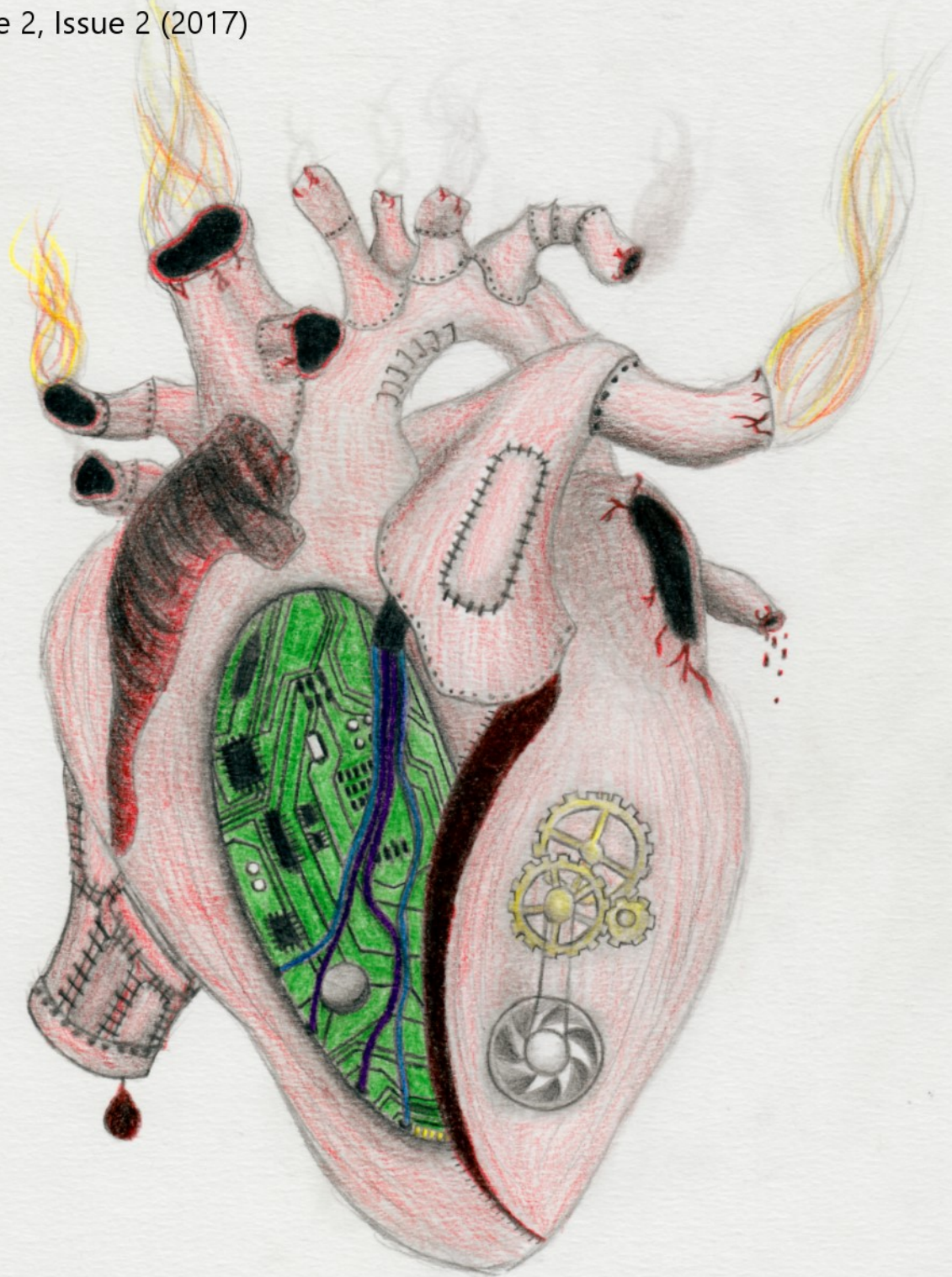


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“You Freud, Me Jane?” The Representation of Trauma and Asexuality in Hitchcock’s *Marnie*

AMBER WITSENBURG^{*}

Abstract: The title character of Hitchcock’s film Marnie (1964) has previously been interpreted as a repressed heterosexual or a closeted lesbian. However, as this paper will argue, it is more logical to read her as asexual. Interpreting her character as such, it becomes clear that the film presents a discursive framework based on compulsory sexuality. Most notably, Marnie’s lack of interest in sex is seen as a symptom of a childhood trauma, rather than as a sexual orientation in itself. This paper will therefore explore how the film links asexuality to trauma by means of the concept of repression, and thus deconstruct compulsory sexuality as the film presents it.

Keywords: Asexuality, trauma, Hitchcock, psychoanalysis

As many theorists of asexuality recognize (see for instance Flore or Kahn), there is a persistent view in contemporary Western society that asexuality is a pathological phenomenon rather than a sexual orientation like heterosexuality or homosexuality.¹ This prejudice should come as no surprise in the context of the dominant view of compulsory sexuality, which entails that

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¹ The definition of asexuality that I will be using in this paper is the one listed on the website of AVEN, which is the largest online platform for the asexual community. This definition is as follows: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” Although this definition does not go undisputed in the (academic) asexual community nor in my own work, it will serve my purpose here as it is short and relatively easy to understand.

every human being experiences sexual attraction.² Sinwell discusses how asexuality is often related to “non-normative bodies and pathology” (162) in fictional television and film. Apparently, this is the only way asexuality can take shape in the dominant discourse of compulsory sexuality as it would otherwise disrupt the very system of (reproductive) sexuality that our society is built on.

The prejudice that sees asexuality as an illness to be cured can partly be traced back to psychoanalysis. Freud relates sexual “deviancy” to childhood trauma, most notably in his influential work “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905). Here he explicates his theory of the Oedipal stage, linking sexual identity to developments in early childhood. Anything that goes “wrong” in the Oedipal stage can result in homosexuality (Freud, “Three Essays” 54) or asexuality (Freud, “Three Essays” 53).³ This view has lingered in the field of psychology as it was only “in 1973 [that] the American Psychiatric Association decided to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders” (Kahn 58), and a form of asexuality is still listed in the DSM as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD).⁴ This illustrates how asexuality still needs to be articulated outside of medical discourse in order to have the potential to be recognized as a valid sexual orientation and identity category.

In order to problematize the link that psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourse makes between asexuality and trauma, I wish to explore the relation between the two by using a case study, namely Hitchcock’s film *Marnie* (1964), which – quite explicitly – relies on Freudian psychoanalysis, making it an appropriate research object for my purpose. In contrast to previous analyses of *Marnie*, I will interpret the title character of this film as asexual, and show how the film presents a childhood trauma as the cause for her asexuality. The male character Mark, who marries her, is perplexed by Marnie’s aversion to sex and attempts to “cure” her. During their honeymoon, he uses corrective rape in order to restore her “repressed” sexual urges. When this does not work, he starts psychoanalyzing her, and actively triggers her memories of the traumatic event in her childhood. At the end of the film he succeeds in doing so, and it appears that Marnie is “cured” from her asexuality when she willingly goes home with Mark.

² The term “compulsory sexuality” is derived from Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and is often used by the asexual community. I use it here instead of Rich’s term, as it is more relevant to asexuality as a concept.

³ Freud does not theorize asexuality as we know it today here, but ascribes it to a latent incestuous desire.

⁴ DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

I will look at the film more critically by posing the following research question: How are trauma and sexual identity (un)linked in Hitchcock's film *Marnie*? After all, in a counter-reading to the film's narrative, one could argue that it is never certain that Marnie has become heterosexual, and the narrative merely exposes Mark's heteronormative frustration with the existence of asexuality.⁵ In my analysis of the film, I will therefore deconstruct the compulsory sexuality that Mark represents and show how the potential of asexuality subverts it in the story. I will first discuss Marnie's asexuality and the manifestation of her childhood trauma. Next I will elaborate on the psychoanalytic basis of the film, following the reading of the plot that the film seems to invite, and finally look at the subversive potential of asexuality to this reading.

Marnie's asexuality and trauma

Before I delve into the problems the film's basis of compulsory sexuality brings with it, I will first present a close reading that illustrates how one can interpret the character of Marnie as asexual. It becomes evident that Marnie does not experience sexual attraction when looking at parts of the dialogue – in which she explicitly addresses her lack of interest in sex – as well as in her behavior towards Mark. Of course, her refusal of one man does not necessarily mean that she is asexual – even if one would expect the male and female main characters to end up together in a Hollywood film – but her repeated statements that she has never been interested in other men either, are revealing.⁶

Having said this, as Lucretia Knapp states, "[the film is] suggesting an existence for Marnie other than a heterosexual one" (8), and as there is no

⁵ Throughout my paper I will use the terms "heteronormativity," "heteropatriarchy," and "compulsory sexuality" mostly interchangeably. Although these terms do not mean exactly the same thing (the first two also affect other sexual minorities, whereas compulsory sexuality is mostly detrimental to asexuals), they have the same oppressive effect on asexuals. As my focus is on asexuality, I will therefore use all of these terms to indicate a system in which asexuality is not acknowledged.

⁶ I should also note here that I do not mean to entirely dismiss any other interpretation of Marnie's sexual orientation, since the film's conclusion mostly leaves this open. This means that I will not have conclusive proof that the character is asexual, other than a few hints that point towards this possibility. However, my aim is merely to entertain the notion that Marnie could be asexual, in order to comment on the framework of compulsory sexuality that the film is based on. The simple fact that the film itself seems to actively steer its viewers away from the reading of Marnie as asexual, reveals much about the discursive power compulsory sexuality holds over cultural products.

evidence in the narrative that she is attracted to any other gender, an asexual orientation would be more convincing than, for instance, a lesbian one as suggested by Knapp (7). Indeed, Mark is presented as her only potential love interest, but the attention he gives her mostly leaves her cold. In fact, as the beginning of the film shows, the only reason she starts a relationship with him at all is because he blackmails her after discovering that she stole large amounts of money from a series of employers, and he eventually even forces her to marry him. The power dynamic this brings into their relationship sees Mark feeling entitled to her, while Marnie retains power in rejecting him. This leads Mark (arrogantly) to wonder why he cannot get Marnie to love him back, and he starts on a quest to find out the reason.

Indeed, when Mark notices Marnie's indifference towards him, he starts questioning her and finds out that she has never had a relationship. He says, "you know, I can't believe you, Marnie. There must've been a great many men interested in you," to which she responds, "I didn't say men weren't interested in me. I wasn't interested in them," suggesting that "them" means men in general. Her aversion to sex becomes even clearer in her warnings to Mark, such as "if you touch me again, I'll die" and "I cannot bear to be handled." Not only is Marnie not attracted to Mark, or anyone else for that matter, but she finds sex repulsive to the point where she panics when confronted with it. This idea is further expressed in Marnie's body language. In the first half of the film, a scene occurs in which Mark and Marnie find themselves alone in the stables attached to the former's mansion. They kiss, but afterward Marnie looks away with an unhappy expression on her face, suggesting her affection was merely acted. It is clear that she is not attracted to Mark, but perhaps goes along with his fantasy, hoping to escape the hold he has over her. Again, Marnie's revulsion of Mark is perhaps not representative of the way she feels about others, but her assertion that she is not interested in other men makes it seem that this could be the case after all.

What is more, after they are married, Marnie refuses to have sex with Mark on multiple occasions. During the nights of their honeymoon they sleep in separate beds, and Marnie wears – to quite a comic effect – a nightgown that covers her entire body to her ankles. This makes it all the more shocking when Mark has finally had enough of the imposed celibacy he initially gracefully accepted. One night during their honeymoon he forces himself on her, in response to her hostility towards him. At first she attempts to resist him, but when she realizes she is helpless she seems to become apathetic, and simply

stares into space. The next morning Marnie attempts suicide and Mark is only just in time to save her life. The rape scene in *Marnie* presents an instance of corrective rape, as it suggests that Mark wants to trigger Marnie's "repressed" heterosexuality by forcing her to have sex.

This scene further seems to be symbolic of the power dynamic in Marnie and Mark's relationship as well as of compulsory sexuality when faced with the disruption of asexuality. In his discussion of the film, Kyle Barrowman, who uses Jacques Lacan's notion of sexed identity, interprets the raping of Marnie as constitutive of Mark's symbolic death "as a sexed being" (15). As Derek Hook explains, following Lacan, one becomes a "sexed subject" after "tak[ing] up a relation to the phallic signifier" (79). According to Barrowman, Mark's identity is seemingly constituted by the phallus, but a type of castration occurs when Mark is continuously rejected by Marnie (15). Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek remarks, "the more he shows his power, the more his impotence is confirmed" (qtd. in Barrowman 15). As I already noted, the power Mark displays mostly consists of his blackmailing Marnie into a meek acceptance of his advances, and later into marriage. Yet, he cannot force her to become attracted to him. When his frustration with this fact culminates in rape, followed by Marnie's suicide attempt, it is clear that Mark has failed in his symbolic role of the patriarchal figure, which is defined by the phallic signifier, as he holds no real power over Marnie. Mark is unable to make Marnie desire him, and thus fails to subject her to the symbolic order of heteropatriarchy (or compulsory sexuality), which he evidently represents.

Instead of accepting his failure, however, Mark resists his symbolic death "as a sexed being" (Barrowman 15) and decides that he needs to find out the possible cause of Marnie's disinterest in sex, hoping to cure her by going to the root of what he sees as a mental disorder. It turns out that Marnie does suffer from the consequences of a childhood trauma, which Mark immediately relates to her asexuality. As Mark observes, Marnie relives her trauma whenever she is confronted with certain triggers, which invoke the same panicked response in her as when she is confronted with sex. For example, throughout the film, there are instances in which she sees the color red, causing her to have a panic attack. During these instances, the camera focuses on her panic-stricken face, while a red haze pulsates in and out of the screen. Meanwhile, the soundtrack adds suspense with quick violin music. These effects make it clear right away that the color red means something to Marnie, and finding out what that is becomes the movie's

central plot drive. The same effect occurs during thunder storms, which leave Marnie completely helpless in her panic. Other scenes that are notable in this regard are when she has nightmares, during which she speaks in her sleep in a childlike voice and suddenly with a different accent. Her evident distress indicates that this is another symptom of her trauma, and the way she speaks in her sleep links this to her childhood.

