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Dr. Rebecca Schreiber

Dr. Dominika Laster

Prof. Julie Shigekuni

**SUBJECT DISINTEGRATION: IDENTITY AND ALTERITY
IN THE AGE OF THE HYPERREAL**

BY

SOPHIE ELL

B.A., English, University of California Berkeley, 2004
M.Phil., English, Trinity College, Dublin, 2005
M.F.A., Creative Writing, Saint Mary's College of California, 2007

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Sophie Ell

B.A., ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY
M.PHIL., ENGLISH, TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN
M.F.A., CREATIVE WRITING, SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY, AMERICAN STUDIES

ABSTRACT

What do the signs "identity" and "alterity" point to within the economy of representation and the logic of simulation that govern the present era? How does the visual saturation of a screen-mediated life affect the study of identity? Where does the information overload within which we operate leave the production of knowledge about otherness? My goal in this project is not to resolve these questions, but rather to linger in them. Focusing on various portrayals of categorical identities in film, photography, and digital media, I utilize a semiotic analysis to examine the formulaic, repetitive maneuvers of signification practices that reproduce essentializing notions of racialized, gendered, or classed subjectivities. Threading through the work is the notion that not only is it impossible to know or accurately represent the other, but that for alterity to hold any meaning it must remain out of reach, foreign, inexplicable, and even threatening. Only then, I propose, does the significance of otherness shift from a surface-level difference to a mirror that reflects ethical inquiries in regard to our own existence and our place as a species on a rapidly changing planet.

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Introduction

In the science fiction novel *Solaris*, written by the Polish author Stanislaw Lem in 1961, a group of scientists attempt to explore the planet Solaris, whose orbit around two suns and between two polar gravitational pulls presents a baffling challenge to the known laws of physics. Observations and studies are made from a space station that can only hover above Solaris's surface, as the whole planet is covered in thick, flowing, ocean-resembling plasma. Unlike water, however, this plasma is made of unstable particles, so in addition to undulating, gushing, and rising in waves like any common fluid, is can also change form, consistency, and molecular structure. It is capable, for example, of arranging itself into spectacular, enormous formations that take the shape of landscapes, built environments, and living creatures (at times magnificently beautiful, at times grotesque and terrifying), and it often (but not always) responds to the stimuli generated by the space station's scientific experimentations with many such great displays. However, the spectacular arrangements are erratic, at times extremely violent, and at other times there is no response at all, and the "ocean" remains perfectly still, placid, and opaque. Despite decades of enthusiastic research and unprecedented volumes of collected data, Solaris remains an unfathomable mystery to the curious human mind. Repeated experiments yield inconsistent results, no patterns are ever established, and the more material accumulates, the more questions remain unanswerable. Does the plasma present a new form of life? Is there any kind of order or logic behind its capricious reactions? Is it conscious? Is it capable of reasoning? Of communicating?

This dissertation takes as its starting point the suggestion that alterity is a mystery so great that its potency lies precisely in the unanswerable questions it poses, rather than in the

answers the inquiring subject sets out to procure. Inspired by the allegorical elements in Lem's novel, which point to the pitfalls and blind spots of the scientific method and systematic knowledge production, it engages in a deconstruction of the basic paradigms of formal academic epistemologies and examines identity and alterity as they interact and clash with one another in a world that is being transformed by technological advances. The project explores the radical instability of a current "reality" dominated by machines and computers, devices and apps, virtual communication and artificial intelligence. What do the signs "identity" and "alterity" point to within the economy of representation and the logic of simulation that govern the present era? How does the visual saturation of a screen-mediated life affect the study of identity? Where does the information overload within which we operate leave the production of knowledge about otherness?

My goal in this project is to highlight the artificiality of popular visual and rhetorical representations that insist on divisions between "self" and "other" when those categorical definitions are in fact being increasingly voided of their legitimacy. Focusing on various portrayals of otherness in film, photography, and digital media, I utilize a poststructural aesthetic analysis to examine the formulaic, repetitive maneuvers of signification practices that reproduce essentializing notions of racialized, gendered, and classed subjectivities. Threading through the analyses is the notion that not only is it impossible to know or accurately represent the other, but that for alterity to hold any meaning it must remain out of reach, foreign, inexplicable, and even threatening. Only then, I propose, does the significance of alterity shift from a surface-level difference used to substantiate the self to a mirror that reflects ethical inquiries in regard to our own existence and our place as a species on a rapidly changing planet. Probing representational narratives as they emerge in a human

environment that is saturated with, defined through, and ruled by advanced technology and mass media, by the endless circulation of refracted, pixelated, regurgitated formations that are far removed from any point of origin, is it possible to concretize subjecthood and various subjectivities and to determine what makes them "real"? In the context of our contemporary, postmodern mediated existence, I suggest, even "real" must be put in quotation marks and can be critically probed and reexamined, as what the term means is no longer clear.

How are presumably undeniable distinctions between sameness and otherness created? As Edward Said (1978) argues, a careful examination of representational practices is necessary for comprehending the cultural, political, and epistemological mechanisms by which the "reality" of otherness is not only recognized but is, in fact, produced. The systematic dividing of the human species into dramatically divergent societies, cultures, races, or traditions has generated, over time, such a convincing, seemingly genuine certainty, that apart from entertaining idealistic theories of freedom and justice for all it is nearly impossible to bring a more unifying perspective into practice. But to operate according to the dominant logic of categorical distinctions between groups of people is to disregard the individual in favor of the collective and thus to automatically dehumanize not just the other but the self as well, for to underline group affiliation as what delineates identity is to generalize, reduce, and essentialize a complex and multifaceted particular existence. Furthermore, engaging with divisions, as Said points out, even when one is intent on dismantling them, is never without consequences. Every "us" and "them," regardless of what defines sameness and otherness, risks the negative effects of asymmetry, schism, acrimony, and violence (45).

My exploration of the tension between the "real" and the simulated contributes to a growing scholarship in American studies concerned with the effects of new modes of representation on the study of subjectivity, and with the corresponding questions regarding knowledge production in the age of overflowing information exchange. Centering my analysis at the conjunctions of digital and visual cultures, I follow the lines of inquiry set by Lisa Nakamura (2008), who was one of the first to dispel the notion that cyberspace was an impersonal, unbiased, pristine realm in which the race, gender, class, or sexual orientation of users were of no significance. While in its early days the Internet presented a potentially utopian medium through which identity could be reconfigured and reimagined as an unmarked, virgin virtual presence, its infiltration of every aspect of our lives has proven this avatar dreamland a false promise. With digital interactions becoming so commonplace they are in fact considered natural, expected, and essential to the function of society everywhere, it becomes clear that they are "inextricably tied to the contemporary racial project of producing volitional racial mobility in the service of new forms of capitalism" (30). The Internet in all its portals and applications can no longer be seen as the neutral, equalizing medium that it was once thought to be. Like most other media of popular and constant use (television, film, journalism, or the advertising industry), cyberspace doesn't merely represent preexisting subjectivities, but shapes and reinforces them through a seemingly inclusive celebration of differences that in effect feeds hierarchical economic, social, and political trends. As Nakamura emphasizes, there is room for much more work to be done in this area, and we must continuously reassess the fast-evolving virtual norms that direct our lives.

In her analysis of social media as a form of social ordering, Taina Bucher (2018) points to the fact that human existence has become so steeped in and dependent on computer technologies that individual identities rarely have meaning anymore outside our screened and mediated lives. The integration of human and machine is so totalizing that it may not make sense anymore to view algorithms as a mere tool in the hands of high-tech industries or economic and governmental entities. The computations themselves have come to possess political power so that what we still refer to as the "social" is in fact a programmed construction "articulated in and through computational means of assembling and organizing, which always already embody certain norms and values about the social world" (4). For example, social media updates are designed to stimulate user interaction in such a way that the more a user engages with the presented feeds, the more visible they become, and the constant "threat of invisibility" creates a cycle of partaking according to normalizing measurements of time spent on the platform and the number of clicks per certain time blocks. On Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and other similar apps, it is the technical infrastructure that molds and regulates social connections through profile availability and popularity. More than disciplining users in what Bucher terms "participatory subjectivity," I would add, the infrastructure of AI has the power to determine the user's very sense of individual identity, constructed through preferences, profile settings, uploads, searches, and "likes" or "dislikes."

Similarly, Ruha Benjamin (2019) exposes AI algorithms in marketing strategies, entertainment portals, and social media as the rising power that perpetuates, with cunning efficacy and alleged objectivity, the man-made systems of racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies. Just like our human eyes instantly register visual information to be interpreted by

the trained human brain according to categories of discernment and discrimination, search engines and coding apparatuses are able to record and process the most basic data a given user might deliberately or inadvertently submit by searching for certain products and information on the World Wide Web. For instance, Amazon, Netflix, Facebook, and other platforms that operate through tailored marketing do not need to gather any actual details about the race, gender, sexual orientation, or social status of the user/consumer. Maintaining a façade of sterilized objectivity, their algorithms rely on prior search histories as proxies through which to predict further purchase interests, generating lists of segmented suggestions and recommendations that "benignly" propagate race, gender, or class divides. Thus, Benjamin argues, economic recognition and informational detection replace both political representation and social engagement. "This transactional model of citizenship presumes that people's primary value hinges on the ability to spend money and, in the digital age, expend attention" (10). By browsing, choosing, scrolling, watching, clicking, and buying, we exercise our rights and responsibilities. The technology-mediated life, therefore, is increasingly the only life that matters—so much so that to opt out, to disengage from the Web, to return to analog, or even to delete certain apps is perceived as antisocial, if not borderline criminal—suspicious of dissent, evasion, or conspiratory rejection of the present social-political-economic order. In the context of these constructs of virtual participatory subjectivity, my analysis of visual media evaluates screened productions, popular Internet portals, and the hidden workings of AI systems not as static, mechanized objects or functions, but as dynamic forces that, much like the historical political movements of the past, induce dramatic material and cultural changes over time, shaping and modifying the living conditions and the very identities of individuals and groups across the globe.

