to connecting the world at a deeper level.” An aesthetic logic discovers the “reason” for the privileged subject’s privilege in that subject’s capacity for an enlargement that “reach[es] out.” As in the settler-colonial discourses analyzed by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, we might say that in \textit{Half the Sky}, “virtue functions within the ontology of possession” to justify “racial and gendered maintenance and domination in the guise of good government.” If the settler-colonial state’s virtue “occurs through the imposition of sovereign will-to-be on Indigenous lands and peoples, which are perceived to lack will,” the logic of transnational philanthropy construes virtue as closing the gap between the transparent and the affectable, the sovereign and the suffering.113 But this virtue remains the property of that sovereignty. It appeals to the universalizing “will-to-be” of the power of judgment (the feeling that everyone should assent to the disinterested pleasure I take) as grounds for a promise that inequality does not foreclose the capacity for intimacy. If, for the socially engaged liberal, “giving […] leaves a better feeling in your insides than receiving,” then social and economic privilege

becomes a pure fund of “giving,” a magic lamp that, though it cannot repair inequality (being inequality’s source), can conjure something much more special. It can conjure, as an affection of the subject, the transparency of liberal humanity itself. Philanthropic reason promises to earn its keep, not by connecting to the world, but by “connecting the world,” as though its purposiveness bore the power of the universal within itself.

*critical negligence and the undercommon sense of us*

One might read the expression of such sentiments as a case of the “ontological expansiveness” that Shannon Sullivan attributes to white privilege, referring to the belief that “all cultural and social spaces are potentially available for one to inhabit.” This is the belief projected by the white body in its transactions with the world. And as a belief inhabited by the student writer, this expansiveness might be said to violate the distance and control sought by critical thought. As Hannah Arendt cautions, “critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others.” But that would be an easy reading, and a negligent one. Negligent in its liaison or entanglement with a certain suspect pedagogy. This pedagogy makes suspects of those whose labor it needs in order to stage its own relevance to that labor’s overcoming. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write in their manifesto with and against the university, with and against academic critique, this pedagogy performs its critical “opposition to the unregulated and the ignorant without acknowledging the unregulated, ignorant, unprofessional labor that goes

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114 Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 25. This expansiveness accompanies the foreclosure, in the white imaginary, of the spaces of resistance inhabited by Black women and other women of color. On this point, see McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

115 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 43.
on not opposite […] but within” it.\textsuperscript{116} The ignorant labor within me includes this neglect, which I perform in my belated critical address to somebody’s composing at the university’s behest. I perform it by making her labor the object of my charity or lack thereof. Perhaps the critical, in its academic practice, cannot escape this uncomfortable intimacy with the philanthropic, which is the love of humanity that presumes to make somebody out of nobody. For at stake in both instances is an unacknowledged debt. Somebody steals from all those nobodies (their lands, their labor, their love, their lives), so that this somebody might make themselves more like somebody. And then, giving back a sliver of what they stole, somebody steals from nobody even the fact of that theft, rewriting nobody’s claim to justice as somebody’s act of benevolence, somebody’s name on a plaque. And so the illness begets itself all over again. In the echo chamber of imperialism, the subaltern contributes their silence—which is only the ongoing erasure of their voice and their name by the machinery that produces nobodies—giving the citizen–consumer occasion to speak on the other’s behalf. And in composition’s echo chamber at the imperial university, the student without something “distinctively her own” to say, contributes their vulnerability, their vulnerability to error, to the admission of a conventional particularity that has yet to learn how to stage its own overcoming in critical abstraction and judgments of taste. Their vulnerability produces the contrast between student and teacher, novice and expert, (feminized) reader and (masculine) critic.

\textsuperscript{116} Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, \textit{The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study} (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 32. Harney and Moten write out of an allegiance and in debt to “the maroons [who] refuse to refuse professionalization, that is, to be against the university. The university will not recognize this indecision, and thus professionalization is shaped precisely by what it cannot acknowledge, its internal antagonism, its wayward labor, its surplus. Against this wayward labor it sends the critical, sends its claim that what is left beyond the critical is waste” (31–32).
These operations do not happen in parallel, by analogy, but in sequence. The one is the fractalization or folding-in-on-itself of the other.\textsuperscript{117} Their conjoint production is the source of what Robert McRuer calls “a certain pathos” specific to critique, which vitiates the promise of a truly embodied, collective, critical agency. This pathos appears in the thought that composition’s normative “straightness” (or whiteness, or cis masculinity, etc.) might be inevitable, which yields a melancholy pleasure, a “sweetness” that clings to the underside of that judgment.\textsuperscript{118} It reveals a taste, in the critic, for “the remainder, the forgotten, the hidden,” which we might call an indulgence in that quotient of experience that cannot be made explicit. A fool for this sweetness, the critic’s voice quivers on the verge of expansive address to a sovereign public that “regards itself,” in Julie Ellison’s words, as “inescapably imperial.”\textsuperscript{119} In the classroom, in the boardroom of the trustees, the somebodies discharge their duty to the trust that they keep on behalf of all those bored, worn-out, affectable I’s, who are always losing their composure and cannot be trusted to think for themselves. They are, in fact, lightning rods for the charge that keeps trust flowing through the system. Overwhelmed by the white-out of their own promises, liberalism’s institutions must harness this charge, which neither the trustees’ composure nor that of the professional critics could handle, in order to satisfy the illocutionary conditions of liberalism itself.