The psychoanalytic view

The way in which the film presents Marnie's trauma in these instances is reminiscent of Freud's theorization of traumatic neurosis. Following Freud, Cathy Caruth provides the following definition of trauma: "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). These intrusive phenomena can include "nightmares and repetitive actions" (Caruth 4). As I just illustrated, this is certainly true for Marnie, who has frequent panic attacks. Yet, she cannot access the original event that caused her symptoms. According to Freud, the overwhelming event that causes trauma is repressed and the trauma victim "is obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed" ("Pleasure Principle" 18, italics in original). This would then explain her initial incapability to discover what has caused her symptoms. The traumatic event that Marnie compulsively returns to is presented as a forgotten secret that needs to be uncovered.

If Marnie's asexuality is then similarly seen as a consequence of her trauma, it is clear that it does not follow the same pattern of her other symptoms. Through her lack of sexual attraction, Marnie does not relive the original event, but apparently attempts to repress it entirely. This is at least what Mark seems to think. Having observed her panicked reactions to some of her triggers, he immediately makes a link between her refusal to have sex with him and what he clearly sees as a childhood trauma. For instance, when he questions her about her refusal to let him touch her, Mark asks "what happened to you?" and "[have] you ever tried to talk about it, to a doctor or somebody who could help you?" He also starts reading books with conspicuous titles such as "sexual aberrations of the criminal female," which additionally creates a link to Marnie's criminal activities.⁷

⁷ Establishing links between criminality and the sexually nonnormative has a long tradition in fiction. I will not go into detail about this here, as I am more interested in the

Mark and Marnie even have a conversation about the former's attempts to psychoanalyze Marnie, who dismisses these as unnecessary and intrusive. She sneers, "You Freud, me Jane?", thus making the references to psychoanalysis explicit. The way in which she actively resists a Freudian interpretation of her sexual identity suggests a counter-reading to the one Mark imposes on the narrative, which I will discuss in the next section.

The references to psychoanalysis in the film invite an interpretation that follows Freud's psychoanalytic theories of both trauma and sexuality. Freud links these in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" by theorizing how repression works both for traumatic neurosis and the sexual instincts. He explains how the pleasure principle, which involves a constant striving for pleasurable experiences, becomes subverted when a source of pleasure becomes associated with pain after a traumatic experience: "[i]f they [particular instincts] then succeed, as so easily happens with the repressed sex-impulses, in fighting their way through – along circuitous routes – to a direct or a substitutive gratification, this success, which might otherwise have brought pleasure, is experienced by the ego as 'pain'" ("Pleasure Principle" 6). Applying this statement to the film, one could say that Marnie subconsciously associates sex with her trauma, and thus with pain. Evidently, this is what Mark thinks when he finally confronts Marnie's mother at the end of the film. He tells her: "Do you also know that your daughter [...] cannot stand to have a man touch her? Any man? She doesn't know why, but you do. Don't you think you owe it to her to help her to understand what happened to make her like this?" In other words, he wants Marnie's mother to reveal the origin of Marnie's trauma, so that she will know that there is indeed a reason for her "unnatural" sexuality and can move on from there.

In the end, it is not Marnie's mother who finally tells her what happened, but Marnie narrates it herself. Whilst there is a thunderstorm outside, another panic attack is triggered, and Marnie again returns to her repressed memories of the traumatic event in her childhood. Only this time she remembers exactly what happened, and apparently tells it to her mother and Mark. However, for the spectator of the film a flashback appears that shows this in detail. It turns out that Marnie's mother used to be a prostitute, and she had a sailor visiting her on the fateful night. Whilst a thunderstorm was raging outside, this sailor started comforting a young Marnie, who was frightened by it. Marnie's mother, who

connection that is made between asexuality and trauma, but this is another aspect of *Marnie* that would be worthwhile to study.

thought he was molesting her, then started attacking him, which resulted in a struggle between them. This struggle ended with Marnie killing the sailor by hitting him over the head with a poker.

I find it particularly interesting that it is indeed Marnie who has to remember and narrate the traumatic event, rather than her mother, since this is precisely what Freud suggests as a cure for trauma victims. He stresses that the patient needs to reconstruct his/her memories so that the unconscious can become conscious, and any resistance to treatment is abandoned ("Pleasure Principle" 17). Indeed, at the end of the film, it seems as if Marnie is "cured" of both her panic attacks and her asexuality, as she finally faced her trauma and, as the ending seems to suggest, can now move on. She also decides to stay with Mark, thus apparently surrendering to the dominant order of compulsory sexuality.

Unlinking trauma and sexual identity

Although the ending of *Marnie* certainly seems to invite an interpretation along these lines, Marnie suddenly having become heterosexual ultimately appears unconvincing when seeing the symptoms of Marnie's trauma as separate from her sexual orientation – and, most importantly, seeing her asexuality as a sexual orientation. Richard Allen's interpretation of the film's ending comes closer to this conclusion, as he writes in his book *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*: "Marnie's memory of the trauma cures nothing" (103), as the characters in the film misinterpret the nature of the trauma as it is narrated by Marnie. However, instead of acknowledging the possibility of asexuality, Allen comes up with an alternate interpretation of what "caused" her asexuality. Her trauma, according to him, lies not in the fact that she killed a person, "but in her mother's guilt about the fact that she emotionally abandoned Marnie," thus "reproducing within Marnie her own emotional deadness and strangling her capacity for affection" (103). Although Allen may be correct in his conviction that Marnie's asexuality cannot be cured by her reiteration of a traumatic event, he errs in his attempt to find another trauma to connect to her lack of interest in sex. If Marnie is indeed asexual, sexuality for her is not something she represses, but something that has never existed for her.

To elaborate, I should revert to Freudian psychoanalysis, which uses the notion of repression as a basis for theorizing sexuality. In his "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud states that "[w]e have come to learn [...] that every

human being is bisexual [...] and that his libido is distributed, either in a manifest or a latent fashion, over objects of both sexes" (244). In other words, he claims that everyone potentially experiences sexual attraction to both men and women, but one of these types of attraction becomes repressed, except in bisexuals. Applying this theorization to asexuals, one could argue that their libido – or more correctly, their sexuality⁸ – is entirely latent, as they do not experience sexual attraction to any gender. However, I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of (a)sexuality, which is that this type of repression does not exist at all, meaning that there is no (hetero)sexuality to be restored for asexuals or other LGBT+ groups. The consequences this has for a reading of *Marnie* are considerable, both when looking at the character of Marnie, and when focusing on the narrative of the film.

Indeed, if a sexual orientation is not based on repression, the link that is made between trauma and sexual orientation becomes nonsensical. As I noted before, Freud theorizes that the traumatized subject represses the traumatic event, as it is too overwhelming, and is then "obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed" ("Pleasure Principle" 18, italics in original). Asexuality is not something that is repeated, but merely consists of something that is not there and never was. To be sure, when theorizing sexuality as something that is based on repression, it is possible to link sexuality to trauma, as it would actually be possible to repress a sexual orientation – perhaps in response to a traumatic event. However, using my hypothesis, sexuality cannot be repressed in a similar way to a traumatic memory, and can therefore not be recovered in the manner that *Marnie's* ending suggests.

Furthermore, this reconceptualization of (a)sexuality has consequences for the film's narrative. In her chapter titled "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," Elizabeth Hanna Hanson outlines Peter Brooks's theory that desire motivates the plot of every narrative structure (350). She furthermore discusses the necessity of a narrative secret to be uncovered at the end of a story. To both of these narrative requirements, asexuality forms a drastic disruption, as it negates desire, and, as Hanson memorably states: "[w]hat asexuals hide is the fact that they have nothing to hide; their sexual secret is that they have no sexual secret. The asexual closet, then, is empty, is not even a closet" (350). Looking at asexuality this way,

⁸ In contrast to the way sexuality is theorized nowadays, Freud does not make a distinction between libido and sexuality (or sexual orientation). Many asexuals do have a libido, which illustrates that the two are largely unrelated.

Marnie's subversive potential comes to light. As I illustrated, the entire plot of this film revolves around Mark's "curing" of Marnie's asexuality and uncovering the trauma that caused her to "repress" her supposed sexual urges. However, if Marnie's sexuality is not repressed, but simply not present, there is nothing to be solved, and nothing to drive the plot.

This disruption to *Marnie's* narrative is caused by the way the very concept of asexuality threatens the structure of compulsory sexuality that the film is based on. As I have shown, Mark, who seems to represent this structure, uses psychoanalytic tactics to attempt to access that which is beyond his grasp, namely asexuality. Because of this approach, his attempts are, however, doomed from the beginning. Marnie is illegible to him in the same way trauma is illegible to the trauma victim. Although Marnie's trauma becomes accessible – or at least narratable – at the end of the film, the real secret that drives the plot, that which causes Marnie to be incapable of experiencing sexual attraction, remains a mystery. At the end of the narrative, Mark is just as clueless as he was at the beginning, as if nothing actually happened. After all, he searches for something to ascribe Marnie's lack of interest in sex to, but, like Allen, misinterprets the nature of her trauma (103) and therefore forestalls closure. Even more drastically, however, I would argue that his entire project is misguided from the start, because of his inability to acknowledge asexuality as a form of existence. Hanson refers to this failure in narrative drive as "asexual stasis" (352) which she sees as a narrative disruption that forms a "cessation of movement" (351) and thus precludes closure. Indeed, it seems that *Marnie's* narrative is characterized by a kind of stasis that is linked to what is unknown, as the unknown in *Marnie* simply does not have a discursive framework it can exist in.

My reading in some ways conforms to Barrowman's interpretation of the film, although his analysis is mostly made from Mark's perspective. As I stated earlier, the rape scene in *Marnie* constitutes Mark's symbolic death, for he is unable to trigger Marnie's heterosexual interest in him. Barrowman goes further in his analysis, as he sees Mark as a representative of the phallic order, which means "his symbolic death is the death of Man" (15). Indeed, Marnie's asexuality and Mark's failed attempts to make her heterosexual, show the failure of heteropatriarchy in imposing its norms of sexuality. In the context of this heteropatriarchy and its compulsory sexuality, asexuality becomes impossible to grasp, which is why Mark, as well as many – if not all – theorists that have written on *Marnie*, considers her lack of sexual desire a symptom of trauma. When

separating Marnie's sexuality from her trauma, however, the radical disruption of asexuality to the dominant framework of compulsory sexuality that the film presents, becomes visible. This disruption displaces sexual normativity and, while exposing the failure of heteropatriarchy, potentially produces a new type of discursive framework beyond compulsory sexuality in which asexuality can exist.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how trauma and asexuality are linked in Hitchcock's *Marnie*. It is clear that Mark sees Marnie's disinterest in sex as an unhealthy consequence of a childhood trauma, rather than a valid sexual orientation. By viewing asexuality in this light, Mark symbolizes the dominant discourse of compulsory sexuality, which is present in the film's narrative as well as in contemporary Western society. It is also evident that he oppresses Marnie, first by blackmailing her into marrying him, then by raping her, and finally by psychoanalyzing her until he is convinced that he has cured her. For him, Marnie's asexuality does not make sense, and it does not have a place in his world. He therefore attempts to bully her into subjecting herself to the (hetero)normative order that he represents. However, the only thing he achieves in doing so is demonstrating how asexuality forms such a radical disruption to this symbolic order that the latter cannot exist if the existence of asexuality is acknowledged. After all, if Mark would accept asexuality as a way of being instead of as something that should be changed, the discursive framework of compulsory (hetero)sexuality would need to be drastically altered to make the asexual subject legible – puncturing Mark's heteronormative fantasy.

Indeed, after my initial analysis of the film, I proposed an alternative way of theorizing (a)sexuality, which is not based on repression as it is in psychoanalysis. As I illustrated, the film invites a psychoanalytic reading because of its explicit references to psychoanalysis. Resisting such a reading, however, leads to more insights into the film's subversive potential. I discussed how Freud connects the repressive nature of trauma to the repression of sexuality in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," and how the character of Mark follows this interpretation. Using a theory of sexuality in which repression does not exist, I unlinked the connection between sexuality and trauma and showed how arbitrary this connection is in the first place. Interpreting the ending of *Marnie* in this way, it is obvious that the title character's reiteration of her childhood trauma does not make her heterosexual, as she simply is not heterosexual and probably never will

be. Yet this renders Marnie illegible in the film's framework of compulsory sexuality, which is why it must present her asexuality as pathological. In this way, the plot still seems to stumble towards a conclusion, even though there may not actually be one; indeed, I would say instead that the film's narrative is characterized by what Hanson terms "asexual stasis" (352). This stasis can only be acknowledged if Marnie's asexuality gets acknowledged, too: if Marnie's asexuality is not a symptom of trauma, there is nothing to "cure," either. *Marnie's* plot thus consists of Mark's heteronormative fantasy, which is easily subverted when asexuality is acknowledged as a sexual orientation.

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“Jesus Fucking Christ! It’s a Goddamn Muslim!”: Orgies of Feeling at Work in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*

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*Abstract: This article explores the melodramatic political and media dynamic in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) as an “orgy of feeling” – a process in which traumatic emotions are relocated and enhanced to ensure a sense of victimization – a concept used by Elisabeth Anker to describe how melodramatic political discourse can be effectively deployed to shape and influence collective political attitude. Bringing Anker’s theory to bear on *The Submission*, this article argues that the novel is both an accurate representation of the “affective work of melodramatic political discourse” (Anker 150) and a critical reflection on the dynamics and defects of a predominantly melodramatic society. In doing so, Waldman contributes to a counter-narrative that argues that both the melodramatic 9/11 narrative and the melodramatic cultural mode that produces this narrative are highly problematic.*

Keywords: Melodramatic political discourse, orgy of feeling, post-9/11 fiction

In *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (2014), Elisabeth Anker argues that melodrama is not just a literary or filmic genre, but also a powerful political discourse that validates and empowers (violent) state actions. In the political and media interpretation and representation of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Anker observes the formation of a melodramatic narrative that demarcates and simplifies the events, reorganizes cause and effect, and applies classic melodramatic roles of victim, villain, and hero

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in order to unite the nation in supporting the war against terror (2-3). Bringing Anker's theory to bear on (post-9/11) fiction, this paper explores melodramatic politics in Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011). Taking the novel to conceptualize Anker's melodramatic politics, I argue that *The Submission* is both an accurate representation of the "affective work of melodramatic political discourse" (Anker 150) and subsequently a critical reflection on the dynamics and defects of a predominantly melodramatic society.