Despite the open discursive outcries about inequality that flood social media and circulate freely online, hierarchical divisions between "same" and "other" have not crumbled. On the contrary—the advanced technologies of mediated representation further entrench them, turning racial, gendered, and classed taxonomies into timeless, borderless, ultimate truths. The visual culture of the past, which depended on material objects such as reels, prints, tapes, or projectors, as well as physical spaces such as movie theaters, galleries, libraries, or living rooms, is now unbound by these constraints. Hence, while the power of the visual to disseminate ideology and dictate inequality is nothing new, it has of late gained unprecedented proportions as it has transcended the limitations of time, space, and matter, to exponentially perpetuate itself in the realm of the virtual, the immaterial, and the eternal. It is true that not all digital representations, profiling, predictions, and personalizations are biasedly computed, but, as Benjamin (2019) suggests, enough are to merit careful interrogation. While existing social hierarchies are reinforced, she argues, novel methods of social control are being produced, and that means that "whenever we hear the promises of tech being extolled, our antennae should pop up to question what all that hype of 'better, faster, fairer' might be hiding and making us ignore" (48). My project argues that the theoretical examination of identity-reinforcing and alterity-generating mechanisms must heed this warning in a self-reflexive manner and pay alert attention to the fact that we, the scholars/users/consumers, no longer enjoy the vantage point of critical disengagement. The machines that enable research and writing, which were once stationary devices we could choose to use or not, turn on or shut off, are no longer optional but mandatory. How we operate, communicate, and do our work absolutely depends on them. And the screen, which was once distinct from the "real," is now touch-responsive and highly portable, fitting easily

in purses and pockets. Once connected, separation from the screen, from the device, from the Web, is unthinkable.

As my project communicates with the above and other contemporary works in American studies, it also revisits the philosophical and critical work of late 20th century postmodern theorists, creating a bridge between the visionary writing of Marshal McLuhan, Guy Debord, Paul Virilio, and in particular Jean Baudrillard, and present considerations of the effects the artificial, the virtual, and the simulated have on human existence. The global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing limitations enforced on many activities and interactions, and the turn to remote, digital configurations as substitutes for numerous human operations, I suggest, reframe the works of the science fiction writers and cultural theorists of previous decades as especially pertinent and useful for understanding the changes experienced by people not only in the U.S. but all over the world. Adding to the foundational historical materialism that grounds much of contemporary scholarship in American studies, my hope is to emphasize the potential of a poststructural approach to expand scopes of analysis. The examination of contemporary cultural productions through a semiotic lens highlights increasingly globalized signification practices that mass media and digital networks circulate in every country and every language, thus prompting the reconsideration of the function and importance of borders. Similarly, emphasizing the forward charge of technological advancements, which creates, as Paul Virilio ([2005] 2007) argues, "an accelerated temporality that affects customs and moral standards and art every bit as much as the politics of nations" (3), changes the meaning of historical timelines. Allowing for a philosophical, speculative inquiry to emerge, the open-ended span of interpretive semiotics

favors a contemplation of human existence as a whole species--a broadened perspective from which to assess familiar categories of identity.

David Harvey, for example, interrogates postmodern concerns with a clear focus on the reorganization of global capitalism, addressing the new levels of time-space compression that follow this restructuring through an analysis of the shifts in the material and the economic conditions of life. While he does point to postmodern aesthetics as fascinating and worth exploring for their complex, dynamic, seductive nature, he centers his work around the measurable and practical conditions that emphasize capitalist logic as the engine that drives postmodernity, thus rendering it a direct continuation of modernity's mass production, industrialization, and urbanization. Many American studies scholars have adopted a similar methodology, utilizing and elaborating on the critical ideas of historical materialism. Baudrillard, on the other hand, sees what he calls the hyperreal as a postindustrial or even postcapitalist development. In his view, the aesthetics of simulation create their own logic, apart from (although interweaved with) the motives and agendas of economic and political systems. If for Harvey (1990), postmodern developments are the result of "the more flexible motion of capital [which] emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism" (171), in Baudrillard's (1981) hyperreal "it is the whole traditional world of causality that is in question: the perspectival, determinist mode, the 'active,' critical mode, the analytical mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and its means" (30). Baudrillard's more radical view rejects the connections drawn between "the relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism" and the "fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality,

spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms" (Harvey 1990, 156). For him, the spectacle and ephemerality of the postmodern have swallowed up their own causal reference points to such a degree that the very historical and material perspectives that were once useful critical tools are becoming less relevant and may simply remain as symbolic acts of repetition with no actual hold on a "reality" that is increasingly more virtual than real.

As part of the shifting sensibilities presented by the logic of the postmodern hyperreal—the global networks of advanced communication technologies, AI systems, excessive information exchange, and the pervasive power of the image—Baudrillard explores the disappearance of signs and their referents into the vortex of representational simulation that permeates our consciousness and our knowledge production procedures. In his foretelling theorizing of postmodern human existence, Baudrillard sees the rapidly growing dominance of the virtual as a poststructural system of signs in which a phenomenon is no longer distinct or independent from its endless replication. Leading to an all-encompassing liquefying of familiar semiotic relations, layers upon layers of manipulated mediation distort the original meaning of the source material, generating signifiers that cannot reliably be connected to stable referents. The signs "identity" and "alterity," of course, are not exempt. Baudrillard's poststructural disappearance guides each of the dissertation's chapters toward a potential collapse of many stipulated taxonomies we tend to take for granted: locality, ethnicity, nation, race, class, gender, and—ultimately—humanity.

This collapse resonates with Jacques Derrida's understanding of poststructuralist deconstruction as a form of radical critique not only of linguistic formations but of political and social systems as well. Paralleling Baudrillard's disappearance, Derrida's concept of *différance* challenges common, often unnoticed dialectical and hierarchical features that

direct the production of meaning in any given text. When considering any system of signs, discursive or otherwise, *différance* points to both deferral and difference, highlighting the open-ended voids left by both. Deferral indicates the gap between signifier and signified; the notion that signs gesture toward but never fully convey the original thing they represent. In other words, the "essence" remains forever out of reach, mediated by signs whose true function is to summon more signs in an ongoing attempt to comprehend the true meaning of the source, which in turn remains further and further behind in endless suspension (1972, 7). At the same time, meaning making also depends on difference: the separation and juxtaposition of signs so that their value emerges through dualistic attributes, binary oppositions, and ordered taxonomies. These structural orders and their inevitable hierarchies, however, must be understood as arbitrary, just as linguistic signs themselves are arbitrary, and only represent the signified through agreed-upon connotations and denotations (1972, 10).

A personal, direct encounter with the other, as Emmanuel Levinas suggests, stands in stark contrast to the various mediated attempts to comprehend alterity. In such undeffered confrontations, an ethical inquiry arises on a precognitive, prelinguistic level, bringing to the surface the spontaneous question of relationality and responsibility, and this question is a most valuable source of self-reflection; a generative interruption in the fundamental understanding of one's place and purpose. "The other that is announced," Levinas ([1947] 1987) writes, "is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light." (43) Any attempt to "know" otherness, to define, classify, and thus seize it, therefore, is futile, as the light that is refracted only comes back to the knowing subject, to the self. The questions that baffle the Solaris scholars remain unanswered, and what further complicates the studying of the odd

planet is the fact that without exception, all the scientists who travel to it experience severe psychological breakdowns, and their work is interrupted by intense surges of the most painful of human emotions: grief, guilt, shame, regret, and suicidal ideations. Insomnia, disturbing dreams, hallucinations, and eventually terror-inducing visitations from long-dead people threaten not only the wellbeing of the space station's crew members, but the very foundations of scientific inquiry. Gradually, all logic, reason, order, and objectivity deteriorate and lose their hold. The momentous task of understanding the foreign planet's behavior becomes insignificant in the face of the urgent need to resolve the internal conflicts of the tormented individual self. It is as if while the scientists are conducting their research, examining, measuring, and assessing this extraterrestrial other, the other in turn is engaged in its own experiments, gathering and reflecting back the most private information stored in the astronauts' psyches.

The dissertation owes much of its overarching inspiration to Levinas, who does not present an ethical theory, nor point to conclusive answers to the moral dilemma of alterity, but instead engages in descriptive and interpretative exploration of intersubjective encounters. "The relationship with the other," he emphasizes," "is a relationship with a Mystery. The other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity, for exteriority is a property of space and leads the subject back to itself" ([1947] 1987, 43). Taking into account the axiomatic mystery of the Other, and thus the dialogic nature of the self, the dissertation puts Levinas's consideration for the ethical implications of alterity in conversation with Baudrillard's theory of disappearance to investigate the growing difficulty in tracing the contours of subjectivity. I look at contemporary representational circuits with the goal of deconstructing the imagery of "self" and "other" while exploring the speculation,

ambiguity, and uncertainty as legitimate and necessary components of processes of knowledge production

The first chapter investigates conceptions of subjectivity in contemporary American studies literature and its influential origins, creating an exploratory dialogue between several confluent theories that inform the study of identity and alterity. It examines the Marxist foundations of historical materialism and puts it in conversation with the poststructural ideas and methodologies explored by Baudrillard, Derrida, and others who view the concretizing of the subject in quantifiable terms as theoretically limiting due to the potentially essentializing tendencies of categorical distinctions. In recent years, many of the leading interventions in American studies have engaged with questions surrounding the epistemic limitations of academic practices, and of working in institutions of higher education that operate as neoliberal businesses. This means that within academia itself, critique of the American empire and its racialized, gendered, classed social and political orders must navigate surveilling and censoring from the outside, as well as potential methodological pitfalls from the inside. In order to avoid the often-undetectable hazards of epistemic violence, repeated calls are being made in the field urging scholars to seek non-traditional forms of theorizing and writing, and to vigilantly examine the efficacy of the critical work that is being produced. My aim in this chapter and indeed in the dissertation as a whole is to identify the challenges that a contemporary discussion of subjectivity involves, and to track possible routes that would disengage the discourse from its liberal-humanist confinements and allow it to move in alternate, perhaps more open, expansive, and dynamic directions.