\textsuperscript{117} As Spivak points out, “when the [European] Woman is put outside of Philosophy by the Master subject, she is argued into that dismissal, not foreclosed as a casual rhetorical gesture. The ruses against the racial other are different” (\textit{Critique of Postcolonial Reason}, 30).

\textsuperscript{118} McRuer, \textit{Crip Theory}, 155. Likewise, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that by positing the inevitability of the suture between whiteness and white supremacy, white anti-racist critics frequently participate in a kind of “white exceptionalism” (\textit{The Future of Whiteness} [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015], 91–135).

\textsuperscript{119} Ellison, \textit{Cato’s Tears}, 60. According to Ellison, the concept of sentimentality refers back to “ongoing crises of masculinity.” In the scenes of neoclassical tragedy and latter-day liberal guilt she analyzes, (white) masculine sentimentality returns as the repressed.
However naive, the hope reposed in “connecting the world” testifies to the fraying of those networks (national, institutional, professional, familial) by which the liberal subject has been trained to sustain their sense of belonging, even as their implication in empire’s engulfment of the globe, and in its dire consequences for human and non-human life, becomes denser. And if the “typical good” subject’s composure entails the capacity to reflect on their own intents and purposes and those of others (for the sake of a typicality that feels universal and commands assent), this composure might be said to underwrite the attenuated promissory chains of transnationally networked capital itself. The vigilance of our negligence seeks to shield that promissory logic from the illusory, fictitious, impractical, and unreal.120 These are some names for how sense exceeds reference, how sensation envelops more sides of a thing than reason can tabulate, how reality is how the world feels, coming together in the gap between us, in the folded cut that conjoins us while keeping us apart. In those folds, intentionality is at once dense and incomplete, inescapable and fugitive in the same breath. But the rubrics of explicitness, which our vigilance requires, express a fantasy of escaping from the folds of intentionality altogether.

Not all ways of learning and teaching presuppose this negligence. If doing the professional academic’s work involves helping “students […] come to see themselves as the problem,” Moten and Harney celebrate a place to which the problems run, “a nonplace called the undercommons.”121 In the undercommons, they are feeling and practicing forms of agency that are not sin-

120 For Ryle, sentimentalists are “people who indulge in induced feelings without acknowledging the fictitiousness of their agitations” (The Concept of Mind, 107). Ann Douglas describes sentimentality as having “no content but its own exposure” (The Feminization of American Culture, 254). As Adela Pinch observes, the sentimental subject “appear[s] really to be feeling emotions that themselves seem hackneyed, conventional […]” (Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], 69).

121 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 29, 39.
gular but collective. They are decomposing and recomposing, sampling from and remixing, queering and cripping and translating traditions of practice rooted in the everyday emergency of embodiment as the ground of individual survival and collective power. They are “weav[ing] the fractured locus” of de/colonial agency. This agency is woven into the very texture of exploited labor, whereby the laborers weave into the social conditions of their work the conditions of its resistance. They are studying and practicing and multiplying an “enmeshment” open to the generative possibilities of the encounter. You could even call it sovereignty, if by that you meant “the ability to assert oneself renewed—in the presence of others.” Such sovereignty “is a people’s right to rebuild, its demand to exist and present its gifts to the world.” Perhaps this work “cannot be reconciled with the project of recuperating the lost voices of those who are written out” of the dominant narratives in order “to bring their humanism and strivings to light.” Perhaps it does not seek to re-inscribe the lost within the telos of their composition as full subjects of modernity. Rather than supposing that the object(ified) can be unlocked, like a jack-in-the-box, to reveal the subject trapped inside, these undercommon practices turn toward lived experience as generative of its own rigors, its own ruses for survival. These are plaited into the person, as densely a part of them as their sinews and their nerves. Surviving our socialization at the hands of parents, teachers, peers, employers, and agents of the state requires learning to sift others’ words and gestures in search of their (not infrequently baleful) purposes: in order not to get bullied or hurt, in order to receive the

122 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 749.
123 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 38.
125 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 154–59. Apposite here is Alexander Weheliye’s question, “Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed? What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency?” (Habeas Viscus, 2).
praise you’re desperate for, in order to walk home safe, in order to clear the hurdle of another day. Many of our students arrive already having had to weave out of their own experience, and in solidarity with others, a fabric strong enough to withstand these abrasive structures. Like the rigidity of gender roles, the invidious nature of class distinctions, the toxic violence of heterosexual masculinity, the deadly boring work of internalizing white supremacy. And some arrive in spite of, in defiance of, the unrelenting force of the state’s paramilitarized, carceral apparatus. Relish for the academy’s critical lessons might depend, then, on a prior estrangement from the signifiers in your behavior, from the appearance of your body, from the baggage you have been taught to regard as your specific gravity in the world. And what of the university that receives them? As Moten and Harney write, “it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can.”