As *The Submission* is often read as a depiction of how a "national tragedy brings out the best and worst in its citizens" (O'Grady), many reviews emphasize the binary opposition between the "liberal, tolerant and fair-minded" and the "bigoted, hot-headed and vengeful" in Waldman's narrative (Skidelsky). I argue that *The Submission* does not seek to bring out polarities, but rather, functions as "a work of social realism whose objective is to show something about the workings of an entire society" (Skidelsky). By simultaneously deploying and highlighting melodramatic conventions, Waldman succeeds in creating "critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 185). I proceed to the claim that Waldman critically questions the melodramatic political status quo in America and its defects. Or, put differently, Waldman's novel "reflects a much-needed understanding of American paranoia in the post-9/11 world" ("Kirkus Review"). *The Submission* takes to heart Don DeLillo's claim that "[w]riters must oppose systems, [...] write against power, [...] oppose whatever power tries to impose on us" (Bou and Thoret 90-95), and in doing so contributes to a counter-narrative.

In what follows, I briefly define Anker's melodramatic politics, after which I analyze four characters in Waldman's novel to illustrate the workings of melodrama, stressing the power melodramatic political discourse exercises over groups and individuals that are part of a society that is programmed by, and thus is receptive to, melodramatic narratives.

Melodrama: A politics

While conventional definitions describe melodrama as a sentimental artistic genre, Anker argues that melodrama has grown into an extremely persuasive narrative technique that has been increasingly used in United States politics since the Second World War. Its usage reached new heights in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, when mainstream politics and media deployed melodramatic narrative conventions to propagate violent military

retaliation and expansion of state power. According to Anker, melodrama helped communicate and encourage that these actions were just and necessary to carry out what it claimed as the nation's mission: to fight for (inter)national freedom in the war against terror (4-6).

Melodramatic political discourse deploys familiar melodramatic narrative conventions to portray political events and crises. Through the use of heightened emotional language, grand gestures, and visual spectacle, melodramatic political discourse aims to unite the nation by dramatizing and personalizing large-scale events and actions. Featuring moral polarities in a Manichean battle for justice, melodramatic political discourse asserts the goodness and innocence of the nation, and locates evil in its political opposition. It likens suffering and vulnerability with virtue and innocence, and draws a motive and justification for action from this grief. The radical (violent) acts of state are then presented as the necessary heroism that will eradicate evil and restore (individual) freedom (Anker 4-6). Melodramatic political discourse decontextualizes and simplifies complex events, (re)shapes and demarcates the narrative, and (re)casts the (roles of) characters within that narrative. It both creates categories of and reinforces categorization in (abridged) concepts of good and evil, and stereotypes and segregates persons and groups involved (Anker 4-6).

To explain the "dynamic and affective work of melodramatic political discourse" (150) in the aftermath of 9/11, Anker furthermore uses "orgies of feeling" to describe how melodramatic political discourse could be effectively deployed. A term introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche, an orgy of feeling indicates a process in which initially confusing and traumatic emotions are relocated and enhanced to produce a stronger sense of victimization. Paradoxically, victimization is a desirable condition, owing to a fundamental connection between suffering and action, between victimhood and heroism. Linda Williams explains that, in melodrama, "to suffer innocently, to be the victim of abusive power, is to gain moral authority, to become a kind of hero" (83). This principle is based in the can-do spirit and self-made quality of the American hero, who can overthrow the evil that causes his suffering through "self-determination and inner goodness" (Anker 80). As melodrama equates grief with innocence, suffering both confirms the innocence of the victim, and justifies any action the hero undertakes. Consequently, suffering absolves the hero of any responsibility for that suffering, and ensures that anything he undertakes to rid himself from suffering is virtuous and noble, giving him what Williams calls "the paradoxical power of the victim"

(83). Thus victimization becomes the incentive, necessity, and validation for action: it is both the mourned and, perversely, desired condition for heroism (Anker 2-3).

Furthermore, orgies of feeling allocate the source of suffering to an external cause, thereby relieving the victim of responsibility for that suffering. Anker explains that by "enfolding pain within a new narrative, orgies of feeling explain where the pain [...] now comes from, and aim to 'liberate' the sufferer from its binds" (150). Thus connecting pain with blame, orgies of feeling appear to offer a solution as to how suffering can be managed and controlled. They suggest that by removing the source of suffering, the victim will be relieved of its suffering, can overcome unfreedom, and regain power. Anker contends, "orgies of feeling suggested that once terrorism is punished [...] individuals' [...] foundering agency will be eradicated and their rightful freedom restored" (151). In the melodramatic narrative of 9/11, terrorism is the external source of all suffering that must be destroyed. Simultaneously, it is the fear of terrorism that is continually reinvented, reinforced, and intensified to ensure continued victimization. In other words: in the orgy of feeling of 9/11, terror "becomes the singular act of injury that orgiastically overwhelms and displaces experiences of fear and unfreedom" (Anker 150). It is also upon this "act of injury" that *The Submission's* orgy of feeling builds.

Telling the story of an American Muslim who anonymously wins the contest for the design of the 9/11 memorial, Waldman portrays the endeavors of politics, media, and individuals in a melodramatic battle for justice and pursuit of power. The novel incorporates the confused, tense mood and resonances of fear in the aftermath of 9/11, showing how these affects are cultivated to renew, relive, and intensify the victimization and suffering of Americans. With the discovery of Mohammad Khan's Islamic background, the novel unfolds in an orgy of feeling in which media, politics, and individuals melodramatically "relocate" the fear of terrorism "onto a new scene" (Anker 150), and, I argue, the blame onto a new villain.

The orgy of feeling at work in *The Submission*

"Jesus fucking Christ! It's a goddamn Muslim!" (Waldman 19). The moment Khan's name comes out of the memorial jury's envelope, this hysterical remark incites *The Submission's* orgy of feeling. Due to the fact that the melodramatic politics of "September 11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category" that

clusters “persons who are or appear ‘Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim’” (Anker 58), Khan’s name alone is reason for the memorial design jury to make a direct connection between him and the terrorists of 9/11. In line with the workings of orgies of feeling, Khan becomes the personification of a new but linked “crisis” that causes both renewal and fortification of the initial injury. Being Muslim, Khan reawakens and worsens the fear and insecurity experienced as a result of the attacks, thus reinforcing victimization. A jury member explicitly expresses this renewal of fear: “people are afraid. Two years on we still don’t know whether we’re up against a handful of zealots who got lucky, or a global conspiracy of a billion Muslims who hate the West, even if they live in it” (Waldman 25). The heated spill of emotions that follows the announcement of Khan’s name conveys what apparently is the only possible conclusion of the situation: that a Muslim, even an American one, thoroughly “vet[ted] [by security consultants] for suitability” (Waldman 24), winning the competition poses an insurmountable problem. Even Claire Burwell, a 9/11 widow who represents the families of the victims, and the contesting voice, admits: “Look, I’m not pretending this isn’t a surprise” (Waldman 22). Despite Burwell’s initial loyalty to the design and indifference about the religion of the designer, the committee are convinced that they have a crisis on their hands.

As the novel progresses, the orgy of feeling unfolds. Media and politics catch hold of the news, incessantly connecting new developments and information about Khan to terrorism. Thus intensifying and increasing the original suffering to ensure a state of victimization, the deployment of melodramatic political discourse strengthens Khan’s role as the villain, as a threat to America’s freedom, peace, and innocence. For instance, a business trip to Kabul is interpreted as proof that Khan is sympathetic towards jihadist ideology, because “[h]e made a threat against the [American] embassy there,” even though “[t]he ‘threat’ was an offhand comment Mo had made” (Waldman 205). Also, the so-called discovery that the design itself – initially considered an uninteresting side issue and mentioned as just “some sort of garden” (Waldman 118) – is an “Islamic garden” (Waldman 215), assumed to secretly represent a Muslim paradise for martyrs, is presented as a new crisis. Finally, the fact that Khan refuses to refute the assumptions about his design or his motives for entering the competition, redoubles the speculations and confirms both his villainy and threat to the nation.

These “crises” cause nationwide victimization and provide incentive to the several “battles” that are fought by different characters in order to acquire a sense

of control or to gain power. Though there are more examples of the dynamics of orgies of feeling in the novel, I focus on three characters that explicitly act according to these mechanisms: Governor Geraldine Bitman, Sean Gallagher, and Alyssa Spier. In addition, I demonstrate the power of melodramatic political discourse through the transformation of Claire Burwell.

In a literal representation of melodramatic politics, Governor Geraldine Bitman, the novel's politician, demonstrates how orgies of feeling enhance (her) political power. Appealing to the fear of an "Islamist threat" (Waldman 131), she draws the matter of her (supposed) concern about Islamic misogyny into the discussion. Bitman claims to be a feminist – or at least to be concerned about "women being oppressed" (Waldman 132). Individually, Khan has nothing to do with the suppression of women: Bitman is well aware of this fact, declaring privately to Paul Rubin, chair of the memorial committee, that "there is no reason to think [Mr. Khan] is [a threat]" (Waldman 130), but argues that "[p]eople need someone to blame at a time like this" (Waldman 132). This logic is an exact illustration of melodramatic political discourse: Bitman turns Khan into a scapegoat, which corresponds with the way orgies of feeling locate the cause of suffering in a concrete, blamable, external entity in order to feign control and gain power. True to generalizing melodramatic genre conventions, Bitman fuses Khan, Islam, terrorism, and threats to women's rights into one cohesive crisis, thereby fuelling the orgy of feeling:

[Khan's] finding a way to victory in this anonymous competition reminds us that radical Islamists could use our democratic institutions and our openness to advance their own agenda. [...] As a woman, I can't stay quiet about that danger, given that if Islamists were to take power here, it is women who would bear the brunt of our lost freedoms. (Waldman 130)

From here on, Bitman presents herself as the figure of authority that will boldly protect her people against a "danger" she herself declares. She manipulates the situation to her own advantage by increasing existing fear and implying new suffering, and then takes this opportunity to convince the public that she will prevent and overcome that suffering if they allow her to take charge. As Anker argues, "[i]n [...] politics, [...] powerful affects [...] may seem to offer political subjects the ability to [...] overcome [...] suffering and ineffectiveness"

(150). Managing crises and appearing to understand the meaning of suffering “is a search for *power*” (Anker 156), and in Bitman’s case, an increase of power: “Every time she had gone on the offensive against Khan, she had risen in the polls. He was her oxygen” (Waldman 320). Bitman successfully deploys melodramatic political discourse, illustrating the process of orgies of feeling. “She wasn’t rewriting the rules,” as Rubin realizes, but merely uses the threat of nationwide victimization to reach her own political goal: “[s]he wanted to be president” (Waldman 131).

Another character reliant on the orgiastic incentive of victimization is Sean Gallagher, who is represented as the novel’s ultimate melodramatic hero: the average American man risen to heroic ranks through his can-do mentality (Anker 81). Sean has lost a brother in the 9/11 attacks, a loss explicitly said to give new meaning to his life, which connects to the melodramatic “American victim-hero” (Anker 52) emerging from his injuries. Anker explains that, in melodrama, heroes – typically men – are “average people [...] who happened to find themselves in dramatic situations and who develop self-reliance by learning to trust their inner strength” (81). Sean’s existence, up to the attacks, “had been a herky-jerky improvisation,” and he is described as “a man lurching wildly through the white space of adult life” (Waldman 71). As a junior college dropout, unlucky in love, and with an unsuccessful “handyman business” (Waldman 71), Sean struggles to cope with a drinking problem and his low self-esteem. The attacks trigger an unprecedented determination in Sean, who, possessed by a tireless purpose to “[p]ut his hands to good use” (Waldman 72), helps clear the debris of the fallen towers and gains slight importance through his activities in the Memorial Support Committee. It is as though the attacks and the death of his brother cause Sean to “listen to his inner virtue” (Anker 81). Rejecting “the constraints of social orthodoxy” (Anker 81), “[h]is ‘trouble with authority,’ as parents and teachers had always termed it, had become an official advantage” (Waldman 72).

However, in the years that have passed since the attacks, Sean is “left of the memorial duty” (Waldman 72), and his heroic reputation fades. The news of Khan breathes new life into Sean’s role as a hero: “A Muslim gaining control of the memorial was the worst possible thing that could happen – and exactly the rudder Sean, lately lacking one, needed. Catastrophe, he had learned, summoned his best self. In its absence he faltered” (Waldman 71). Sean’s paradoxical desire for a crisis in order to reclaim his position as hero accurately illustrates the

dynamic of the orgy of feeling in which to be or to feel victimized are the conditions for action.

Action, in the Gallaghers' lexicon, is melodramatically understood as a battle, as war. Fittingly, Sean's father claims: "Yes, we plan to fight this until our last breath. No, this is not Islamophobia. Because phobia means fear and I'm not afraid of them. [...] [T]hey can come find me" (Waldman 70). Sean and his family think in shallow, categorized terms of good and evil, and they confirm that "melodramatic subjects externalize all responsibility for [the] problem to an evil Other" (Anker 83). That Khan is the evil Other is due to the earlier mentioned melodramatic generalization of all "persons who appear Middle Eastern" (Anker 58) as terrorists: "[t]hey killed my son. [...] And I don't want one of their names over his grave" (Waldman 70). Corresponding with the dynamics of the orgy of feeling, the family are convinced that in order to regain freedom and to overcome suffering, the evil Other must be eradicated, and thus Sean must act "to remove the villain" (Anker 83). His mother, Eileen, begs him: "[p]lease, Sean, don't let this come to be" (Waldman 152). And so, "[a] plan was up to him" (Waldman 152).

Consequently, Sean sets to work. Melodramatically rousing the public with his action-packed speeches – "[w]ords aren't the way to fight this" (Waldman 169) – he practices what he preaches by organizing a protest rally and initiating a sequence of "liberating" scarf-pulling in the name of freedom. In doing so, the portrayal of Sean and his family emphasizes melodrama's anti-intellectualist sentimentalizing of the events. According to Judith Butler, melodramatic political discourse promotes anti-intellectualism; it leaves no room for a situation in which "critical discourse and public debate on the [reasons and] meaning of [the] events" can exist alongside "a full measure of grief for [the] losses" (Butler xiii-xiv).¹ Suffering becomes the reason to avoid critical debate: within the melodramatic narrative, the phrase "there is no excuse for September 11" (Butler 2-3) becomes something of a creed – one that tolerates no question or contradiction. Butler's analysis is illustrated by the Gallaghers; in particular Sean's behavior is exemplary for the anti-intellectualism she describes. When the selection of the winner does not develop to his liking, Rubin tells him to let go of his irrational anger. However, Sean continues to lose his temper in his demand for

¹ Butler does not use the term melodrama, but describes a similar narrative framework in which the "violence we suffered [...] sustain[ed] the affective structure in which we are, on the one hand, victimized and, on the other, engaged in a righteous cause of rooting out terror" (5-6).