Considering visual signs, mass media, and the world of entertainment as powerful tools for identity classification processes, the second chapter presents a close aesthetic

reading of several sample visual texts in an attempt to understand how images provide a sense of familiarity with the other, and hence a sense of "knowing," defining, possessing, and controlling both identity and alterity. The study looks at popular cultural attempts to contest and dissolve racial categories by exposing the arbitrariness of visual marks that differentiate "same" from "different." This arbitrariness, however, still carries with it the heavy baggage of history, and the symptoms of social stagnation that traps alterity in a prescribed container. Select scenes that tackle this debilitating arbitrariness are found in classics such as Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998), and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), as well as in more contemporary television shows such as *Dear White People* (Simien 2017) or *Unorthodox* (Winger 2020). These productions stand out in their intentional effort to dismantle essentialist constructs and disrupt contemporary notions of equality that multicultural discourses propagate while ultimately upholding long-standing racial hierarchies. Lingering on occurrences that reveal the performative aspects of racial identity in everyday life, the essay engages with moments that interrogate the promise of racial, ethnic, and cultural inclusion by unveiling the alleged neutrality of white dominance. Through often subtle dialogic clashes and challenging exchanges of gazes, the emptiness behind white hegemony is exposed, allowing for alternate narratives to surface. Reflecting on the ideological apparatuses of the hyperreal, and the deceptive nature of visual signs, the chapter questions not only typical racial formations but performances of resistance as well, especially those that rely too heavily on hidden kernels of essentialism. Is there any possibility, I ask, for moving beyond (or around) the boundaries of ordered taxonomies? For subverting the instant stereotyping that visual representation so easily produces, regardless of its declared intention?

The third chapter applies Baudrillard's semiotics of the hyperreal and Levinas's ethical inquiry of alterity to an analysis of mass-mediated representations of radical, threatening alterities. Looking at the ways in which, as Said (1978) argues, the other is produced by popular cultural knowledge, the chapter develops a comparative semiotic exploration that situates the COVID-19 global crisis alongside common forms of terrorism, suggesting that these parallel menacing unknowns evoke a moral question mark that, if carefully attended to, has the capacity to destabilize the self and offer an opportunity for a reassessment of a collective understanding of U.S. history, as well as a critical examination of a presumed human superiority over other species, the planet, and evolutionary processes. The potential, however, perceived and repeatedly marked as unwanted, is arrested by the mechanisms of simulation, as images, messages, and signs flood the screens that surround us, creating a sheltered existence that in itself becomes a mediated, virtual stream rather than a direct and tangible experience. Within the self-perpetuating systems of signs that circulate in the hyper-commodified realms of the simulated spectacle, identity and alterity circle around each other in repetitive, predictable patterns that ultimately rob both of their meaning and function. Looking for deconstructive openings that question contemporary meaning-making processes, the analysis aims to regard the invisible, the uncertain, and the erratic not as opponents but rather as useful elements of both knowing and being. This may lead, as Baudrillard (1981) suggests, to articulating subjectivity in a manner that "can remove us from the system's strategy of simulation and the impasse of death in which it imprisons us" (154).

The fourth installment expands on the thematic thread that runs through the previous sections, further exploring the notion that mass media, hypervisuality, and digital technologies alter human perception and affect our understanding of subjecthood. Focusing

on representations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work presents a semiotic analysis of

images and processes, drawing parallels between computational procedures and human

cognitive functions. The similarities are growing, I suggest, not only because we program

computers to imitate human activities and behaviors, but because artificial intelligence,

mechanized processes, and algorithms, in turn, gradually program us to operate in

accordance with prescribed, systematized, and highly predictable modes of thinking and

acting. The preconfigured methods of analysis used in designing AI, along with the two-

dimensional interface, are no longer confined to the hard drive or the screen; they penetrate

the human mind and dictate world views, sensory perception, social interactions, and how we

perceive the self in relation to the other. Even seemingly spontaneous struggles for social

equality, it appears, are subject to the laws of simulation and cash-nexus, and the mediated

mechanisms of the hyperreal quickly devour the contents of radical resistance, absorbing the

new into the spiraling cycles of perpetual regurgitation, leaving a shell of surface-level

activism in the spaces where actual refusal once was.

Looking at discursive articulations that systematically secure identity and alterity in

hierarchical structures that are ordered according to what is deemed central or peripheral, the

fifth and final chapter heeds the call made in recent years in American studies for an

ongoing, self-reflexive, conscious assessment of institutional practices of knowledge

production. The essay points to drawbacks of conventional protocols of research, writing,

and presentation, searching for ways to subvert traditional subject-object power dynamics.

Following Kandice Chuh's (2018) appeal for seeking out "pedagogies of dissent," as well as

Baudrillard's commentary on the university as an institution that produces information but

not necessarily meaningful knowledge, the chapter reflects on the inherent limitations of

familiar research methodologies in exploring nonhierarchical constructs of self and other, emphasizing the inherently essentializing and ultimately discriminatory division of subject and object that is at the core of dialectical thought. As noted by leading scholars in American studies, the discipline, despite its deep commitment to radical politics, innovative methodologies, and extra-institutional involvement with struggles for social justice, is still part of the university, which, as Baudrillard (1981) points out, is now "an uncertain institution" with an unclear function and ambiguous content (149). Like the university, the discipline itself is not exempt from the challenges of formulaic modalities of thinking, researching, and writing, and their intrinsic risk of reinflicting epistemic violence.

In a world governed by the laws of simulation, cash-nexus, and surplus reproduction, what is the worth and meaning of "knowledge"? Under the phantom aura of insight and progress, or revolution and dissent, what is it that is actually being produced? Even within the field of American studies, certain so-called "radical" ideologies that guide the examination of identity and alterity risk spiraling in predictable orbits. These circular trajectories often stay locked in their courses by the gravity of familiar categorical constructs and the so-called objectivity of formal presentation. Awareness of these restrictive patterns, I suggest, also entails navigating their drawbacks and seeking out alternative epistemologies that would allow for the other to emerge as an unclassified totality: an expression of a particular and fundamentally impenetrable mystery that lies beyond the concretizing constructs and defies the mastery and possession of "knowing."

<div align="center">*</div>

Like the enormous, incomprehensible displays erected by the plasma that covers Solaris, the other we set out to study, understand, write about, represent, and defend remains

a shape-shifting, opaque, impenetrable entity, not only unknown but unknowable. Rather than trying to resolve the enigma, my intention in this project is to consider this mystery as a generative philosophical and ethical question mark; a mirror of alterity that reflects back to the subject the chaos of its own being and the unintelligible disarray of a world in flux. Perhaps, as Levinas points out, there is good reason to fear alterity as we fear death. After all, both hold the power to expose the limits of existence and the confines of all that we as a species venerate: science, order, reason, progress, formal education, technology, the accumulation of possessions and power, and moral aspirations of justice, liberty, alliances, and solidarities. In the face of both alterity and death, all of these signifiers deteriorate and lose their meaning, much like the subject loses its agency and centrality. The work presented here suggests that this disappearance of meaning might not be a bad thing, as it is from this vanishing point that unexpected perspectives might emerge, and with them new ways of knowing, being, and relating

Chapter One

On the Enduring Question of Subjectivity

Who is the subject in the current historical moment? How might subjectivity be theorized within a cultural logic marked by the governing principles of advanced technology and consumerism, and by what Jean Baudrillard (1981) calls the hyperreal, which he defines as a state of increasing interdependency between the real and the simulated: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1)? Although theories of subjectivity and attempts to understand otherness evolve over time and generate inquiries that are significantly different from those that came before them, contemporary articulations of identity and alterity are part of an ongoing attempt throughout human history to assess and define an experience of being which, in essence, lies just beyond rational explanations. It is worth noting that explorations of the nature of the self have preoccupied philosophers, poets, and cultural critics throughout the ages and across all continents. But when talking about the designated eras pertinent to this project, broadly termed as both modernity and postmodernity, the theoretical frame of reference is mostly Eurocentric. From Descartes's "cogito ergo sum," the Enlightenment's philosophy of mind, or Hegel's idealism, to Husserl's phenomenological intersubjectivity and Sartre's existentialism in *Being and Nothingness*, the subject is generally imagined as an individual entity that is awake, conscious, and has direct access to reason, logic, and discerning cognitive processes (Zima 2015, 2). This entity is also thought to have agency, the capacity to act independently, and a desire to express itself, to make itself known.

One of the most challenging concerns for contemporary cultural critics and for American studies scholars in particular is the lingering view developed by the secular

humanism of the Enlightenment, according to which the human individual is seen as a solidified creature of reason and free will who possesses an innate, autonomous moral core. In terms of historical progressions, the dramatic political, economic, and industrial changes of late modernity had certainly inspired major revisions of this notion, making it possible to perceive the individual as a relational being embedded within systems of governance and social structures that orient, evaluate, and determine its worth. Nevertheless, this relational paradigm, in many ways, still retains a certain fundamental sense of agency which resides in the subject: a capacity for logical cognitive processes, conscious choice, and ethical critical discernment.

With the rise of global capitalism, the acceleration of technological developments, the decline of the nation state (and with it national identity) and the deterioration of "high" culture in favor of mass media and excessive consumerism, further reconfigurations occurred, and the subject is now often theorized as a multi-faceted moving collage of disjointed, shifting, at times contradictory parts. Much more fluid and variable, this conception of the subject is dependent on shifting contexts and multiple avenues for belonging and differentiating. Here, as Gianni Vattimo (2019) argues, Heidegger's theory of Being as a phenomenological gesturing (a movement toward something: an object of desire, the other, the future, death) and Nietzsche's understanding of the subject as a split presence in the process of *becoming* have greatly informed "the normal condition of postmodern human beings in a world in which the intensification of communication—freed at both the political and the technical level—paves the road to an effective experience of the individual as multiplicity" (16). Why then, even in the postmodernist flux that frees the subject from an imagined ontological, metaphysical solid kernel, do problems related to identity still persist?