From the body, which “does not stay quite composed,” or from the flesh in its intimacy with otherness, beginning with the (m)otherness from which we all emerge, I want to take my cue. But it is not mine to take, nor is this my story to tell. I intrude upon a texture the trace of which I have been taught to rub out in myself, to expunge from my senses. A cruel optimism promises that explication’s purgative thrust can leave me pure enough to merit whatever it is I desire. As Lauren Berlant writes,

a poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the story I can tell about wanting to be near x (as though x has autonomous qualities) from the activity of the emotional habitus I have constructed, as a function of having x in my

126 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 26.
life, in order to be able to project out my endurance in proximity to the complex of what $x$ seems to offer and proffer.\(^{128}\)

Cruel optimism’s “attachment to […] a problematic object” echoes Kant’s reference to what lies beyond the limits of what we can think. A horizon of explication, this concept lacks the logical identity of a substance (where a thing is equal to itself). Rather, in Kant’s words, “the object = $X$. “\(^ {129}\) Experience, like optimism, has a problematic object, an $X$ that marks the spot that cannot really be a spot for us, because all we can be sure of is that our dispositions aim somewhere else. We have as fact only these acts of loving, wanting, hoping, fearing, hating, etc., which have a direction, a history, a structure, but we do not possess the object as such. The pedagogies of patriarchal white supremacy are indescribably cruel in their efforts to fix as objects the others whose fixation might (though it never does) anchor white cishet masculinity to itself. If, othered by that fixation, somebody can still enjoy the thrills of expansiveness and manage to feel their judgments thrum with the rhythms of a purposiveness saturating their surround, that may be precisely because, as Moten suggests, an intimacy with the lived ways of Blackness teaches respect for “a physicality that is indexed to something more than the ‘merely’ physical.”\(^ {130}\) In its non-place, in the wonder of the undercommonality of sensation, feeling, and breath, this “breathed critique,” this indexical encounter in, of, and with the flesh, is not necessarily without reflection.\(^ {131}\) But as reflection, it involves, involute to the movement of abstraction, a homing, fugitive flight toward the embodied in its excess of the human

\(^{128}\) Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 25 (emphasis in the original).
\(^{129}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 232.
\(^{130}\) Moten, “Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis,” 223.
\(^{131}\) Ashon T. Crawley writes: “Such life, such breathed critique, speaks back and against this totality, makes evident the incompleteness, the incompletion, of the project of white supremacy. And this because of the open-endedness to movement, to change” (*Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017], 46).
body in its guise as singular thing, composed and strapped into place. This flight is expressive of the world’s fragility, the cut of its presence under the tongue. This is an actuality prior to possibility, a materiality prior to form, not in the sense of what form informs, but what informs form in the repeated summons to form’s constitution and its undoing. We might call this movement the ontologically deepening or implicating awareness that it is this world (not another) to which you assent, and which you discover in its deferral and refusal and prolongation of your assent. This world has futurity as its permanent, fugitive gift. As Fanon writes, “there had always been the unforeseeable.” In such a moment, somebody might even say with W.E.B. Du Bois, writing of his matriculation into Fisk University, “I leapt into this world with enthusiasm.”

As an invited ghost at the scene of composition, enthusiasm suspends purpose in favor of attention to the moment at hand, alive to the swerve, to the rhythm, always incomplete, of fervor and exhaustion, defiance and defeat, by which the hand writing or the mouth talking tries to fill the volutes of our lives. In thrall to that suspension, what occupies the page declares the writer’s flesh at once familiar and foreign (unheimlich in Freud’s words), home to a capacity unlooked for in the institutes of composure, the capacity for surprise. This capacity, and the way words can court it, puts us in mind of an etymology: ἐνθουσιάζειν, meaning “to be inspired or possessed by a god.” And if there is no god to take possession, are we clay pots filled only with dogma, ideology, bad images, the murmur of the masses or the lies of demagogues? To what does it leave us open? What lies on the other side? What beckons from that crack open to the uncanny that, misquoting Kant’s stroke of enthusiasm, we could call the


“other = X”? Call it a dodge, if you like. But this X introduces a certain frisson. Call it ex-thusiasm, to register the sense of a god’s going out, a god’s exit from the world. There remains the space for something, a shuffling of the papers on the desk, a billowing of the drapes. As David Marriott writes about Fanon, “to leap is to escape and yet remain, to continue to relate to the ‘historical’ and yet never abandon the possibility of an open-ended traveling where reaching toward the universal is to reach for oneself as other.”135 And so the critic’s optimism, perhaps, is of this Cheshire sort. For only in this all too brief felicity, which they will not name as such, can the writer find what they need to bring surprise into the world. They need the pressure of this enthusiasm against the sphincter of what our history bequeaths us, against the reflex of doubt, disbelief, even despair. How ill-prepared we are even for these breaches of felicity, and nothing preaches our finitude quite like falling in love with the first flush of inspiration. Whole lives traffic in the aftershock.