"rights": "[w]hat about my rights? The families' rights? The victims' rights?" – to which Paul replies: "[e]motions are not legal rights" (Waldman 165). This sets off Sean completely: "I tell you this is tearing up my parents and you lecture me about legal rights?" (Waldman 165), affirming that grief is a "means by which to stifle any serious [...] discussion" (Butler 3). His conversation with Rubin shows that Sean is the true embodiment of the melodramatic hero whose "[h]eart is the sure compass that [...] guides toward truth" (Grimsted qtd. in Anker 81). Melodrama's anti-intellectualist nature is thus defined by the belief that not fact, but "emotional sensibility is the real criterion" (Grimsted qtd. in Anker 81) for justice.

This conviction is also emphasized in the work and character of Alyssa Spier, the relentless and exasperating reporter for the sensational, right-wing tabloid *The New York Post*. Without much interest in facts, objectivity, or background – "[a] tabby all the way" – Spier writes to shock. She is interested in sentimental and dramatic gestures, and is described as thrilled by "unearthing a scrap of news" and "playing it as a fact" (Waldman 76). True to melodramatic conventions, Spier's style is sensational, not rational, and her alliterating captions ("MYSTERY MUSLIM MEMORIAL MESS" [Waldman 65]) and hollow prose ("The problem with Islam is Islam" [Waldman 136]) underline her melodramatic reporting.

Arguably, it is Spier who is the greatest facilitator of the orgy of feeling. Her "melodramatic tactics" continually reopen "the nation's wounds" (Anker 38), sustaining the victimization that validates the eradication of the evil Other who imposes injustice onto society. She unveils that a Muslim has won the competition with her "Mystery Muslim scoop" (Waldman 73), writes polarizing articles about Islam, and incessantly reorganizes and manipulates information about Khan to stereotype him as a dangerous Muslim, a threat to the nation. True to melodramatic political discourse, Spier personalizes the issue as she focuses on the designer, not the design – incidentally taking the complete opposite approach to art from Burwell's deceased husband, who believes one should "look at the creation, not the creator" (Waldman 349). She is not interested in reason, which is made clear when Khan gives a press conference to explain his design: "[t]he note-taking slowed, the room deflated, the reporters pranced in place. No one cared about the design, Alyssa thought. Didn't he get that?" (Waldman 118). The design's meaning only becomes of interest to her when she can reinterpret it

as an Islamic "VICTORY GARDEN!" (Waldman 149) that aligns with Khan's racial profile as a Muslim.

Spier directs the narrative, and manages to influence Burwell, the moderate voice on the memorial committee, confirming that the melodramatic media indeed "harbor particular power for shaping experiences of the 9/11 events" (Anker 38). Spier demarcates, decontextualizes, and abstracts the events, and "cements [them] within a narrative, a truth, and a moral polarity" (Anker 63). She boils down the discussion about Khan to an ethical question with just two options for an answer (for or against Khan), repeating the popular angle of the 9/11 narrative that also offered the binary decision between good or evil through two completely opposed categories (the virtuous victim-hero America and its villainous attacker). Fittingly, Spier positions Burwell's initial support for Khan as treason: "[i]f, metaphorically, speaking, she's sleeping with the enemy, whose side is she on?" (Anker 140). This taps into the binarism that was also present in President Bush's "Address to Congress" of 20 September 2001, in which he declared: "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("President Bush"). Identifying Khan as a "political foe," Spier places him "outside of what is properly inside 'America'" (Anker 99). On the hunt for information to confirm this claim, she is unsuccessful when she visits his business partner and friend Thomas Kroll to uncover "Khan's backstabbing, his compromising of [...] this all-American family," but finds out she only "prompts Kroll to rally to Khan's defense" (Waldman 123). With no material here for her story, the incident underlines her one-sided reporting and the biased nature of melodramatic political discourse in general.

Although melodramatic politics presents itself as unbiased, equal, inclusive, and non-racist, minorities are only acknowledged if they explicitly demonstrate their position according to the conventions of melodrama, or, in the words of Anker, if they give evidence of a "civic nationalism that binds Americans to the nation [...] through [...] the shared experience of injury" (58). As a Muslim submission clearly does not align with nationalist "woundedness" (Anker 58), Khan is placed outside of what is considered truly American. Khan is excluded from this category of victims because, as a Muslim, he is "more similar to terrorists than to Americans" (Anker 58). Spier's accusation that Khan "offended so many Americans" by "entering the competition and insisting on [his] right to win" (Waldman 334), exemplifies this. "I am an American, too," Khan has to remind her: "I have the same rights as every other American" (Waldman 334-35).

Subsequently, the main problem Khan faces throughout the novel is not just the initial connection between himself and the terrorists, but having to “explain himself”; to overtly convince his fellow citizens of his good intentions and innocence, and being condemned by society at large at his refusal to do so. Declining to cooperate with a lawyer’s strategy to “humanize [him]. No, Americanize [him]” (Waldman 267), Khan thus refuses to “explicitly profess [his] intense love of the nation, demonstrate how [he] share[s] in its woundedness,” to “repetitively engage in exaggerated performances of patriotism” (Anker 58).

Furthermore, Khan’s own suffering, or “[t]he strain [...], which had built by the week, then the day, now seemed to intensify by the hour” (Waldman 266), is not regarded as suffering. The pain and humiliation Khan endures as a result of his scrutiny by melodramatic political discourse, is regarded as inferior to the suffering that he, as the villain, causes the victims. This is due to a development of exclusivism in the 9/11 melodramatic political discourse, in which suffering is “legible only if it is effected by the 9/11 attacks, only if one is wounded by one’s role as a victim of terrorism, only if suffering can be redressed by ‘punishment’ of the evildoers through the war on terror” (Anker 59). As Khan’s suffering is not directly caused by terror, he is unable to participate in the victimization “that defines nationhood” (Anker 58).

This bent understanding of equality is exposed throughout the novel, which thus lays bare the problematic development of exclusivism or selective inclusivism in American culture (Anker 58-59). Rubin echoes this development when he “wonder[s] what the families would have to say about their precious democratic process now [a Muslim has won]” (Waldman 24). In other words, democracy and equality are make-believe; when the outcome does not suit the families they can easily be persuaded to change the rules, and thereby abandon the democratic beliefs they, as Americans, uphold so fervently. This can be found, straightforwardly, in Sean’s understanding of democracy: “you wanted a competition, a democratic exercise everyone could participate in. And so everyone did,” says Rubin; to which Sean replies: “[t]hat’s not who we meant by everyone” (Waldman 164).

The cultivation of exclusivism can also be recognized in Claire Burwell’s change of heart. As the story unravels, and the orgy of feeling accumulates, Burwell’s determined support of both Khan and his design begins to wane. The continuous stream of insinuations made about Khan’s “real” motive behind the design, and his increasing “villainy,” finally get a hold on Burwell. From “his

greatest champion" (Shamsie) who is fully supportive of the design, Burwell shifts to being just as prejudiced as the rest of the opposition, asking Khan to withdraw his design without clear or rational reasons besides her personal concerns and sentiments. Her firm and democratic initial reaction – "So [...] you propose [...] we squash it, when the majority of us believed it to be the best design? That's a total betrayal of what this country means, what it stands for" (Waldman 26) – is in sharp contrast with her request for withdrawal at the end of the novel: "[w]e do not want to take anything from Mr. Khan. [...] We simply think a memorial other than the Garden [...] would be better for the families of the dead, [...] for the country" (Waldman 351). This corresponds to melodrama's assumption that "what [is] good for the hero [is] a universal good" (Anker 82) and underlines melodrama's one-sided understanding of democracy.

In addition to upholding a biased democracy, Anker underlines melodramatic political discourse's tendency to shape and shift the perspective of the narrative. Butler, too, contends that the 9/11 narrative is a "first-person [...] point of view," which centers the U.S. as the protagonist or "narrative 'I'" (6). The story starts with the planes crashing into the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 and ends with President Bush's "mission accomplished" speech on 1 May 2003 (Butler 6). Similarly to Butler, Anker argues that "starting the narrative with the plane flying into the tower means that everything that comes beforehand is not part of the story. [...] The narrative thus [...] circumscribes broader accountability for the actions" (51). Consequently, the melodramatic narrative of 9/11 did not reflect on American responsibilities in a larger global setting, did not question America's actions and their consequences. Instead, it brought about a sensational, one-sided, anti-intellectualist representation of events in which reality is substituted with familiar legends, suffering absolves people from accountability, and grief becomes the validation for avoiding critical debate (Anker 4-6). With Burwell's transformation, a similar development takes place in the novel.

In accordance with Butler's claim that "a narrative form emerges to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability" (7), the summit of melodrama in the novel is not Spier's sensational reporting, nor the Gallaghers' conservatism, nor Bitman's politics, but Burwell's shifting opinion. She announces: "Mr. Khan says he shouldn't have to say what the Garden is, or where it came from, and he's right. [...] But I want him to" (Waldman 357). Contrary to Butler's call to a "decentering of the narrative 'I'" (Butler 6) in 9/11 discourse, Burwell yields to the

melodramatic, first-person narrative. With this change of heart, Waldman displays exactly the power and influence of the melodramatic narrative that Butler and Anker refer to. Burwell yields to melodrama's (re)arrangement of facts and its way of molding emotions, and loses all perspective but her own. Spellbound by melodrama's power to reshape the narrative, Burwell thus becomes entangled in precisely the anti-intellectualism she renounces at the beginning of the novel.

Thus, by deploying melodramatic political discourse to shape her characters and plot, Waldman has managed to create a narrative that "felt so real" that many readers "forgot it was fiction" ("The Submission"). Waldman uses a fictional incident to imitate the reality in which it unfolds. Hutcheon argues that such a reconstruction of reality is a form of parody, which manifests (itself) as "repetition with critical distance [...] at the very heart of similarity" (185). As *The Submission* – a "narrative of dominant culture" – questions the system it both "work[s] within and use[s]" (Hume 117), it offers a birds-eye perspective of the melodramatic political status quo and the orgy of feeling as its underlying mechanism. The novel encourages the reader to reflect on the melodramatic conventions it both imitates and consists of. Hume argues that this form of parody contributes to a counter-narrative because it "invites us to ponder the signifying practices of both the original constructs and their [...] avatars" (117). In other words, it attends to the urgency to "reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from [...] unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways," so that we can "start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community" (Butler xii).

Conclusion

By depicting the exploitation of democratic values, Waldman exposes the dynamics of a predominantly melodramatic cultural mode. She illustrates not just how a, supposedly democratic, competition becomes biased by prejudice and affect as the result of the melodramatic political discourse, but also demonstrates how the terror and confusion experienced on 9/11 are cultivated to renew, relive, and intensify the victimization of Americans. Thereby, *The Submission* functions as a portrayal of Anker's orgy of feeling, exposing a reality that functions according to its dynamics: a civilization built on crisis upon crisis – whether real or invented – and upon reactions to those crises, which in turn lead to new crises, and

ultimately to a situation in which “we deprive ourselves of the [...] resources we need to imagine and practice another future, one that will move beyond the current cycle of revenge” (Butler 10). Waldman’s novel shows that melodrama, and the orgy of feeling as its “mechanism of distribution” (Butler xii), contrary to what it promises, does not solve problems, does not unite, but only leads to more violence, more grief, deeper polarization, and less tolerance. *The Submission* confronts the reader with some of the many political and social practices that, as Anker argues, developed as a result of the dynamics of 9/11 melodrama and melodrama as a cultural mode: anti-intellectualism, depoliticization and decontextualization, anti-Islamism, further polarization of Americans, and a dramatization of facts.

The Submission, then, provides insight into the conventions of 9/11 melodrama and puts them on display. The novel challenges the reader to consider the beliefs and morals that fuel melodramatic dynamics, and to critically reflect on the impact and effect of 9/11 melodrama. By challenging what is mainstream, and by providing a critical view on the interpretation of the events, Waldman contributes to a counter-narrative that shows both the melodramatic 9/11 narrative and the melodramatic cultural mode that produces this narrative to be highly problematic. Thus *The Submission* works, as Arin Keeble puts it, “against the unilateralism of the Bush Doctrine, and attempts to reanimate some of the nuance, complexity, and conflict that was overshadowed by Manichean and clash-of-civilizations [or, in other words, melodramatic] discourse” (177). Waldman’s reverberation of melodrama is not, as many reviews have claimed, a question of choosing sides, but a mirror to the melodramatic cultural and political climate in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Ultimately, then, *The Submission* is not concerned with what 9/11 *did* to America, but “with what it revealed about all of us—granting us the opportunity to look at ourselves anew” (“The Terror Dream”).

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Who Run the World? Feminism and Commodification in Beyoncé's Star Text

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Abstract: Grounded in the field of celebrity studies and analyzed through an intersectional lens, this paper untangles the seemingly incongruent discursive knot that constitutes Beyoncé's feminist identity. I claim that the divergent discourses circulating through her star text tell us something about the state of feminism today. As such, she does not merely display the tension within her own star text, but, as celebrity feminists perform do, also the tension within the (post-)feminist debate in American society.

Keywords: Celebrity feminism, commodification, celebrity culture, Beyoncé

"You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation."
– Beyoncé, "Formation" (2016)

When Beyoncé appeared in front of an enormous screen reading "FEMINIST" during the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, the singer became a focal point for critique on the celebrification of feminism. Criticasters of "Beyoncé feminism" emphasize the inconsistencies and oppositional discourses within her *star text*. While Beyoncé presents herself as a strong, independent, Black¹ woman, she is, for example, also deeply invested in

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¹ Black and White are capitalized throughout this article to signify use for analytical purposes. The terms in this context relate to lived experiences, without condoning

sexual (self-)objectification, and (heterosexual) marital life and motherhood. Moreover, Beyoncé's intentions are questioned because of the commercial aims of her celebrity status. The discussions about Beyoncé are similar to more abstract discussions about feminism. Questions about (hetero)sexuality, motherhood, and consumerism are still hotly debated in both the theory and practice of feminism.