Why is there still such a strong desire—an obsession, really—to define, categorize, study, and cohere different subjectivities in their varying expressions of relationality?

For Stuart Hall, the obsession with difference holds a great deal of significance precisely because positivist understandings of identity and alterity have *not* disappeared into a more fluid flow that might liberate the individual from the burdens of imposed classifications. Essentialist constructs remain intact, stubborn and fixed, and despite any new forms they may take, they still preside over the politics of representation, contributing to deepening ideological rifts, unequal distribution of resources, the alarming rise of fundamentalist and nationalist movements, and escalating violent eruptions around the globe. Referencing Raymond Williams, Hall (1980) argues that the study of subjectivity constructs must involve recognizing "those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves—in 'unexpected identities and correspondences' as well as in 'discontinuities of an unexpected kind'—within or underlying all social practices" (60). As Hall points out, organizing patterns are often concealed by the mass media, digital technology, and consumer culture, as globalization holds the potential for dislodging identity from its enduring taxonomies, from the ordering of groups according to unifying inscriptions, be they skin color, ethnic origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political leaning, cultural background, or market segments. Under this futuristic, utopian promise of leveled grounds, however, essentialist differentiations are still reinforced steadily.

Following Williams, Hall often employs a Marxist perspective to examine the obscuration of insistent taxonomies of difference, and this focus on historical materialism has guided much of the work that emerged out of the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies,

and in turn has also shaped the foundations of American studies scholarship. Further advancing the Marxist methodologies of the Birmingham School, Frederik Jameson has been another deeply influential figure in American studies. Like Hall, in Jameson's 1991 comprehensive volume, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he sees the subject as a product of globalized markets that engender classed, gendered, and racialized populations whose positioning adheres to the familiar hierarchical orders of past European colonialism. Examined through this lens, postmodern identities still derive their coherence from the lingering legacies of Eurocentric power structures, now replaced with U.S.-dominant neoimperialism.

Jameson views postmodernism as tightly wound with late capitalism, much in the same way that modernism emerged out of the Industrial Revolution, Fordism, and the spread of traditional monopoly capitalism. The aesthetic trajectories of modernism or postmodernism, however, are relevant to Jameson only to the extent that they advance the discussion of both as modes of production (1991, 406), and although the "hyperspace" of postmodernism does present a fascinating, "strange new landscape" (xxi), it is not too strange to be tackled by the Marxist dialectical approach. To understand postmodernism, Jameson writes, "the dialectic requires us to hold equally to a positive or 'progressive' evaluation of its emergence, as Marx did for the world market as the horizon of national economics, or as Lenin did for the older imperialist global network" (50). Following this logic in all his subsequent works, Jameson, who has been vastly influential in American studies, favors a politically progressive, reactionary focus on material conditions and observable practices over the concern with the phenomenology of lived experiences, the parts of those experiences

that may evade logic and methodological expression, and speculation as a form of critical inquiry.

Similar to Jameson and to Hall, David Harvey sees subjectivity as relational and conditional, and yet tightly bound to the postmodern reorganization of global capitalism and to shifts in the realms of the material and the economic. For Harvey too, the aesthetics of postmodernism are worth exploring for their complex, dynamic, seductive nature, but they too are cohered as expressions of the capitalist logic that is still the engine that drives postmodernity, thus rendering it a direct continuation of modernity's mass production, industrialization, and urbanization. Elaborating on Marx's idea of the time-space compression, Harvey (1990) emphasizes the changes in perception brought about by capitalism. After several identifiable key developments in the history of capitalism, he suggests, the postmodern era has introduced a novel aspect of the time-space compression, so that the concept no longer applies (as in Marx's original analysis) to the objective acceleration of manufacturing time and the far-reaching, rapid transportation of goods, but involves "processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves" (240). In Harvey's view, postmodernism signals a crisis in representation, a marked shift from the representational conventions of modernism, and of course from modernism's roots in the Renaissance.

According to Paul Virilio ([1980] 1991), however, the shifting modalities of representation (and of human cognition) produced by time-space compression do not necessarily denote "crisis." The hidden, yet perhaps more intriguing element in what we still conceptualize in terms of capital, wealth, and power, as Virilio notes, is velocity. In this

view, forces outside human control emerge as determining factors in recent transformations of social and political structures. How we experience events, then, is a result of existing in "a space which is speed-space," where both our environment and our sense of time are manipulated by electronic transmissions and cybernetic machines, and where therefore "man is present in this sort of time not via his physical presence, but via programming" (71). Examining historical eras from a postmarxist perspective, Virilio sees the acceleration that characterizes postmodernism as motivated not only by capitalist expansions but by the evolution of warfare. The technological advances of the present, in other words, are the byproducts of the military industry, where the most daring innovations are developed, and where the greatest scientists and high-tech experts are employed. But the accelerated processes and novelties of the war machine (exemplified best, perhaps, by the atomic bomb) acquire a life of their own, a logic of their own, and a particular aesthetics, which Virilio refers to as the "aesthetics of disappearance."

Where does the rushing forward of technological advances leave the subject? How do we proceed to reflect on what it means to be human and to exist in relation to other, different, foreign, unknown and unknowable humans? Do the historical formations of logic, subjectivity, and identity still stand the test of time? Like it or not, Virilio ([1980] 1991) argues, cultural criticism in its various forms must accept "the *fait accompli* of technology" (42). All contemporary cultural productions are embedded in a mechanized, digitized, screened matrix that has long ago detached itself from social, economic, or political preconceptions, from what we want to call "reason," "truth," or even "embodiment" and "awareness." We rely so heavily on artificial mediation that subjectivity itself, at least at it was once imagined, is disappearing from the scene, leaving an absence in the place where

wakeful presence once was (or was thought to be), and it is this representational specter of what once was—the ephemeral remainder—that demands grappling with.

Both Harvey and Jameson consider the postmodern time-space compression and the departure of representational practices from their origins as still dialectical, at least in terms of historical timeline formations. To evaluate their analysis now, three decades later, is to realize the possibility that new concerns have tipped some scales. In the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic, and under the pressure of fast-approaching ecological crises, between the notion expressed by robotics specialists that singularity is unavoidable (or has already happened) and articulated by geologists in regard to the end of the Anthropocene, the problem of history recedes in the face of the rising question of futurity. As Natalie Melas (2020) reflects, "epochality, not just as a cognitive or epistemological frame, but as experience, drops away, leaving me with a dissociated sense of obsolescence, anachronism severed from historicity" (Post45, "1990 at 30"). Reexamining the postmodern built environments (shopping malls, megaplex movie theaters, Las Vegas) and temporal experiences (air travel, instant communication, microwave cooking) that featured so prominently in the works of Jameson and Harvey, it is possible that the historical materialist, subject-centered approach to theorizing space is changing its meaning, as home entertainment, internet shopping, virtual conferencing, and instant messaging render both space and time irrelevant.

More aware of the deteriorating hold of epochality, Jean Baudrillard, a contemporary and critical interlocuter of Virilio's, turns his attention toward the future, and considers the obsolete as a generative opening for critical discourse. Parting ways with the strict historical materialism of Marxism, he takes on a theoretical position that is aligned with the

poststructural leanings of Jean-François Lyotard and the legacy of Jacques Derrida, Roland

Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Georges Bataille, among others who may be labeled as

postmarxist. In Lyotard's ([1979] 1984) view, for example, the mechanisms of

postmodernism, grounded as they are in mass media, rapidly evolving technology, and global

consumer culture, diminish the value of historical metanarratives and, in fact, reconfigure the

structures of the social and the political. As a result, he suggests that both the conservative

and progressive approaches are equally outdated, as both regurgitate old models of

diagnosing, assessing, and analyzing problems that emerge from a different kind of logic. "I

will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a

metadiscourse," he writes, "making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the

dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working

subject, or the creation of wealth." The postmodern, accordingly, can be viewed as

"incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiii–xxiv). For Lyotard, the aesthetics of the

fragmented, frantic, dynamic, recycled, overloaded hyperreal hold the key to an

understanding of this incredulity and its manifestations in the realms of the arts, language,

knowledge, science, politics, and, ultimately, human consciousness. Pre-established rules

lose their functional soundness here, and the familiar methods of discerning, categorizing,

and determining judgment are being called into question. Instead of turning again and again

to these methods, Lyotard suggests, we might want to consider adapting to the deceiving,

insubstantial, unstable nature of simulation, virtual representation, and what artist Nam June

Paik termed the "electronic superhighway."

Figure 1. Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii. Video installation by Nam June Paik, 1995.

If for Harvey (1990), postmodern developments are directly related to "the more flexible motion of capital [which] emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism" (171), for Baudrillard (1981), in the postmodern hyperreal, "it is the whole traditional world of causality that is in question: the perspectival, determinist mode, the 'active,' critical mode, the analytical mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and its means" (30). Baudrillard's radical interpretation, therefore, expands the connections drawn by Harvey and Jameson between "the relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism" and the "fleeting

qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms" (Harvey 1990, 156). The poststructural approach, then, sees what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal as a postindustrial or even postcapitalist development: an independent system in which the practices of simulation create their own logic, apart from the motives and agendas of economic systems.