Although an extreme linkage between Beyoncé and feminism is reductionist to both ends and depoliticizes the gender issues at stake, Beyoncé's claim on the feminist label nevertheless caused people to consider the meaning of gendered identities within dominant power structures in which women are marginalized. A discourse of popular feminism gained momentum, void of rigid boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In my personal understanding of feminism, which mostly relies on the writings of bell hooks, in particular her *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), feminism is per definition an active moment that fights oppression in all its forms.² In this article I analyze what Beyoncé's star text says about the commodification of feminist and anti-racist narratives. In what ways does her star text escape the neoliberal commodification of these possibly transgressive narratives?

With *star text* I refer to Richard Dyer's explanation of the concept in his books *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986). A star text consists of all (commodified) artifacts that relate to the public persona of a celebrity. Star texts dwell in various types of media and they are always both extensive and intertextual in their composition (Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* 3). In other words: the star text is situated in various forms – not just in performances, lyrics, and music videos, but also in interviews, photo shoots, social media posts, and so on. Moreover, the star text is always contradictory and unstable because of its complex relation to the society in which it circulates.

Grounded in the field of celebrity studies and feminist theory, the present article untangles some of Beyoncé's recent articulations of feminism and anti-racism. The articulations of feminism in Beyoncé's star text serve as a cipher to grapple with the current context of US, and in general Western, (public) feminist debates. I contend that, following Rosalind Gill's assessment of the role of neoliberalism in gendered identities in "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and

biological determinist or essentialist understandings of identity. This reading is performed from a positionality of a Western European White perspective.

² Oppression takes shape at the crossing points of social categories within identity. This means that an intersectional outlook on oppression is indispensable for feminism. Let it be clear that the separate use of the terms feminism and anti-racism in this article is used for the sake of clarity but that since the two are thoroughly intertwined, anti-racism is always implied when the term feminism is used.

Postfeminist Times" (2008), scrutinized hyper-individual women, like the female celebrity, can be considered quintessential neoliberal subjects and therefore require more academic consideration when questions of gender politics resonate in the public realm in which they are so visibly positioned. I claim that for the past fifteen years, Beyoncé's star text has offered a microcosm in which articulations of womanhood, femininity, and race are continuously reconfigured in a codependent relation to neoliberalism and the (post-)feminist/race debate in US-American society. Beyoncé here serves as a focal point to lay out what Lawrence Grossberg calls a radically contextualist political history of the present (2). In extension, my analysis of Beyoncé's feminism provides a case study of the paradox of feminism in popular culture: pop culture perpetuates a highly individualized and meritocratic image of feminism, but it simultaneously encourages audiences to question the inequality at the base of this meritocratic world view from a feminist perspective.

Beyoncé's feminist manifesto

During the MTV VMAs 2014, Beyoncé performed a medley of her album *Beyoncé* (2014). In this performance, her song "***Flawless" is introduced with the sample of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous Ted Talk on feminism displayed on a huge screen:

We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings
 In the way that boys are
 We teach girls to shrink themselves
 To make themselves smaller
 We say to girls,
 You can have ambition
 But not too much
 You should aim to be successful
 But not too successful
 Otherwise you will threaten the man.
 Feminist: the person who believes in the social,
 Political, and economic equality of the sexes

Beyoncé problematizes a narrow understanding of female sexuality as in contrast to male sexuality. Moreover, she defies the notion that female ambition should be non-threatening. The central pointers of Beyoncé's feminism as presented here are sexual freedom and ambition for all.

There is nonetheless a difference between liking sex and performing sex, which has formed a crucial axis of the feminist debate since the 1960s and 1970s. Beyoncé's focus on sexual equality grounds her performance in a sex-positive discourse that might be read as feminist yet it is spread in a media environment that is decidedly post-feminist. Post-feminists see feminism as decisively aged and redundant (McRobbie 255). In this view, gender equality is already achieved and feminism is no longer vital: "Women, according to post-feminists, are able to make their choices out of free will" (McRobbie 259). In this performance, Beyoncé demands recognition for female desire and pleasure within a feminist framework, yet the self-objectifying dance routines of Beyoncé and her dancers do not seem to differ much from post-feminist media outlets in which women are continually shown to be sexual objects – though of their own choice.

Post-feminism and neoliberalism, the context in which Beyoncé's star text resides, share an insistence on meritocracy. When related to celebrity, post-feminist and neoliberal rhetoric tend to equate the possibility of individual female success with gender equality. The articulation of personal female success as proof for the viability of the meritocratic American Dream continues to exist alongside countless examples of gendered and racialized inequalities. This individual focus is clearly present in the performance of "****Flawless." The song is in this instance performed after Beyoncé's song "Partition." In this part of the performance she and her female dancers perform a pole-dance act and Beyoncé sings: "take all of me, I just want to be the girl you like." This exemplifies celebrity feminism's post-feminist sensibility, discussed later in this article, and especially foregrounds feminism's representation in the fantasy world of the popular music performance in which a sexually savvy femininity at times looks awfully similar to a submissive, objectified woman. While the sample of Adichie is projected on-screen, Beyoncé's dancers pass by standing on a production line. Their outlines are emphasized through backlight, which makes it impossible to identify them. The lightning turns them into rigid Barbie dolls rather than women – we see thin, interchangeable bodies without a face or identity. They do not even move their own bodies, since the production line moves them across the stage. This creates a disjuncture between the visual and the lyrical: while we hear Adichie's voice making a feminist utterance which is projected on-screen, we see Beyoncé's voice-, face-, and nameless dancers pass by as objectified omnivomen.

The dancers here serve to highlight Beyoncé's extraordinary individuality more than they sustain her feminist activism. There is a clear chorus/star dynamic that could be read as a concrete visualization of post-feminism: not everybody can be a star. In a pessimistic reading this is reinforced by the insistence on the

importance of ambition in Beyoncé's feminist manifesto. The manifesto and star/chorus dynamic both emphasize the ideals of meritocratic neoliberalism in which talent, hard work, and resilience are rewarded by extraordinary personal success. Beyoncé presents herself as the possible outcome of female ambition, and seems to urge young women to follow her lead. This version of post-feminist feminism, so intricately focused on individual female ambition and financial success, has been coined "Neoliberal Feminism." In the course of this article, I nonetheless hope to convince the reader there is more to Beyoncé's feminism than this neoliberal reading. Aside from the neoliberal readings of her feminism, the claim on the feminist label by Beyoncé was a daring move, when one considers that many popular music celebrities, for example Bjork, Madonna, and Taylor Swift, publicly distanced themselves from feminism (Zeisler).

The dictionary definition of feminism in the sample of Adichie's Ted Talk makes feminism into an abstract thought that does not require action, since it makes gender equality sound like an aspect of common sense. It is simultaneously a teleological interpretation of feminism and a post-feminist definition of feminism. Adichie's decontextualized sample presents a feminism so basic and logical that it can be considered taken into account. This is a starkly different definition of feminism than for example the before mentioned definition by bell hooks, in which feminism is interpreted as an active movement that seeks to end sexism and oppression (*Feminism* viii). Beyoncé's borrowed definition of feminism, in other words, can be read as a rearticulation of post-feminist feminism that can be considered a safe cause to support, not just because it is articulated as a depoliticized personal ideal, but moreover because it envisions gender equality as a teleologically unavoidable reality. In an era of post-feminism, the difference between embedding a belief in meritocracy in a star text and explicitly claiming the feminist label is negligible: the content is similar in its focus on individuality, with different accentuations that create the illusion of the existence of a new and upgraded conjuncture of celebrity feminism.

After Adichie's sample, we see the screen behind Beyoncé light up in bright red. Her face and outline are clearly visible as she stands in front of the word "FEMINIST." The choreography of what follows is as sexual as it is aggressive. Beyoncé sings:

I know when you were little girls
 You dreamt of being in my world
 Now don't forget it, don't forget it
 Respect that, bow down bitches

The myth of meritocracy is reinstated through these lyrics – Beyoncé’s hyper-individual success is presented as something to envy and aspire to. During a discussion about Beyoncé at The New School in New York (“Are You Still a Slave?”), bell hooks called Beyoncé an anti-feminist terrorist in reference to this work. hooks even goes as far as to argue Beyoncé colludes in a construction of herself as slave, in service of imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. She elaborates: “I used to get so tired of people quoting Audre Lorde, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, but that was exactly what she meant, that you are not going to destroy this imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy by creating your own version of it. Even if it serves you to make lots and lots of money” (“Are You Still a Slave?”). Beyoncé’s success is continuously presented as the result of hard work and dedication, characteristics that are highly valued in American society. Considerations of systemic inequality are rendered invisible and her success becomes articulated not just as a feminist accomplishment but moreover as something that is just and deserved rather than a complex process of individual agency and social construction.

The revival of feminist and anti-racist activism together with the current prominence of celebrity society (see also Krieken) nonetheless creates a conjuncture of celebrity feminism and anti-racism that makes it possible for a celebrity to usurp an activist label without leaving the meritocratic framework – that is both cause and symptom of the inequality denounced by feminism and anti-racism – in which the celebrity is able to exist. To put it even stronger: the celebrity, by virtue of her success, shows that she is no longer held back by institutional racism or sexism. In a 2009 interview with journalist Jonathan van Meter for *Vogue* Beyoncé stated: “no one’s paying attention to what race I am. I’ve kind of proven myself. I’m past that” (qtd. in Cashmore 144). Ellis Cashmore argues that Beyoncé did not incorporate her Blackness in her star text but merely displayed a “wish-fulfilment fantasy that portrays the hard-earned success of a black woman in a culture largely purged of its historical iniquities” (146). This perpetuates a view of Beyoncé as a post-racial and post-feminist entity that prospers in the meritocratic system. Celebrity feminists, in this discourse, are marked as feminists by mere virtue of their success. They become the ruler against which the failure or success of all women can be measured. Gender liberation, in this case, becomes synonymous with functioning like White Men.³

³ I capitalized White Men to emphasize that I’m referring to an institution rather than a group of persons. Sara Ahmed explains: “An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals

The use of the word "bitches" in "****Flawless" illustrates the complex negotiations that are part of reading feminism in pop music. Cussing fits with a tradition of using "derogatory and demeaning language when discussing other women" in hip-hop and rap music (Oware 790). Matthew Oware describes the custom of braggadocio, in which a type of arrogance is vocalized to illustrate the abilities of an artist to overcome hardship and achieve material success (792). In one reading, Beyoncé thus does not challenge the meritocratic system but rather prospers in it. In another reading, Beyoncé's use of braggadocio grounds her in hip-hop culture, of which the history is in turn strongly related to Black culture. In this second reading, Beyoncé might not break with a patriarchal framework, but disrupts the Whiteness of mainstream culture. The second reading clears the way for a more nuanced understanding of Beyoncé's feminism wherein her work shows the possibility of creating "cracks" in a neoliberal capitalist culture heavily indebted to colonial expropriation and the appropriation of Blackness and Black culture. Further elaboration on the complexity of these ruptures is required when Beyoncé's later work is taken into consideration, as I will do in the following section.

From the margins to the center

While Beyoncé does not trespass the meritocratic neoliberal framework in which her star text is sold in my reading, the mere presence of her Black female celebrityhood and layered artistic output could already be marked as a disruption of the Whiteness of mainstream culture.⁴ To put it differently: the fact that her star text is such a success can be viewed as an act of dissent in itself.⁵ As Beyoncé was critiqued for her feminism, continuous systemic and institutionalized racial

within a given community. So when I am saying that 'white men' is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the *mechanisms* that ensure the persistence of that structure" ("White Men"). This does not mean White Men are a fixed constant. The institution is constantly rearticulated and reassembled. Ahmed writes: "'White men' is between tenses, it is how an inheritance is reproduced" ("White Men").

⁴ The continuous articulations of Blackness in Beyoncé's oeuvre and star text have been pointed out by amongst others Brooks, "'All That You Can't Leave Behind'"; Durham "'Check On It'"; and Weidhase, "'Beyoncé Feminism.'"

⁵ The disruptive possibilities of celebrity cannot be determined without engaging with the consumers of celebrity. Like most research in the field of celebrity studies, this study is limited by the absence of consumer voices. There is an urgent need for celebrity studies scholars to combine textual analysis with fan interviews in order to be able to discuss what it is that celebrity actually *does*. Integrating fan research with celebrity research would guard research from the dangers of singular interpretations.

injustice gave rise to violent upheavals in American cities like Ferguson and Baltimore after the murders of amongst others Eric Garner, Ezell Ford, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Walter Scott.⁶ While the murders of these men can be seen as the immediate cause for these revolts, Louis Hyman reminds us that the riots are above all "an expression of anger at another aspect of a system that has exploited the black community in subtler, more insidious, but similarly tragic ways" than fifty years ago during the riots in the 1960s ("Why The CVS Burned"). After 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was put on trial for his own murder, and the acquittal of his murderer George Zimmerman, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum and visibility. The special relationship between popular music and social justice was exemplified by the great amount of musical celebrities who soon expressed their support for the movement: musicians like Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, John Legend, and Prince all used their star power to pledge their allegiance to Black Lives Matter in their music as well as during public events.

On February 7, 2016, the Super Bowl halftime show, officially headlined by Coldplay, formed the premiere stage for Beyoncé's newest song "Formation." Her outfit during the show paid homage to Michael Jackson's 1993 Super Bowl performance, her dancers were dressed as Black Panthers, and Beyoncé sang about her Black heritage.⁷ The fashion of the performance grounded Beyoncé in Black superstardom and her dancers in a historical narrative of (Black) activism. With this performance, not just her feminist identity but also her identity as a Black woman was riveted in not only American pop culture but perhaps American history at large. By performing a song that centralizes Blackness and Black womanhood, Beyoncé used her stage-time for one of the most political halftime performance ever. Moreover, popular music once again presented itself to be intricately connected to social justice and political protest.

The music video of "Formation," released a day before the Super Bowl, presents the audience with imagery of Black suffering yet also celebrates and reclaims various elements of Black culture that had previously been appropriated

⁶ The murders of these men received widespread media coverage. While this was an incentive for many celebrities to speak out, police violence against Black women and LGBTIAQ people remains largely uncovered and underreported by the mainstream media. This ultimately purports to larger questions of grievability and social justice in relation to celebrity activism that go beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ Beyoncé did not only sing about Black Southern and Creole heritage but also musically incorporated a vast amount of different music genres that come from Black cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the choreography can also be analyzed as including different influences and artistic expressions historically tied to Black/African-American communities.

by White artists such as gospel and twerking.⁸ The video starts out with Beyoncé on top of a slowly sinking police car in Katrina-struck New Orleans while Messy Mya can be heard asking: "What happened after New Orleans?"⁹ "Formation" seems to hint at a more explicit intersectional incorporation of feminism in Beyoncé's star text in the way it specifically foregrounds Black womanhood.¹⁰ Beyoncé sings about her genealogy: "My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana, you mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama." This lineage emphasizes both the *specificity* of the Southern Blackness of her star text, as well as her *ordinariness* – her Blackness is so clearly inscribed on her body through the emphasis on lived experience as well as performance of Blackness that it blurs the line between the person Beyoncé and Beyoncé as pop star. In other words: it becomes impossible to delineate Beyoncé as commodity within celebrity culture as separated from Beyoncé as human being outside her stardom. The line, "Earned all this money but they never took the country out me," signifies a moment before fame, used to again present herself as authentic but also to pledge her allegiance to the Black/African American community. In "Formation," Beyoncé foregrounds her Southern Black heritage as the core of her star text. The song reminds its audience that however universal her outreach or success might be, she first and foremost remains a Black woman from the South. So while her earlier performance of "****Flawless" lyrically featured Beyoncé as an almost universal symbol for female empowerment, "Formation," on the hand, explicitly calls attention to the specific lived experience of Black womanhood.

This does, however, not immediately discard the universalist and post-racial aspects of her star text, nor does it debunk the inevitably commodified nature of stardom. "Formation" is as much an example of Black pride and activism as it is another example of the commodification of both Blackness and activism by Beyoncé as a million dollar brand. The crucial aspect here is that neither of these readings excludes the other, but that they rather exist simultaneously. The

⁸ Both gospel and twerking form important parts of Black culture that have been publicly appropriated and decontextualized by popular White artists numerous times, which adds to the value of Beyoncé reclaiming them. For more on the decontextualization or whitewashing of Black culture see Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking & You"; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*; and Pérez, "The Ontology of Twerk."

⁹ Messy Mya (Anthony Barre) was a New Orleans rapper, comedian, and YouTube personality who was shot in 2010. The sample of Messy Mya, together with the sample of New Orleans bounce musician Big Freedia (Freddy Ross) – also present in "Formation" – grounds the song in the spatiality of New Orleans as the apex of Black Southern culture.

¹⁰ Again, I want to emphasize that her Blackness was never absent in her earlier oeuvre. The difference here is that she capitalized and politicized her Blackness and made it both lyrically as well as visually central to her performance.

neoliberal focus of celebrity activism is not disrupted: "Formation" features lines such as, "You just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making," "I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making," and "Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper." These lines perpetuate a vision of financial power as the ultimate way to reach equality and end oppression. Not only is a neoliberal and meritocratic view of society reinforced, the fact that institutionalized racism makes it far less likely for a Black person to become as rich as Bill Gates, or as wealthy as Beyoncé for that matter, also remains unrecognized.

Nevertheless, with "Formation" as well as with the subsequent visual album *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé uses her art to create a space wherein Black womanhood can be discussed on its own terms. The most explicit reference to the specific experience of Black womanhood on the album is made in her song "Don't Hurt Yourself." In it, a well-known Malcolm X speech is sampled, during which he calls the Black woman the most disrespected and unprotected woman in America. *Lemonade* can be read in line with the writings of famous authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, whose narratives have portrayed Black womanhood as broken, unique, and powerful all at once. When the visual album is digested in its chronological sequence, a story arc of a personal journey in search of the meanings of individual subjectivity in relation to larger societal structures surfaces. The focus on Black womanhood in *Lemonade* urges an intersectional view of feminism in which Whiteness is no longer the invisible norm of mainstream culture.¹¹ In *Lemonade*, Whiteness is made strange. Aside from a few mentions of "Becky with the good hair" and imagery of happy couples of various descent during the finale of the album, White people are both lyrically and visually absent.

After *Lemonade*, many wondered whether bell hooks, who had called Beyoncé a feminist terrorist in 2014, would change her opinion on the singer. In her think piece on the visual album, hooks focuses on the ways in which Beyoncé and *Lemonade* still do not escape commodification. Although she calls the subject matter of Black womanhood "daring," hooks critiques the meritocratic fantasy world Beyoncé creates. "In the world of fantasy feminism," hooks writes, "there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown [sic] simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality" ("Moving Beyond Pain"). Moreover, hooks critiques the way in which Beyoncé's feminism has come to stand as "truth." She warns us

¹¹ For additional analyses of Black womanhood in *Lemonade*, see Hobson, "#Lemonade"; Parris, "Eight Black Canadian Women"; Ray-Harris, "Beyoncé's *Lemonade*"; and Richards, "The Meaning of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*."

to not let Beyoncé's feminism become our only feminism: the incorporation of feminism in the realm of entertainment, and the rise of celebrity feminism, should not replace political feminisms. It is problematic that it is so much easier to have conversations about race, class, and gender through popular culture than it is to discuss them through formal politics.

hooks continues by critiquing the idea that *Lemonade* is primarily created for a Black female audience. She states: "Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé's audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color" ("Moving Beyond Pain"). *Lemonade* demands attention for Black womanhood, but departs from Beyoncé's extensive star text that offers many aspects to which fans can relate. Beyoncé's lucrative star text, and her diverse and large audience, are abettors to the many debates that occur whenever she releases a new product. However, the productivity of the incorporation of an intersectional feminist representation in her star text, specifically as a Southern Black woman, though embedded in a neoliberal meritocratic context, should therefore not be easily dismissed.

"Formation" and *Lemonade* have for example spurred societal debates about oppression with their, in hooks words, daring focus on Black womanhood. The music video of "Formation," the Super Bowl halftime performance, and *Lemonade* were all discussed extensively on radio and TV, and inspired hundreds of think pieces and academic papers. A memorable reaction to Beyoncé's Super Bowl halftime show is the sketch Saturday Night Live produced. SNL created a fake movie trailer called "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black," which mostly shows panicking White people, confused because they do not understand the meaning of, for example, the lyrics "hot sauce in my bag, swag." A confused White man states, "maybe the song isn't for us," after which a hysterical White woman exclaims, "but usually everything is!" Turmoil spreads as White people lose their "damn White minds" because of their incapability to understand Beyoncé's newest song ("The Day Beyoncé Turned Black").

The real-life inability of especially right-wing White people to digest *Lemonade* became visible through, for example, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani's denouncement of the Super Bowl halftime show for its "unwholesome" and "political" character, and the failed attempt at a nationwide police boycott of Beyoncé's world tour. The National Sheriff's Association even blamed Beyoncé for the deaths of four officers, describing her music as "anti-police entertainment" (Hassan et al.). While Beyoncé's feminism in itself might not be as radical as for instance hooks wants it to be, Beyoncé's work and its disruption of the Whiteness

of mainstream culture does facilitate as well as accelerate debates about the intersections between gender, race, and sexuality.¹² Beyoncé's feminism might not serve straightforward political purposes that go beyond long-standing systems of oppression, but it does perform socio-cultural work that creates spaces for more heterogeneous conceptions of gendered and racialized identities. While this gives the public new ways of engaging with these conceptualizations, the question of the effects of Beyoncé's feminism on consumers lingers.

Conclusion

Feminism, after years of relentless post-feminist media output, became simultaneously hollow enough to be rearticulated in commodifiable ways that do not harm or threaten the profitability of a star text, and forceful enough to figure as an indictment against the current state of gender affairs. The post-feminist emphasis on the contradictory tension and multiplicity within individual female yearnings enables celebrity feminists to pick whatever additive they deem fit from a seemingly unlimited plethora of choices that can be articulated as feminist. In this process, feminism itself becomes rearticulated as a commodity. Consequently, bell hooks argues, debates about gender issues slowly move away from the political field and reemerge in marketing and entertainment (*Feminism* 5). The celebrity activist, who by definition forms the antithesis of a prerequisite strategic essentialist collectivity needed for feminist and anti-racist activism in order to radically alter the system in their favor, articulates resistance and compliance to the system at once. In the reading by hooks, Beyoncé's feminism is so dispersed and contradictory that it does not transgress the boundaries of neoliberal post-feminism. This indicates that after years of post-feminist media imagery, feminism itself is rearticulated as a part of a post-feminist conjuncture.

In the current crossroads that is celebrity feminism, Beyoncé is concurrently both object and subject: she represents, yet at the same time shapes, debates concerning feminism and race. This popular discourse of

¹² The widespread attention for Black womanhood after *Lemonade* motivated writer and educator Candice Marie Benbow to comprise the *Lemonade* Syllabus through a Twitter hashtag. In the introduction of the free syllabus she writes: "Black women, spanning generations and class dynamics, used social media to suggest books, films, songs and poetry – primarily by Black women – that they believe best accompanied *Lemonade* and spoke to the essence of Black womanhood in its historical and contemporary manifestations. Compiled is [sic] over 200 resources that specifically speak to Black women from classics in fiction to Black feminist theory ..." (Benbow 1). The syllabus was downloaded over 40,000 times in 5 days.

intersectional celebrity feminism is thoroughly embedded in a neoliberal post-feminist and post-racial framework. This framework enables Beyoncé to claim the feminist label and simultaneously reinforce hyper-individual meritocratic ideals without exploring the tension between the two. Time and again, Beyoncé presents her personal success as a feminist act. This articulation of feminism and anti-racism can be accused of depoliticizing the larger issues of social inequality at stake: it takes them away from the political arena and into the consumerist field of popular culture. On the other hand, it might be more productive to argue that these articulations function as disruptions of the system in which they are sold. These transgressions are more likely to occur in a culture in which media literacy – the critical consumption of media culture – has become widespread outside the ivory tower of academia. When pop feminism is considered a locus of activism, its most activist element might be that it allows contemporary feminism to become part of everyday life. Further research into the effects of this development is needed, especially in the form of audience research. Now that we know what celebrity feminism looks like, it is time to find out what it is that celebrity feminism actually *does*.

Lemonade can be seen as a culmination of tension between Beyoncé as a million dollar brand in celebrity culture and Beyoncé as Black woman outside her stardom, between Beyoncé as commodity and Beyoncé as activist, between the personal and the political. This does not mean that either of these entities should be deemed worthless, but rather shows that the difference between commodification and activism is no longer determinable: they exist simultaneously. This bleeding into each other of entertainment and politics warrants investigation into how commercial success and social or political processes are negotiated. The notion that celebrity and politics co-constitute each other can be a fruitful premise for research into the politics of pop feminism rather than an impasse. In order to shed light on this co-constitutive relationship, more research on the effects of celebrity is needed. This means that the bridges between celebrity studies, fan studies, and media studies need to be strengthened in ways that facilitate multi- and interdisciplinary research projects. Moreover, the study of celebrity needs to safeguard itself from simplified readings of the phenomenon that either make the object of study into an individualized case study or abstract entity. Rather, celebrity should be taken up as a foundation of contemporary discussion, with famous persons intervening in current political debates, and such political debates in turn supporting the success of a famous person.

Intersectional feminism is never complete or finished; it is constantly evolving. Beyoncé helps construct the feminist debate and might affect the overall meaning of feminism in society, as well as the meaning of Blackness and race. However, the presentation of feminism and Blackness as a cool brand is a long way from progressive and radical feminist and black activism that seeks to end oppression in intersectional ways. Beyoncé's work, and star text overall, could be the start of a conversation rather than functioning as an endpoint.

Even though Beyoncé's intersectional feminist star text might be read as controversial, she time and again proves to be a rich source of inspiration for the feminist debate. Although Beyoncé's feminism does not seem to consider the connection between neoliberal capitalism and oppression, and moreover often conflates her personal success with the possibility of Black and female success in general, her affective investment in celebrity feminism does create more space for discussions about the intersectional nature of oppression. Because of their investment in meritocratic and neoliberal hyper-individualism, celebrities are unable to completely leave behind the socially constructed framework and existing discourses to effectively fight oppression. Celebrity activism is therefore inherently limited and perhaps falls short due to the celebrity's unrelenting aim of maximizing profits. Within these limitations, Beyoncé's work and star text nevertheless illustrate how commodification and activism coexist in contemporary popular culture.

In conclusion, the study of "Beyoncé feminism" shows how two contradictory strands of contemporary celebrity feminism in popular music might coexist: her feminism on the one hand shows the inescapable nature of both neoliberalism and capitalism, yet on the other hand illustrates how both are still potentially escapable from within. These escapes might be but small cracks, but also point to the possibilities of art to politically resist and transgress societal understandings of identity. While it might be easier to focus on the ways in which Beyoncé's intersectional feminism can be problematized, further research into the productivity of these cracks is ultimately of larger interest to both academia and society.

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“With What Do We Rise Up?”

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Soulèvements, Exhibition, Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 18 Oct. 2016 – 15 Jan. 2017.

“Raising”/“Lifting”; “Revolt”/“Uprising”

There is no single English equivalent to the French word “soulèvement,” but rather a variety of them. The complexity of the word itself, as well as the phenomenon it refers to, increases as we try to formulate some of the many ways through which it is possible to “r(a)ise up.” Whether it refers to silent demonstrations (Chieh-Jen Chen, *The Route*, 2006) or vociferous strikes, social disturbances or political disorder, the crowd’s stampede is just as polymorphous as the individual gestures that communicate an urge to revolt. Whether a fist raised in the air or banging on a table, a face distorted by battle cries or cries of pain (Ken Hamblin, *Detroit Police Headquarters, Beaubien Street*, 1971), or even mere immobility, the word transcribes the will to be in and to occupy a public space.