Within American studies, it seems that modernist notions of the individual still underlie much of the recent calls for heightened awareness of discursive pitfalls of pinning subjectivities to generalizing taxonomies of ethnic, economic, and cultural markings. Aesthetic inquiry, phenomenology, and the elevation of non-normative expressions of identity formation are all recent efforts to disengage the discipline—and the Humanities as a whole—from its intricate ties with Eurocentric liberalism and the neocolonial agendas of representation that perpetuate the marginalization and silencing of certain populations. Nevertheless, the lingering view of the subject as an embodied, rational being of agency and reason presents an ongoing challenge. Aesthetic inquiry, as Kandice Chuh (2019) argues, allows for a shift away from the rigid dogmas of traditional paradigms of subjecthood, making room for different epistemologies that favor modes of knowing and being that defy the prescribed constructs of secular humanism (26). The coherent, stable, self-contained, individualized subject that has been articulated in modernist literature and philosophy, Chuh argues, has served as a model on which to formulate the academic study of identity and alterity, the various disciplines of the Humanities, and society as a whole. This liberal humanist conception of the subject has been (and still is) so instrumental in shaping social structures, that we are often blind to the ways in which it eliminates other ways of engaging with self-other dynamics, ways that are more aligned with the postmodern, poststructural

dispelling of agency, consistency, uniformity, and rationality. In her close readings of experimental, marginalized, "ethnic" literature, Chuh emphasizes "poiesis in critique" as a way "to amplify, by routing through aesthetics, the presence and potential of alternatives to liberal humanist onto-epistemologies that give rise to the narrow definition of the human around which the modern condition has been organized" (3). The liberal humanist notion of the subject as a rational, independent individual can be seen as a guiding force in contemporary social and political orders, and to a large extent is the root of neocolonial global power configurations and the persistent inequalities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or ability. To counter these effects, throughout her book Chuh encourages scholars in the humanities to turn to "illiberal" ways of conceptualizing identity and move towards "subjectless" modalities of knowledge production.

Similarly, in his 2012 *The Reorder of Things*, Roderick Ferguson examines the "insurgent articulation of difference" (27) that began with the student movements in the 1960s, emphasizing the subsequent institutionalization and containment of the radical resistance with which these movements attempted to destabilize racialized structures of power in the U.S. Ferguson's study of the processes of co-opting and disarming the struggle for equality, which echoes Jodi Melamed's concerns about the academy in her 2011 *Represent and Destroy*, sets up a dialectical juxtaposition between the "politics of absorption" (27) and the potential revolution staged by the student movements over half a century ago. Like Melamed, Ferguson argues that the university's administrative power "had to affirm difference to demonstrate institutional protocols and progress" (214) by establishing ethnic, race, gender, and sexuality studies departments and curricula. Through broadening the ranges of representation, the budding revolution was curbed and absorbed into the normative

discourses of higher education, serving, in the end, not the newly represented minorities, but the neoliberal agendas of the institution, which could now capitalize on its revised policies of diversity and affirmative action. This is the essence of identity politics in higher education, which is still a source of potential epistemic violence.

The absorptive suppression of the attempted insurgence, writes Ferguson, "divulges a story not captured in the taken-for-granted analytics of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, and their descendants," as "typical poststructuralist and postmarxist theorizations leave out the student movements that yielded the interdisciplinary fields" (2012, 5). Such a declaration, I suggest, is worth reevaluating. Baudrillard (1981), for one, credits the French student uprising of 1968 for pointing to the impasses of knowledge, and for presenting an "explosive contradiction of knowledge and power in the university, and, at the same time, through symbolic (rather than political) contagion in the whole institutional and social order." Such an eruption, as Baudrillard sees it, was in fact bound to quickly lose its meaning in the so-called "victories" it had achieved in terms of representation and inclusion. Furthermore, our conception of the powers that are responsible for the suppression may require a reexamination, since "power itself, after knowledge, has taken off, has become ungraspable—has dispossessed itself" (149). In the long-term operations of the system in all its institutional iterations, Baudrillard suggests, both knowledge production and power structures are becoming more and more obscured by the methods, procedures, and formulas that keep them in motion and by the perpetual discursive practices that simulate their purported function to the point where their actual meaning can no longer be determined with effectual measures of coherence and clarity.

Because the title of Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things* is a direct reference to Michel Foucault's 1966 *The Order of Things*, it is also worthwhile to revisit Foucault's original contribution. The analysis of the meaning of knowledge in Foucault's work focuses on representation, and the centrality of representation in practices of knowledge production. As means of representing and decoding information change over time, world views and our understanding of what "truth" is consequently change as well over the course of history. If different time periods can be characterized by the different modes of learning and presenting knowledge exercised in the sciences and in higher learning in general, then an inquiry into what distinguishes the contemporary episteme (the rules and methods that govern a system of knowledge production) may reveal the limitations and blind spots of current representational practices. For Foucault, historical processes of change in epistemes occur in incremental shifts over time, and in the big picture of these gradual transitions, single events such as the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s do not hold up as a significant source that merits continuous attention. In fact, in his view, to seek an "origin" to courses of development is a futile endeavor, a mark of the refusal to come to terms with the philosophical paradox of an evolving culture that generates "knowledge" in excess while draining actual knowing of its ability to provide meaning. In a historical period marked by the rise of the machine, the multiplicative simulation technologies through which signs keep slipping away from their referents, and the exponentially growing circulation of information, the subject itself becomes less and less substantial, the imaginary autonomous command invested in the term "Man" by the Enlightenment already dissolving into an inane state of indeterminacy. As Foucault writes, "it is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a

lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think" (342). Disappearance, in other words, could be a generative place of speculation, creative analysis, and aesthetic inquiry, rather than a dead end from which we must escape by rematerializing subjectivity in an attempt to find our origin stories and thus make sense of our place in the empirical world.

Treating the logic of disappearance as a generative source of new epistemologies seems to fit with several self-reflexive trends in contemporary American studies. In the 2013 issue of the American Quarterly, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson's presidential address at the ASA annual meeting calls for a deeper and more determined analysis of U.S. imperial legacies, both historic and current, both domestic and foreign. By tracing the course of the American empire, he argues, scholars resist the oppressive, nationalistic mechanisms of knowledge production, while working towards an applicable critique of current manifestations of U.S. military might and economic power, which must be examined in conjunction with classed, racialized, and gendered inequalities. Jacobson is particularly interested in institutionalized disparities in the world of higher education, and American studies, he notes, "is especially well placed to document, recount, and situate the history of the institution, from the first land grants and the professionalization of the disciplines to the current trend of corporatization that menaces the university's core mission" ("Where We Stand: US Empire at Street Level and in the Archive," June 2013,) To honestly assess institutional and disciplinary practices, however, it might also be useful to reexamine the definition of "knowledge" and to account for the ways in which the age of information drains the term from its original signifying powers. When Jacobson stresses that "students are *not* clients or customers and ideas are *not* commodities; knowledge *cannot* be manufactured,

packaged, and distributed as if it were a snack food" 287), he is in effect calling attention to the fact that, despite our best efforts, that is in fact a fairly accurate description of the state of higher education today. In this call to action, recommitting to the cause of public education in the face of ongoing budget cuts, administrative reorganizations, and the shift toward the business model must connect the discursive denunciations of the American Empire with "street level" solidarities aiming to foster egalitarianism and social justice. To resist the corporate practices of the university, then, means to insist on returning to the "core mission" of offering equal and affordable access to quality education and continually striving to promote democratic practices, civic freedoms, and cross-cultural alliances. From the radically poststructural viewpoint of thinkers like Foucault or Baudrillard, however, the question must be asked: Is that even possible? Have not those freedoms and alliances that we advocate themselves turned into empty assertions of outdated solutions? Do they not mechanically replicate the student resistance movements of the 1960s or other glorified historical moments of uprising that have since been emptied of their meaning and exhausted by cycles of repeated simulation?

In 2015, Lisa Duggan continues along the same lines of scholarly activism when she justifies the ASA's vote for an academic boycott of Israel as part of the many avenues taken in American studies to intellectually condemn settler colonialism, imperial violence, and severely uneven political power dynamics, siding unapologetically with "those without power." American studies scholars are, Duggan declares, "prison abolitionists, transgender warriors, Native and indigenous activists, union organizers, critical curators, artists, musicians and performers, and more, as well as scholars" ("The Fun and the Fury of Transforming American Studies," American Quarterly, June 2015, 291). Work done in the

field, therefore, requires not only a probing inquiry into the mechanisms of empire, but a committed engagement with social movements; a "revolutionary consciousness," which she admits might sound outmoded and prescriptive, and yet, precisely because it points to the world of phenomenology, feeling, and aspiration, it is an important component of the general position American studies scholarship must take, one that understands the conditions of life under the current power structures as lacking, as not enough, as urgently needing improvement.

Further pursuing this urging for action, accountability, and self-reflexivity, Kandice Chuh's 2018 presidential address encourages members of the American Studies Association to delve deeper into an investigation of the liberal and neoliberal ideological foundations on which academic institutions in the U.S. were built. These foundations, as she demonstrates in her work, still dictate modes of researching, teaching, and writing, and are the guiding forces behind recent attacks on and restrictions of academic freedoms. The discipline must fight the suppression of scholarly work that critiques the U.S. as an empire and must keep tackling the hierarchical structure of the empire, namely racism, settler colonialism, and the late-capitalistic exploitation of people, cultures, natural resources, landscapes, and ecosystems. To counter the limitation of the nationalist, neoliberal agendas, Chuh advocates "a pedagogy of dissent": "an organized approach to un/learning grounded in the world and founded in generosity and compassion, understood to be essential to social transformation" ("Pedagogies of Dissent," American Quarterly, June 2018, 168). Here again is an attempt to disengage from the nationalistic, neoliberal strategies of institutional management while holding on to a familiar view of the subject—especially the educator—as capable of grand feats of social change.

However, as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2003) demonstrates, there is a certain risk in using the rhetoric of dissent and revolution. Saldaña-Portillo's work reveals the striking similarities between the language used by modern revolutionary movements and the Enlightenment-informed expressions of a model subjectivity that are grounded in Eurocentric, normative theories of individual as well as collective agency and of Man's transformational potential. The language of social change itself might construct the liberation of the subaltern in familiar epistemologies that are gendered and racialized. In its sweeping assertions of opposition, such rhetoric can be dismissive of nuance and particularities. Taking up the secular humanistic notions of Man's central place in the universe as a generator of change, many resistance movements passionately adopt, in effect, the very language of the oppressive system they attempt to reject. The paradigms of activism, transformation, and transcendence, Saldaña-Portillo suggests, may have the ironic effect of silencing and objectifying the very people the revolution sets out to liberate, fortifying, paradoxically, the exploitative political-economic agenda of neocolonial capitalism.