The concept of “soulèvement,” carefully studied, analyzed, and developed by the philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, has become the subject of an exhibition: *Soulèvements*, on view at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris, from 18 October 2016 to 15 January 2017, and touring across the world in 2017 and 2018.¹ Throughout the exhibition the variety of artworks on display (paintings, drawings, lithographs, photographs, videos of performances, films, texts, books, and *objets détournés*), ranging from the 18th century to our current

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¹ Museo Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Feb.-May 2017; MUNTREF – Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Ferrero, Buenos Aires, June-Sep. 2017; MUAC – Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico, Feb.-July 2018; Galerie de l’UQAM, Montreal, and Cinémathèque québécoise, Sep.-Nov. 2018.

time, offer a range of possible understandings of the ways in which an uprising can move itself and others.

Following Didi-Huberman's Madrid exhibition *Atlas – Comment porter le monde sur le dos?*, presented at the Museo de la Reina Sofía in 2011, and *Histoires de fantômes*, co-curated with Arno Gisinger and on display at the Palais de Tokyo in 2014, *Soulèvements* can be seen as a "visual essay" aimed at explicating the complex meanings and manifestations that characterize the notion of "uprisings." Consequently, Didi-Huberman has turned the notion of "soulèvements" into a concept: exploiting the potentiality of the word to raise questions and playing upon its capacity to be declined, redefined, and specified as it encounters various contexts. In his hands the concept of "soulèvements" is used not to provide answers, but to pinpoint the singular moments when an individual or an entire crowd manifests its desire to go against a state of affairs. Indeed, more than in a thematically organized exhibition, visitors are invited to think of the several contexts, possible ways of materialization, and consequences of uprisings.

Didi-Huberman has organized the exhibition into five sections that, one after the other, seek to answer the implicit question: "With what do we rise up?": I. With elements (unleashed), II. With gestures (intense), III. With words (exclaimed), IV. With Conflicts (flared up), and V. With desires (indestructible). The show, which initiates a non-exhaustive typology of actions that stem from or transcribe an impulse to rise up, was the result of a continuing research process that includes Didi-Huberman's *L'Oeil de l'histoire* series focused on the representation of "the people." Consequently, the exhibition was not conceived as a final product, but rather as a step in the ongoing process of defining the meaning of "uprisings" from both political and artistic points of view.

The premise of *Soulèvements* had indeed been discretely unveiled about a year ago, prior to the opening of the exhibition, when Didi-Huberman was invited for a "carte blanche" at the cinema des Ursulines in Paris. The subsequent selection of seven short films that were presented at the cinema is noteworthy in that it was motivated by the same thematic that organized *Soulèvements* at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, namely uprisings. From Hans Richter's avant-garde film *Vormittagsspuk* (1928) to Paulo Abreu's 2003 *Conde Ferreira* (the latter also on display at the Jeu de Paume), Didi-Huberman's choice of films highlights the complexity and plurality of a concept at work when there are rules to be transgressed and norms to be bypassed. Indeed, film, which by nature is prone to show movement, is particularly well-adapted to one of the central components of any uprising, for what is more adequate than a moving image to represent the tensions that are common to moments of outbreak, suppression, and subsequent

release? Therefore, it is of little surprise that Didi-Huberman's exploration of the theme of *soulèvements* was first brought to the public's sight through a group of films, and that the medium of the moving image consistently appears throughout the new exhibition.

Consequently, the battered body in Paulo Abreu's short film finds a place among the works on view at the Jeu de Paume, sharing a room with Agnes Geoffray's *Metamorphosis II* (from the "Metamorphosis" photography series, 2011-2015) in the second section of the show where uprisings becomes manifest with gestures. In Abreu's piece, which is a 1.25 minutes black-and-white film named after Porto's psychiatric hospital (in which it was shot), an emaciated and bare-chested male body is levitating in a room, suspended in a state of gesticulation that belongs to no other time and place than a "sanitary" institution's. The effect of the moving image is counterbalanced with Geoffray's photographs that depict hysterical female bodies, suspended and still above their beds. With both the still and the moving image, the artists are concerned with making visible what is usually kept from sight, i.e., behavior considered as abnormal and associated with insanity. The filmmaker and the photographer thus each operate an act of protestation against the implicitly established rule dictating that the "insane" should remain concealed. One of the messages conveyed in this section is that when the body is a source of alienation, it is subject to becoming a means to revolt.

In *Vormittagsspuk*, one of Hans Richter's dada short films, present at the cinema des Ursulines but absent from *Soulèvements*, flying hats produce a rather comical effect on the onlookers, as they defy the rules of rationality and the laws of nature. This witty cinematographic piece – an ode to subversion and a celebration of absurdity against the moroseness of everyday life – subtly integrates the theme of *soulèvement(s)* into its content: hats are rising up and ties are moving around, these objects are rebelling and tricking their owner. Hence the absence of Richter's film among the artworks presented at the Jeu de Paume: by putting objects at the center of the piece, the film somehow resists being classified into one of the five sections constituted in the show. Nonetheless, for those who had the chance to attend the screening and to visit the exhibition, Richter's film perfectly resonates with a leaflet made by Philippe Soupault that reads: "Dada soulève tout" ("Dada lifts everything"). This collage, made in 1921, is exhibited in the third section of the show and demonstrates how words can be used to create uprisings. It is no surprise that the two parts "With Gestures" and "With Words" follow one another, and that the transition from the first to the second part of the exhibition is almost imperceptible: in the process of rebelling,

of asserting one's discontent, acting and speaking often go together, for example when marching and chanting, or tagging walls with words.

The same logic applies to the last two parts of Didi-Huberman's "visual essay," i.e., conflict and desire, the former being the result of the latter, and vice versa. Indeed, under the aspiration for a better future, uprisings destroy with a violence necessary to the process of restoring hope. Agustí Centelles' photographs, presented in each of these two parts of the exhibition, reveal that the border between conflict and desire is blurry. In *Barricades, Barcelone* (1936) two men, one wearing a suit and the other jeans, are hiding behind the dead bodies of horses that are piled up to be used as a barricade in the middle of the street, both pointing their guns at their common enemy who is out of camera range. This first image is on display in the "With conflicts" part of the show. Another photo, *Jeux d'enfants à Montjuic* (1936), which appears in the "With desires" section, turns around the tension that is palpable in *Barricades, Barcelone*. The composition is similar: all the protagonists in the picture are facing the same direction, looking at an adversary situated outside of the image, with wooden sticks (fake guns) in their hands. However, this is a representation full of hope: the fighting has become acting – merely the play of children – and is therefore harmless. Consequently, it suspends for a moment the real outcome of the war: there is no blood, no injuries, just the cheerful faces of the dressed-up boys. It therefore seems to signify that fighting remains a fiction to them, that war is nothing but a setup that entails specific frames, settings, and costumes. War has become something that the children longed for, merely a game that they desired to play. These two pictures, showing opposite depictions of war, thus serve as a visual leitmotiv bridging the "With conflicts" and "With desires" sections of the exhibition, highlighting that the division between the two is always imprecise.

In many regards, the first section of the exhibition, "With elements (Unleashed)," enunciates what will follow in the subsequent sections of *Soulèvements*. Dennis Adamas' floating red plastic bags silently rising in the air, photographed in *Patriot* (from the series "Airborne," 2002), embody the winds of change. The piece anticipates the gestures and words that will transcribe the will for revolution, and the conflicts and desires that will shape uprisings. The elements, because they are unpredictable, embody the uncertainty that characterizes the becoming moment of any revolution: Are the flags and banners going to fly away or will they fall back to the ground? Are they going to be forgotten or will they be set up in the public space in anticipation of the fists, hammers, and stones that are about to be collectively thrown against an object of

dissent? Are the two boys in Gilles Caron's *Manifestations anticatholiques à Londonderry* (1969), turning their back on the viewer as they revolt with the gesture of throwing projectiles at a mob, going to hit their targets? Will they in turn be struck back at in retaliation?

This last piece exemplifies what is at stake in the representation of *soulèvements*: A moment of fragility with an uncertain outcome, which nonetheless – no matter the way it will end – is already making history. After all, one of the definitions of uprising that Judith Butler highlights in the exhibition's accompanying catalogue of texts, entails not only a group movement, a mobilization of an entire crowd, but also another kind of anchored intervention, i.e., a word written by an individual; a poster, a pamphlet, or the defilement of a work of art that calls into question principles and prescribed rules of behavior; a trace, subtle yet tangible, that remains dormant to be collected years later.

Whether suggested or explicit (did we not just read "Dada soulève tout" on a leaflet?), voices of dissent are not solely anti-; they also operate, at a local level, to bring about concrete changes. They fuel our imagination with representations of accomplished and aborted attempts of uprising, calling the onlookers to be outraged for or with them. By bringing back these voices from a more or less distant past, by displaying them in their complexity and their plurality, Didi-Huberman has succeeded in showing the tight link between politics and aesthetics, and their dependence on constant renewal and actualization. In many ways this is where the (non-)answer to the question "How/With what do we rise up?" lies: There is no way to know until the action has already been undertaken.

By displaying part of the various records and documents he has collected in the course of his research, Didi-Huberman's role with *Soulèvements* has been to raise the question "With what do we rise up?" and then provide the viewer with possible – fantasized or real – directions to look at. Nevertheless, the viewer knows full well that this list is incomplete and full of lacunas, and that it will remain this way forever. Indeed, the final room of the show is a dead end that obliges the spectator to go back to the penultimate room to reach the exit. This feels like an invitation to the viewer to retake the various ways of uprising once more and, upon leaving the Jeu de Paume, ask: With what do I rise up?

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The Undoing, a Step by Step Process

RENÉE JANSEN*

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (Atwood 392)

They sat at what they knew to be the important table, front and centre. His most distinguished benefactors, partners, patrons, old friends, mentors. All of them a small murmur of conversation and Omegas against royally distributed glasses of Moët. Proudful looks curling around their lips, as they smugly shot up-and-down glances at those at the tables of lesser importance, or the waiting staff.

Tonight was an event to honor him, true, but they had anticipated basking in the glory with him for months now. Among themselves they not-so-quietly whispered at how they regarded the heavy-set, short-haired, pimple-faced waitress especially with jealousy. Oh, how much simpler her life must be without all of these years of hard work they had put into cultivating valued relationships. Oh, how they yearned the uncomplicated existence of a waitress. None held a straight face, this was obvious. The waitress was better at hiding her chortle.

He entered the scene late, with half-hearted apologetic hand gestures. They forgave him for this transgression. They would not forgive him for the next. You see, *she* was also late.

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There was always some kind of talk about the Girl, seeing as there was always some kind of new Girl. Here, that name belonged to her more than her own. The nickname was all they cared to know of her. It was a name coupled with an attitude, this mixture of pity and disgust and reluctant tolerance. Talk of her always occurred through implication. The mere mention of her a taboo subject.

This one he had adorned in long emerald lace and organza. If you looked hard enough, and most of them did, you could see the flesh-toned round tape placed strategically as to cover her modesty. Modesty was an interesting word to use in the context of that gown.

Later that evening, when the silent car ride back was to be made, there would be speculation as to whether or not he had her enter like this. Late. In full view of the room. Putting Louboutin in front of Louboutin as she strode to the important table, taking the looks in stride, having the audacity to not show a single hint of trepidation in her eyes.

Had he also written the remainder of the scene? Had it been his design, too, to have that gremlin waitress move one of his guests to another table, so the Girl could sit front and centre, facing him in a way he could most easily look down her dress? Had his wish to have her seated at the so-called important table been his way to betray the status of those sitting there, by having hers so overtly displayed?

The trophy. A thing they all were here, in essence.

Whether her existence at the table was more uncomfortable for the men than for the women was hard to say. Some women were more obvious in their attempts to avert their husband's eyes from her lips, her chest, her back. Others had resigned to their fate a long time ago, sitting corseted, in their most expensive lingerie, with copious layers of cosmetics on top of their La Mer on top of their quarterly administered Botox. They had come to believe that as long as they would later bend over and show their husbands the experienced fuck they'd never have with that Girl, their men would not stray.

Whatever their wives attempted, all the men stared. Some opted to believe they were superior to their host - this way they could cope better with the situation. You see, at least they had a life partner, an intelligent, whole person, a full human being, not some kind of animated blow-up doll that was just there to be fucked and fucked and fucked and replaced with the latest updated model ad nauseam. Girl iOS 12.3 we were on, they believed, snickering. Only some of them actively sobbed as they viciously rubbed away their erections during an additional toilet break.

She sat straight and smiled, her eyes bright like she had practiced in the mirror over and over, her movements small and contained, her voice withdrawn. An attempt to please them, even though she knew this was futile. Nonetheless, she took in the stares, the frosty conversations, the poorly cleaned semen stains on the trousers of those table companions who had just returned from their additional toilet breaks.

All of it she let bounce off. She was Helen of Troy, they were rain. It had become her mantra. She was Helen of Troy, they were rain. She was Helen of Troy, they were rain. You're not Helen of Troy, I am Helen of Troy.

She repeated it because she knew playing her role perfectly would anger them more. If she was anything these days, after all, it was a creature of spite.

The gown she wore was, per usual, one of his choosing, though she had had a hand in the selection process. The emerald had been the most revealing, and she relished in how her decision had put additional venom in the stares of those that surrounded her.

He bought her a dress for every event, as she was sure he had done for the previous Girl and the Girl before her. At the end of the evening the gown would be a sorry pile somewhere in the hotel room. Eventually she'd clean herself of this evening and of him, and join him again in jogging pants and a tank top, bare-faced and wet-haired. He'd inevitably say he infinitely preferred her like this. The *real* her. She'd then smile at him, the man who would have absolutely no interest in the real her.

Besides, she was fairly convinced he liked her most like this, in the much-too-revealing emerald, with the gigantic diamond earrings he'd gifted her accentuated by her pinned-back hair. Girl, at the most important table, the centre of attention. This was the image that would bespeak to the entire room his wealth, importance, and influence. Look at how I made her. Look at how she believes I love her. Look at how she believes I would treasure her forever. Look at how she believes she will one day inherit the Earth.

It was an unspoken contract she had willingly signed. She'd known what this was from the beginning, as much as he chose to believe that she was blindly devoted to his every move. It was the only way to preserve his manhood, this belief. That she acquiesced happily to his expectation for her to always be beneath him, literally and figuratively. Once she became too much of her own person, he would lose interest. He couldn't do with a Girl he could not manipulate, after all.

It goes without saying that his psychologist had once said it was exceptionally difficult for him to form a true partnership with a woman because

his mother had left him with his wealthy, distant, cold father. The Girl had had a decent relationship with her father, actually. It'd just been exceptionally difficult for her to form a true partnership with a man because she had found that men generally approached her with the mind-set of some fat cat sugar daddy who would charitably educate her on the Good Life as long as she bruised her knees every now and then.