The mission of reconfiguring national and imperial agendas while actively supporting the struggles of social movements places American studies scholars in a delicate place that can be traced back to Gayatri Spivak's (1988) problematizing of institutional scholarship engaged in postcolonial critique. Spivak's main concern in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is that as academics working in Europe and North America attempt to give voice to and "empower" previously or presently marginalized peoples, they in fact, by virtue of working within prescribed theoretical frameworks and representational methods, reaffirm Eurocentric legacies of political, cultural, and epistemological domination. Spivak points to the ways in which progressive theory and criticism are entrenched in the same rhetorical protocols of the

very imperialist regimes they aim to unsettle. The resulting discourse, more often than not,

aims to know, classify, analyze, and ultimately possess subaltern populations by confiscating

and appropriating their historically silenced voices. Discouraging scholars from speaking *in*

the name of the subaltern, Spivak suggests making more room for the omissions and lacunas:

the empty spaces created by systemic oppression, exploitation, and dispossession. Rather

than seeking to fill them up, or to recover and rescue missing voices, she argues, institutional

academic discourse should engage with the impossibility of representation, treating it as a

generative, critical tool in a process of unraveling the dynamics, conditions, and mechanisms

of representational practices.

The fine line between the desire to give the silenced subaltern a voice and the

possible epistemic violence that doing so entails is also at the core of Wendy S. Hesford's

2006 *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms,* in which she

interrogates the language and visual signs used by international human rights organizations to

advance justice and equality. The verbal and visual representations that advocate the

empowering of "those without power" often repeat—albeit unintentionally—Eurocentric

political, cultural, and moral definitions of subjecthood, thus, in effect, maintaining the

unbalanced relations between "self" and "other." In this context, provocative images and

descriptions of injustice and suffering position those who do have power in the role of

superior benefactors who are called to rescue, liberate, and redeem the less fortunate. Here

again, attempts to study, know, and advocate for the other are problematic because they risk

the ironic rhetorical locking of that other inside an eternal victimizing cage while

inadvertently perpetuating hegemonies grounded in race, class, and gender hierarchies.

Similarly questioning not just the language but also the imagery of a "revolutionary consciousness," Leigh Raiford's (2011) work examines the ways in which American social movements have used photography in particular as a tool of resistance. Her analysis shows how iconic images that were circulated widely with the intention to promote social justice "become integral to processes of national, racial, and political identity formation" (3). On the one hand, visual articulations of resistance were successfully deployed by early twentieth-century anti-lynching campaigns, the civil rights, and the black power movements to mobilize participants, publicize goals, narrate histories, and construct visible identities for marginalized groups marked for racial exclusion. Visual self-representation "offered activists a seemingly democratic and versatile medium through which they could visually reference, reframe, or reject dominant political categories" (9). And yet, Raiford warns, we must be careful not to glorify this historical reclamation of black identity, because much like words and perhaps even more so, images are prone to capturing and fixing identities, underpinning alterities, and holding subjectivities captive in designated ontological taxonomies. This warning resonates with Spivak's cautioning against idealizing the subaltern's missing voice as the ultimate antidote to Eurocentric articulations of subjectivity, especially those that, against best intentions, essentialize the other as Other while appropriating its alterity in the name of resistance and progress.

If poststructuralism can be used to destabilize the potentially essentializing qualities of visual and rhetorical representation, it also raises a legitimate theoretical concern in regard to the epistemic dissolving of the subject, and to the presumably dead end of disappearance, erasure, and thus the potential further silencing of those without power. In response to theories that were getting too abstract, too far away from "real" life, and to the radical,

nihilistic threat of complete eradication of human agency, the centering of affect, according to Patricia Clough (2010), proposed "a substantive shift in that it returned critical theory and cultural criticism to bodily matter, which had been treated in terms of various constructionisms under the influence of poststructuralism and deconstruction" (206). Like phenomenology before it, affect theory is an attempt to revive the dynamism of the human as an embodied, autonomous, active agent in a concretely material world, thereby countering the poststructural disappearance of the subject into hyperreal, hologramic dimensions.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the disintegration of the individual subject into a fragmented, origin-less configuration that might present a fissure from which to disengage both "self" and "other" from their conventional, dichotomized understandings. Contrary to historical materialism, phenomenology, and affect theory, which retains the understanding of identity and alterity as intricately tied to processes of production and consumption, and to observable political power structures, Foucault and Baudrillard argue that the postmodern hyperreal presents a new logic based on the notion of the void, of abstraction, and of disappearance. Within this void, the individual subject, whether self or other, loses its substantiating qualities to an accelerated process of immaterializing. Advanced technology, social homogenization, alienation, and the commodification of everything (not only all material objects but also ideologies, moral principles, and identities) lead to reification, a Marxist term that refers to the conflation of subject and object in the context of commodity fetishism, where commercial items become infused with non-functional qualities such as success, status, happiness, comfort, etc., while ideas, concepts, and values are reduced to things that can be bought and sold in the ever-circling marketplace of signs. The human subject too, is accordingly reified, objectified and abstracted, turned into a flattened image

laden with identity demarcations that have no clear origin. Within the current system of representation, as markets of exchange, mass media, and the virtual realms govern all forms of social relations, individuality, self-determination, and the presumed human potential to produce change no longer hold much validity. Instead of insisting on a return to an origin narrative that might procure a redemptive reassertion of human potentiality, poststructuralism suggests, it is perhaps more useful to confront disappearance on its own terms, as an unresolvable baffling paradox, seeking not to restore a presumed fullness of existence but creatively exploring the possibilities that lie in the nothingness of being.

       As Foucault, Baudrillard, and Virilio suggest, the ways in which advanced technology is evolving in conjunction with, and yet apart from, the familiar structures of political governance and social ordering signals a different kind of logic within which to reconfigure specific politics of relations and, on a larger scale, the human species' place in the world. Deeply penetrating every aspect of human life, technology operates its own mechanism of deference, where all interactions are designed to mediate and suspend, and where the disappearance of the "real" leaves the subject in a state of passive anticipation rather than active participation. The electronic circuits of the digital and virtual realms dictate and organize our workplaces, social interactions, and daily experiences. Our very identity, John Cheney-Lippold (2017) argues, is constructed by machines. From the basic level of physical existence (health, fitness, family planning, the diagnosis and treatment of disease) to metaphysical practices (meditation, yoga, bible study, or higher education), everything we do depends on networks of algorithms and the high-definition allure of simulation. Complex computations determine the information we get, the connections we maintain, the purchases we make, the things we consume, and the political, social, or environmental activism we may

choose to participate in (24). In truth, machines are in charge of both the functions and

perceptions that define who we are and how we see ourselves, others, and what we call

reality.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard suggests that "a revolution has put an

end to this 'classical' economics of value, a revolution of value itself, which carries value

beyond its commodity form into its radical form… beyond all reference to a real" (1993, 7).

Traditional capitalist dynamics of value exchange, therefore, no longer hold their original

meaning, because it is the symbolic that has come to dominate human perception in all areas

of life, from material products and services to concepts, ideologies, and representational

formations. The one thing, however, that stands outside the circuits of symbolic value

exchange is death. Death, Baudrillard demonstrates, is completely abstracted, and while in

the past it did have a place in religious, political, or artistic systems of signs, today its only

symbolic value is that of the absolute negation of life. As the totality of the negative, the role

death has acquired within the abstracted signification circuits of the hyperreal is that of the

ultimate Other—an alterity that must be fiercely rejected, denounced, and condemned.

We are very much concerned with distorted representation and exclusion practices of

the racialized other, the poor, the mentally or physically handicapped, queer and

transgendered people, women, immigrants, indigenous people, the elderly, or the

incarcerated. But "at the very core of the 'rationality' of our culture," writes Baudrillard, "is

an exclusion that precedes every other… preceding all these and serving as their model: the

exclusion of the dead and of death" (1993, 126). Before the human other, or perhaps

embedded in it, death is the primary negation of the self that in our times is an unspeakable

abomination that holds no symbolic value. Examining this fundamental exclusion of death is

an apt example of how poststructural methodologies can shed light on cultural workings that tend to remain hidden and yet have a profound effect on our daily lives.

According to poststructuralist logic, sign systems can be defined largely by what they abhor and banish. Foucault (1966), for example, argues that a society that is obsessed with expelling the mentally ill, the criminal, or the sexually "different" is, in fact, plagued with precisely the same madness, moral degradation, and perversion it imagines and condemns in the exorcised populations. For Baudrillard (1993), it is the adamant rejection of death that signifies a dying society: a culture of disappearance where all meaning, including that of human subjectivity, is being lost in the transference to the virtual realms. A global pandemic, for example, is perceived and represented as a menacing threat that must be avoided at all costs, at the same time that the physical death of thousands is obscured by graphs, diagrams, daily and hourly reports, expert predictions and calculated projections. The methodical tracking of the virus gives the illusion of reason, containment, and control, while the actual dead are quickly and easily "thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a role to play" (126). Which brings up the question, Are we? What is the role of the living in the fragmented, pixelated, remote-controlled world of the hyperreal? With our bodies vulnerable, helpless, and confined, our minds roam free in the alternate universes of cyberspace. All aspects of our identities are being uploaded, processed, and backed up by our various electronic devices. We carefully watch the incessant newsfeeds that sensationalize mortality rates, death curves, and infection statistics, mostly unaware of the power of simulation to produce an illusion of reality where the visual models of scientific assessments reassure the living that someone is in charge, that measures are being taken to

stop the spread of the virus, that a vaccine is on its way, and that soon this will all end and we

will get back to "normal." The next question, naturally, would be, What is "normal"?

Chapter Two

Mass Media and Mass Alterity

The obsession with seeing difference seems to be a human trait that has long ago lost its

practical purpose. As vision has evolved to form the dominant sense that dictates perception,

representational imagery takes precedence over any other mode of understanding, knowing,

and experiencing. The unbalanced reliance on the visual generates systems of classification

that are securely fortified by the media: by simulations and reproductions that magnify

differences and tightly connect the signifier "identity" with surface visual referents that are

easily coded and recoded in the symbolic spheres of the postmodern hyperreal. The

unprecedented domination of the spectacle arises through mechanisms of visual production

that themselves operate as a directive force, so that the image as well as the medium conjoin

to guide viewers' eyes and cognitive processes, to shape mass perceptions, and to uphold

hierarchical categories of difference. Through images that aestheticize—and thus

legitimize—a particular point of view, visual cultural production reflects at the same time

that it constructs a racially-organized "reality." And unlike other historical systems of

domination (dictatorships, theocracy, colonialism, slavery), visual media has transcended the

need for coercion and physical force. On the contrary: simulation apparatuses work by

attraction and seduction, by offering viewers constant stimulation and tantalizing glimpses of

appealing fantastical possibilities while always remaining efficiently veiled as either

objective information or harmless entertainment. Not a particular person or government, the

true power of our times is the media itself, which, as Jean Baudrillard (1981) suggests,

operates outside the political, in the pure realm of circulation, where all ideologies operate

under the supreme laws of supply and demand. Like any other commodity, any agenda of the

social or the political "is dependent on mass production and consumption. Its spark has disappeared, only the fiction of a political universe remains" (26). By extinguishing all sparks, the media disarms both subjects and objects so that a mesmerized, subdued tranquility is achieved as the desired status quo, flattening all oppositional currents onto the smooth surface of the screen.

Within the flatlands of the hyperreal, however, identity and alterity still have their roots in the social and racial hierarchies of past empires. The racialized other, it appears, is an inescapable product of European colonialism, and remains an organizing sign that can be deconstructed but not dissolved. It is a convenient conceptual habit, as Baudrillard (1993) argues, to cling to the definition of the other as either the dreaded enemy or the oppressed victim (88). As cultural signs that are embedded in colonial legacies, both understandings of the other do not contest racial formations but rather reinforce them. Mediated representations make that especially clear by focusing on seeing difference rather than contending with an alterity as that which could never be represented, never fully understood. This chapter focuses on examples of popular cultural attempts to question and dissolve racial divides. Many such contesting representations point to the superficiality of visual marks that sustain social hierarchies as well as to the cultural stagnation that insists on containing alterity and repressing its inquisitive potential. Comparing and contrasting classics such as Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000)*,* Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998), and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) with contemporary productions like Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2015) and Anna Winger's *Unorthodox* (2020), the analysis highlights the performative reframing of racial identity constructs and the destabilizing of multicultural discourses that ironically work to uphold long-standing racial categories. Examining cinematic moments that challenge

neoliberal notions of racial, ethnic, and cultural inclusion, I consider the effectiveness of such contestations in light of the deceptive nature of visual signs, which inadvertently often reinforce positivist constructs and allow the viewer to "know" otherness and thus appropriate and disarm it.

In her analysis of the conjunctions between cinema and anthropology, Fatimah Rony (1996) points to late 19th and early 20th century studies of Indigenous peoples as the origin of European science's obsession with racial variance as pathology. "Discoveries," she suggests, hinged on "the desire to see 'difference,' and to establish iconographies for recognizing difference instantaneously" (32). Anthropologists would present their findings in public science fairs in big cities around Europe and North America, and "native villages" were recreated for the enjoyment of visitors. In these prototypical villages, Indigenous specimens were performing their "primitive" daily lives for "civilized" white patrons as part of an educational experience that also functioned, clearly, as pure entertainment. But what the curious patrons occasionally learned is that while they were unabashedly watching the bodies and faces of the "savages," those very bodies and faces watched them back, in an exchange that was charged with the potential to radically reverse the presumed power structure. The "savages" too had eyes, and innate curiosity, and so, "Visitors to the fair were meant to 'see anthropology,' but what they were seeing was not often comfortable: the gaze returned" (41). And, as Rony speculates, "Perhaps with a third eye, the performers at the fair were aware of being viewed as objects of ethnographic spectacle, and resisted this status by subverting the illusion of scientific voyeurism" (41). This returned gaze, according to Rony, can be not only uncomfortable, but actually potentially threatening to the seemingly immune positioning of whiteness at the top of the social-racial order.

The fundamental nature of anthropological studies aimed at classifying various groups of people, as Baudrillard (1981) points out, is to obscure the very human they attempt to comprehend. "The logical evolution of science is to distance itself increasingly from its object, until it dispenses with it entirely: its autonomy is only rendered even more fantastic—it attains its pure form" (7–8). "Savages," therefore, are doomed by science to forever embody primitivism. They are "frozen, cryogenized, sterilized, protected to death, they have become referential simulacra, and science itself has become pure simulation" (8). The open-air educational fairs of past centuries, contemporary indoor museums, and exponentially growing digital repositories all ensure the continued fossilization of Indians. The idea that ethnography's preoccupation with the distilment of alterity only applies to certain unfortunate groups and not others, however, is a misguided presumption. It is naive, says Baudrillard, to assume that the Third World and oppressed non-white minorities are the sole victims of ethnography's violence; its hijacking of the real, its hallucination of truth. We have all become specimens, obliged to perform an assigned role, compelled to operate "under the sign of dead differences, and of the resurrection of differences" (8). Difference, in Baudrillard's view, should not be eliminated, for its function as a disruptive force is crucial. The oppositional gaze of the savage is a potent mirror held before science, there to reveal the compartmentalization of the scientific object as "equal to the confinement of the mad and the dead" (8). Mirroring, mimicking, reversing—these are the poststructural functions that push against the disappearance of the real. It is not necessarily a way out, but it is a conscious illumination of the violence inherent in knowledge production.

Alterity hinges on the element of surprise lurking in the returned gaze, in the bold resistance to being known, and in the unsettling disruption in a relational system in which

subjectivity, identity, and performance are prescribed by a strict social hierarchy. Writing about the act of looking as a charged reclamation of power, bell hooks (1992) suggests that the long history of black people's positioning as the other on display, and the repressive mechanisms that regulated, forbade, and punished (at times by death) the returned gaze, had produced an overwhelming, rebellious need to look, to stare back. "Even in the worst circumstances of oppression, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (16). The oppositional gaze, which was often the only tool of resistance available to the subjugated subaltern, goes mostly unnoticed in historical records, but deserves critical recognition as the one consistent key intervention that stripped whiteness of its assumed neutrality, exposing it as an artificiality, a blind and blinding hegemonic construction.

From its very early days, cinema, much like European and later American imperialism, has assumed whiteness to be the default standard from which other races then deviate. While obviously holding a position of power at the top of the racial hierarchy that dictates social ordering, in the Eurocentric representational imagination "white" does not indicate a racial group, a distinct culture, or even a skin tone. On the contrary; it is in fact the blank, unmarked category that indicates humanity in a most nondescript way, and under this general blankness people are distinguished through their personal traits and individual character. This perception of whiteness as norm, as a universal model for humanity, is in fact precisely what enables white hegemony to maintain itself in a seemingly natural configuration. As Richard Dyer (1997) argues, white people do not see themselves as superior; they are convinced that they are "just people," and it is because they understand themselves as the ordinary human standard that they "seem not to be represented to

themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized, and abled" (3). Thus, a hierarchy is preserved in which, against this assumed neutrality of color, minority others exhibit unique physiognomies, character traits, or cultural marks that set them apart and give them their unique racial identity. This process of racialization has come to be accepted so widely that it appears, for the most part, as absolutely natural. In this way, whiteness as a social infrastructure becomes synonymous with racism, an equivalence made discernible by the returned gaze.

In the film *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1998), for example, the whiteness-as-racism configuration functions as central to understanding indigeneity. The plot follows two young men, Victor Joseph (played by Adam Beach) and Thomas Build-the-Fire (Evan Adams), as they take a long road trip from Idaho to Arizona. On the Greyhound bus, Victor teaches Thomas how to be a "real Indian." But what does "real Indian" mean? Passing through classic U.S. Western desert scenery, Victor instructs Thomas: "First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic." As Thomas practices looking stoic, Victor affirms: "You gotta look mean, or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean." Victor's idea of the image he needs to project to the outside world is based on his double consciousness: on the need to look a certain way in a hostile world, and the image of the mean Indian he adopts that offers protection by way of fulfilling white expectations. Ridiculing Thomas for watching *Dances with Wolves* too many times and performing the white-pleasing stereotype of the noble savage, the medicine man, or the storyteller, Victor himself is trapped in another stereotype, that of the self-possessed, spirited warrior.

Is there such a thing anymore as a real Indian, or any "real" other for that matter? In a film, on the screen, young Native Americans appear to be wrestling with their identity. They emerge from a material experience of life on the reservation, where they perform certain roles within a community of sameness. In that context, Thomas can wear glasses, be a geek, smile for no reason, and believe in fairytales. This is his individual, peculiar character, the self that is independent of the group. That self, however, must be eliminated when traveling outside the reservation. The image Indians carry with them into the outside world is not of their own making—it is an imitation of the marks of alterity that are being maintained by hundreds of years of reinforcement by repetition.

There is always tension in the attempt to emerge free out of dynamics that are by nature dependent. Group identity is a product of this game, it is defined by the effort to maintain uniformity through alterity, a process that is, more often than not, self-defeating. The white world maintains its identity by repeatedly pointing to difference, to the physical and cultural marks that make up an essentially imaginary Indian. The Indian, in turn, imitates those tropes at the same time that he mimics select white ways, constructing an identity that has little to do with what a "real" Indian is, once was, or should become. Victor, who seems to have mastered the art of being Native, insists that a real Indian must dress like any modern American guy, in jeans, T-shirts, and basketball high-tops. American sports are important, as is popular culture, like John Wayne Westerns. Braids are outdated, but the long hair must remain, loose and untamed, symbolizing... What? Freedom? Rebellion? Wildness? The game of replication, unfortunately, always leads back to square one, to the labeled box of otherness. "Mimesis," says Michael Taussig (1993), "plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair,

mimesis registers both sameness and difference, or being alike and of being other" (129).