She had discovered there was something refreshing about a relationship with a clear expiration date and a well-defined part in the dramatis personae.

Man, 55+, actually a fat cat sugar daddy this time around

Girl, 18-21, sexy trophy girlfriend (non-speaking role)

Bless him, he tried his best to pretend this was a "real" relationship, but the experienced businessman in him couldn't help but underestimate the naïve little Girl, so he had no chance of pulling it off. It was simple. This time there would be no way to fool herself into believing she was in any way, shape, or form taken seriously by her "partner."

This time around she could no longer blame the fairy tales she'd grown up with for her skewed relationship expectations, either. She could now finally take them for the warning they had always been. Prince falls for girl who has no voice. Prince falls for sleeping, immobile, silent, dead girl in thorny castle. Prince falls for sleeping, immobile, silent, dead girl in glass case. Death becomes her.

She had felt like the dead girl in the thorny castle before, but lately she identified more strongly with the dead girl in the glass case. Her world had become much more transparent. It was easier this way, she told herself.

Especially in the beginning she thought herself some kind of master con artist, being able to see the game for what it was, playing the system. Fucking with it. She felt no difference between this and any other relationship she'd been in - aside from the fact she could walk around in diamonds this time. She had relished in the knowledge that when he would inevitably cast her aside, her heart would remain unbroken. Unbreakable.

It would always be hers. And in the meantime she would amass wealth in gifts and some stolen niceties left and right. They'd all be pawned off in the end. She currently estimated her profit at about half a million dollars. Masterful. Indeed.

Yet there was a nagging sensation she had been unable to shake off lately. Like a vile, toothed butterfly that had started gnawing at any hint of that golden self-satisfaction that had been fluttering about in her stomach. A reverse Midas touch that would occur every time she taped her toes together so her Louboutins wouldn't blister her feet. Every time her earrings would leave her earlobes red and

swollen. Every time her stomach would growl viciously at the mere thought of food. Every time she had to rip off the flesh-colored tape from her sore nipples. Every time she stabbed herself in the eye with her eyeliner. Every time she ripped out a fistful of hair when she tried to pin it back. Every time she had to force a glass of champagne down her throat so she would barely remember having to thrust her teeth in a pillow as he rammed himself inside her ass like she was a fucking dog.

As she was expected to do, she smiled at him every time he glanced at her. A smile her face would immediately retract afterwards. She glanced at the cutlery lining her plate, her eyes zooming in on the knife she would soon slice into medium-rare Wagyu in a red wine reduction. She pictured ripping the meat apart with her teeth instead, the juices dripping down her face, into the cleavage of her dress, bloody red sauce staining the bottom of her skirt. She pictured taking off her shoes and doing a perfect Viennese waltz so the syrupy red would distribute artfully over the marble flooring as the dress glided over it.

Her face had started to hurt from holding her smile. Her eyes had started to dull. Her thoughts had grown ever more obsessed with that bleeding red rare cow on her plate. Her stomach growled for her, her tongue grew wet for her. Her cheeks started to sink back into her face. She felt like getting up and feeding the rest of the table with the bile inside her empty stomach.

She made her escape with a flimsy bathroom excuse instead, letting go of her stupid face when she was no longer being watched. The hotel had mirrors lining its walls like it didn't know what had happened to all those assholes in Versailles. They showed her the image this dress was making her into. She grunted at it, softly at first, then a full-toothed wild grunt. She collected air in the pockets of her cheeks, slouched, pulled her nose up, crossed her eyes, and let the air go again.

She wanted to taking a few steps back, getting in a starting position, and running at full Usain Bolt speed into that mirror, only to then walk back as if nothing had happened. Sitting down at that table, plucking shards of glass from her skin, the same way she would sometimes nonchalantly peel off her nail polish crumble by crumble. Enjoying the disintegration surrounding her nails.

The lace of her dress was burying itself into her skin, marking and bruising it more than it already was. Did that make her want to bleed? Or was it the mirrors and their unrelenting insistence in projecting this pitiful and disgusting image back at her? She'd grown weary of reflections ages ago.

She glanced back at the room, still hearing shards of him commemorating his achievements among his guests. She was glad to have left his presence before

he had plunged into his regular spiel of how he had aided various charities over the years. She found it easier to pretend that body was incapable of producing even the smallest shred of kindness.

She imagined putting her face back on, and setting Louboutin in front of Louboutin, snaking back to her seat. Smiling at him, her eyes bright.

She imagined taking off her shoes, running back inside, and stabbing him in the eyes with those stiletto heels. The bottom of those shoes was red either way.

She turned around instead, mocking all further mirrors with a grotesque expression and a full on silly walk.

So this is how it feels to close a chapter.

Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they only have to stop listening to the Sirens for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (Cixous 885)

When she had seen the Girl, she had wanted to drop her tray of Moët, drag her, softly, by the hand, out of that snake pit, give her the ugly old sneakers she had stashed in the staff dressing room, hug her, tell her everything was going to be okay. She had never really forgiven herself for not doing the same five years ago, at an earlier version of this event.

She was surprised at how surprised she was at the repetition she encountered tonight. The glances that managed to simultaneously look up and down at her, the poorly hidden snide comments at how offensive her body was in this context. While her stomach hung over her trousers, her arms were too muscular for her blouse, her skin too uneven, too splotchy, too dark, too bare, her hair too short, her body hair too visible, her overall appearance too obviously *poor*, too obviously *lesbian*. Did she even wear deodorant tonight? She couldn't remember.

She would sometimes mention the Girls she saw to others. How she wished to live and see all Girls set free.

Inevitably they'd reply that she should just stop projecting her own insecurities about her femininity onto these Girls, who were there out of their own free will, exerting their own free agency. Who was she to pity them, who was she to want to stand up and *save* them?

She'd reply she had no insecurities about her femininity. That's when they asked if she had even taken the mascara they bought her out of the packaging. She thought about the punching bag in her favorite gym. Something she could hit so she wouldn't need to hit *them*. So she wouldn't need to hit *herself*.

She wished to live and see all Girls set free, but could not bring herself to act upon her wishes. Not even a little.

Here she stood, behind a dumpster, dragging on her cigarette and dragging out her smoking break because she did not want to exist where these people did. She thought about spilling some champagne down the front of the Girl's gown, and asking her if she needed somewhere human to stay tonight, only to find she did not need any such plans.

There the Girl was, breathing like she'd been running, her face no longer a mask. An authentic set of eyes now, bewildered, but not venomous. Had they ever been? She couldn't recall.

In a voice belonging to some poet, she asked her if the speech was. She squeaked back in a voice she had cultivated for her Girl existence, small, quiet, unassuming, obedient.

She told her she just needed some fresh air. She shrugged, continued smoking, but her eyes wouldn't leave her, not this time. Inquisitive dark brown circles, in which she was surprised to find not one hint of pity, disgust, or reluctant tolerance. She told her her name, feeling like she should. She told her hers, then moved to pull a ratty plaid blanket from underneath her. Here, she said, so you don't catch a cold in that thing. Unless you feel it doesn't go with the look.

Now her true face had made room for a smile, a real one, for the first time that evening. Corrupt me, she told her. It made her eyes light up something fierce, and there was a raving hunger radiating from her face, just for a split second, before her expression became pleasant again. Yet there had been no danger. Not for her, at least. Never that, not with her. Not in the way she had been called *hey beautiful* at night, some blocks away from her apartment. Not in the way anger lurked in his eyes before he would pull her down onto his bed. Not in the way all of his pornography centered on *destroying this teen cunt's pussy* and he would laugh at it, every time.

She recalled the sneakers, asking her if she wanted them, you know, as a means of corruption. Before they knew they were in the staff room together, sneakers touching noses. Figuring she might just as well complete the look, she undid herself of the earrings, the ring, the necklace, the bracelet, the hairpin, the false lashes, and that fucking nipple tape. She released her zipper for her, and the

end result stood in front of her in flesh-toned underwear and the blanket, loose hair messy from leftover hairspray, the sneakers on her feet, a slight flush on her face.

It had been a while since she had presented someone with this nude a version of her. No, not nude, *naked*. But still not naked enough. She let the sink help her bid farewell to Deep Throat blush, Orgasm Illuminator, Better than Sex mascara, Fuzzy Handcuffs and Virgin shade eyeshadows, and Underage Red lipstick. All that was left of her mask were the specks of Kink nail polish she couldn't remove with tooth and nail. They spread like moss on her fingers, chin, lips, legs, and the plaid.

Her eyes had been on her during this process, holding a look of curiosity and of recognition. She couldn't quite put her finger on the *why* of it all, but there was a sense of comfort in standing in front of her in this hodgepodge of styles, with a naked, wet face. There was something familiar about her, about the dark brown freckles around her nose, the patch of her face where both eyebrows briefly met, the curl of her lips, how prominent her canines were when she smiled, her scent – the blend of nicotine and sweat that shouldn't make for something pleasant, but did anyway.

There was something familiar about her, indeed, about the patches of blue around her knees, the cat-paw scratches around her fingers, the outie belly button, the now more visible nasolabial folds, the true brightness of her eyes, the eyelashes sticking with water, or sweat.

There was something about her that reminded her of her, in some parallel universe, where there was no concept of Girl. I want to be free, she said, but I don't know if I know how. You see, freedom is an alien concept to me. Can I cross over to where you live, she asked. If you can stomach me.

Can you take me anywhere else?

I know a place.

They say we must disregard all the stories relating to those of them who have been betrayed, beaten, seized, seduced, carried off, violated and exchanged as vile and precious merchandise. [...] They say that there is no reality before it has been given shape by words, rules, regulations. They say that in what concerns them everything has to be remade starting from basic principles. (Wittig 134)

Her breasts are marked with a pattern of pale brown, almost purple lightning bolts. As she squashes down before she starts making her entrance into the water they touch her thighs briefly, which makes a stronger echoing sound each time it happens. In the water she becomes a dark shadow rippling in the dark blue. There is little illumination the hotel offers the pool at this hour. Still there is something preventing the Girl from going further than seeing how the water distorts the Kink on her toenails.

Her eyes keep wandering towards the windows of the hotel. Like any tall building it comes with the feeling it would fall over if you look up at it long enough. Some rooms are lit. She notices a light turn quickly off and on in one room, as if it's winking at her. She can't remember whether or not the restaurant looks out over the pool. Part of her wonders if he would still prefer her like this.

She wants her to join her. But what if someone sees us? They'll see two vague silhouettes around a pool. There are people who know who I am there. Truly? I... Only you can see yourself in full detail – there are some to whom you'll always remain a vague silhouette, you know. She knows.

She slips the lingerie out under the blanket first. A memory twists somewhere. La Perla. No need to get it wet. It gets placed by the sneakers as if the marble flooring around the pool is a store window. No such careful handling of the blanket. That gets unceremoniously dropped next to the display.

She lets herself submerge immediately, accepting the shock of cold the water provides. She opens her eyes to a darkness in which she can barely make out her peddling legs, which the water morphs into tentacles. A shape that draws her further from the silent redhead mermaid, and closer to the fat sea witch. The monster who was too loud, too big, too old, too ugly, too queer to exist.

There is something peaceful about being underwater, about feeling her hair wave up from her scalp. It takes most of her willpower to emerge from the darkness again.

She floats steadily on the surface of the water, her body significantly slimmer due to the water contouring it. She swims to her and tenses her stomach so she floats up next to her. Her temple touches hers. She can feel her face smile.

She wants to know what she is seeing. She points out Big Dipper, but that seems to disappoint her. Everyone knows that one, what do *you* see? She points out Little Dipper. That makes her laugh.

I see my mother, she says. She would always wear black and her eyes would always sparkle with some new kind of mischief. It means I can see her in every star now. It's kind of her to leave me with that legacy. If I have a daughter it's what I'll do, too.

She asks her what she would do if she had a son, but she doesn't answer.

When they dry ourselves they do it together, in that plaid. There are small red specks of wool sticking to her skin like inverse gooseflesh. They stick to her, too. She is about to flick one off her collarbone, to see what she would do when she touches her. That is when she feels the trickle down her thigh. A sensation she hasn't felt in a while. A sacrifice she made to be able to wear the Versace he had bought her. That night he had told her she had never looked more beautiful in her life, and that he would bet good money she'd never look as beautiful ever again. She should have ripped his throat out with her teeth like she had wanted to, to satiate the hunger.

She tells her she is bleeding, casually, so she'll know what she means. She nods. She tells her she has some tampons and pads in her bag. She mentions a friend who makes art with her blood, writing words in different typeface, cutting and pasting them onto paper as if she's making a ransom note. She addresses each of them to a politician who is bent on legislating women's bodies. Often she makes a threat of castration in them, implying that it would make it easier for her to replenish her "ink."

It has been a while since she has made any kind of art. As a girl, before she was a Girl, she liked drawing skies, pressing down hard with the True Blue Crayolas she would always whittle down too quickly. She stopped when her grandmother gave her a fashion design coloring book along with all the "girl" Crayola colors – Purple Pizzazz, Razzle Dazzle Rose, and Razzmatazz. Skies made of pink, other pink, and yet another pink seemed too out of touch for the little girl. Gran would take away her True Blue, too. That's a boy color, dearie. When she learned that had only been the case since the 1940s she told her gran, proud of her research, but gran just laughed and told her it would be better if she could just accept the way things were.

She unwraps herself from her side of the blanket and sits down on the marble by the pool, bleeding. She sits next to her and wraps the blanket around them again. There is no need to ask her what she's doing. She just knows.

The blood flows freely. There is no hair for it to stick to, as he had insisted she would wax her naked body into that of a prepubescent. *I'm your Venus*, but never the one in furs. She wonders why she has never questioned this before.

She doesn't know for how long they sit there, but enough time has passed for her to gather her materials. It pleases her to see the previously immaculate marble stained by the various shades of red. This is what really goes on here, you assholes. This is a part of me too. You should know who I am.

There is not a lot for her to work with. She figures a small word, max.

C, she spells, her face a frown. U. N. Before she can shape the last letter,
she grabs her hand.

No, she says. Don't. Don't make it theirs again.

She dabs the remnants of her body that are splattered on the marble with
her hands, so it becomes whole again.

G, she spells, smiling this time. I. R. L.

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