Being alike, as much as being other, it appears, amplifies the power of the group at the

expense of the individual. When a collective identity is the main indicator for classification,

there is no room for personal preferences, for the odd, the peculiar, the quirky.

The bus stops for a break during which Thomas obligingly changes his outfit

according to Victor's instructions, and is now wearing jeans and a bright T-shirt, like every

"normal" guy. His hair is loose, his glasses pocketed. Climbing back on the bus, however, the

boys are confronted with two white men that have taken their seats. The men refuse to move,

ordering Victor and Thomas to "find another place to have their Pow Wow." Helpless, the

two shuffle to the back of the bus to the silent stares of other white passengers and an

indifferent driver. And here comes an attempt to subvert the defeat. Victor reminds Thomas

of an Indian joke that explains why John Wayne, the iconic hero, never smiles. As the joke

goes, John Wayne had very bad teeth and was embarrassed by the fact that he had to wear

false ones. Much to the disdain of the all-white travelers, Victor and Thomas actually do

imitate a Pow Wow and improvise a loud song that points out "this critical flaw in the person

who symbolically represents the anti-Indian American cowboy" (Zonn and Winchell 2002,

153). In this application of the oppositional gaze, the two boys momentarily reverse the

racializing process and not only disturb the unsympathetic rednecks on the bus by singing

and drumming, but also identify a major imperfection (some white people's predisposition

for rotten and crooked teeth) that now signifies a defect in American hero mythology. What

matters here, as Zonn and Winchell emphasize, is not the boys' "allegiance to some form of

essential identity, but rather their effective destabilization of those other identities built

around the West, namely, the cowboys" (153). The disruption created by the third-eye

returned gaze allows the "savage"—in this case the modern American Indian—to parody the "civilized," turning the tables so that the unfavorable inscriptions of whiteness become visible, available for labeling, typecasting, and mocking.

Countering the liberal understanding of Indians as the exotic victims of conquest, mass extinction, and cultural destruction, Indianness can be explained as precisely what consistently eludes the restrictions of taxonomy. To survive the various projections and impositions of the dominant order is no easy feat, and survival depends on inevitable adaptation processes that cannot be judged as good or bad, especially when considering that the process is far from over. Alterity, then, "is every inch a relationship, not a thing in itself, and in this case an actively mediated colonial relationship meeting contradictory and conflicting European expectations of what constitutes Indianness" (Taussig 1993, 130). But such a relationship—the demanding, probing, challenging radical otherness of direct encounter—has fallen, like everything else, under the market laws of supply and demand, and under the flattening wheels of mass reproduction (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 141). The Indigenous other on display that had once required an expensive trip to the museum, the primitive village at the world fair, or the actual reservation now enters every living room with great ease, becoming one of many simulations of otherness a viewer can choose from. As a mediated representation that can be copied, reproduced, and reimagined ad infinitum, otherness is dramatized to the point of losing its meaning and potency. It has turned, as Baudrillard argues, into psychodrama and melodrama: into harmless entertainment ([1990] 1993, 142).

The melodrama of alterity thrives on the thrill of surface difference, thus neutralizing present and historical systems entrenched in hierarchical inequality. Despite increasing

liberal sympathies, many not-insignificant advances in official policies, and a formal rhetoric of a color-blind society, the hierarchical patterns that govern everyday race relations in America remain rooted in white supremacy. And although no laws exist anymore that forbid or punish the movement of eyes, the act of looking still remains a telling indication of a power structure in which whiteness reserves the right to look, inspect, study, scrutinize, categorize and taxonomize, while for the non-white the oppositional gaze is still very much a risky tool of resistance. This is especially true in the contemporary, hyperreal configuration of racial ordering, in which mainstream popular culture is saturated with the appropriation of non-white subcultures. Within the circuits of mass media and global capitalism, such representations reach beyond mere entertainment and become a mode of containment. American capitalism thrives on the promotion of equality and is extremely convincing in creating the illusion of inclusion. But, according to Taussig, the same capitalist forces of market economy and technological development repeatedly thwart the materializing of freedom and fairness. And race, inseparable from class (and gender), is still a mechanism through which the socio-economic order arranges itself. "As in a shadow play," writes Taussig (1993), "the Indian and the black are beings through which the ceaseless dilemma of labor-discipline and freedom in capitalist enterprise is to be figured" (156). And the magnetizing visuality of the entertainment industry is the main medium through which the American drama of identity formation is played, quite literally.

Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* ([2000] 2001), like many of his other films, provocatively tackles a question that parallels that of the "real Indian"—what might be called "the black experience." The movie examines a long history of exploitation not in labor but in show business. From the early days of slavery in the U.S., the film argues, black people were on

display as entertainers, playing music, singing, dancing, and telling jokes for the pleasure of white audiences. "Blackness," therefore, is so tightly associated with entertainment that is nearly impossible for a black person in America to be taken seriously unless that person is a threatening delinquent, preferably a gang member, who conforms to yet another white imaginary, one that equate blackness with lawlessness, drugs, and violence. Like the leading characters in *Smoke Signals*, the young protagonists in *Bamboozled* are trapped between racial stereotypes propagated by popular culture. In order to survive as living representations of alterity, they must choose between a limited range of labels: comedian, musician, athlete, or criminal.

The film follows Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans), a Harvard-educated television writer, whose scripts are rejected and ridiculed by his white boss, Thomas Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport), for casting blacks in "conventional" roles of well-assimilated young professionals. Early in the film, after Delacroix is late to a staff meeting he was not informed of, Dunwitty calls him into his office, which is adorned with African art and large photos of Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, and Mike Tyson.

DUNWITTY: Do you know what C.P. Time is?

DELACROIX: C.P. Time is Colored People's Time. The stereotypical belief that Negroes are always late. That Negroes have no sense of time—except when it comes to music or dance. *[They both laugh.]*

DUNWITTY: I'm sorry about my blowup but I have to have a whipping boy every meeting.

DELACROIX: I understand. But again, in all honesty I was not informed.

DUNWITTY: Forget it. Look, I know you're my most creative person I've got on staff. You're hip. You know what's happening. I got some pasty ass white boys and girls writing for me, know what I mean? I understand Black culture. I grew up around black people all my life. If the truth be told I probably know "niggers" better than you, Monsieur Delacroix, and don't go gettin' offended by my use of the quote-unquote N word. I got a black wife and two bi-racial children, so I feel like I have the right. I don't give a damn what that prick Spike Lee says, Tarantino was right. Nigger is just a word. If Dirty Ole Bastard can use it every other word so can I.

DELACROIX: I would prefer you not use that word in my presence.

DUNWITTY: Oh really?? *[pause]* Nigger! Nigger nigger nigger!

In response to this, Delacroix is fantasizing an outburst in which he beats on Dunwitty, yelling at him: Whitey! Whitey whitey whitey! The fantasy passes and Delacroix remains composed and subdued, but his inner outrage emphasizes the unfathomable audacity of this white man's use of the "N word," and his proclaiming to understand black culture better than blacks. The self-referential meta-commentary that compares Spike Lee with Quentin Tarantino exposes the ultimate authority when it comes to representations of blackness. It is not the conscientious African American film artist but rather the sensational white one who gets to determine what is tasteful or not.

DUNWITTY: The material you've been creating is too white bread. White people with black faces. The Huxtables, Cosby—genius, revolutionary. But that's dead. We can't go down that road again.

DELACROIX**:** I don't agree. The Negro middle class does exist, and it's rich material for a dramatic series or even a sitcom.

DUNWITTY**:** I'm telling you it's not... It's too clean, too antiseptic... Too...

DELACROIX**:** White? I still feel all of my scripts would make good shows.

DUNWITTY**:** Delacroix, wake up, brother man. The reason why they didn't get picked up was because nobody, and I mean no motherfuckin' body, niggers and crackers alike, wants to see that junk.

DELACROIX**:** I've never been given a fair shot.

DUNWITTY**:** You got your head stuck up your ass with your Harvard education and your pretentious ways. Brother man, I'm blacker than you. I'm keepin' it real and you're frontin', trying to be white.

DELACROIX**:** I'm an Oreo, a sell out? Because I don't aspire to do Homeboys from Out of Space, The Secret diary of Desmond Pfeiffer, or, as you might put it, some "nigger" show? Is that what you think?

DUNWITTY: Yes, that's exactly what I think.

In this exchange, Dunwitty, arrogantly assuming superior knowledge of black culture, criticizes Delacroix for being a "sell out." What he's saying, which in effect, summarizes the whole film's oppositional stance, is that ambition, intelligence, good education, a career, and a middle-class life, which are all the indications of success in the white world, become undesirable when used to represent blackness. While the white Dunwitty shamelessly adopts the style, dialect, and attitude associated with black stereotypes, the black Delacroix exhibits typical white characteristics (he is reserved, uptight, well dressed, polite, and articulate), but

in show business, the film demonstrates, blacks are only interesting if they maintain their unique racial identity, which is to say if they exhibit the marks that clearly distinguish them as different. Under the growing pressure to write something more "black," Delacroix, hoping to shock the boss and get fired, pitches a grotesque minstrel show loaded with the most abhorrent black stereotypes and offensive racist jokes. To his amazement, the boss loves the idea, the show gets produced and turns into a big hit, and Delacroix sinks deeper and deeper into despair as he becomes the celebrated new talent in a white-dominated entertainment industry, and a hated target for black power militants.

According to Dyer (1997), if white is the omnipresent blank category that "both defines normality and fully inhabits it," then whiteness, by virtue of being equated with simply being human, ensures a position of power that in and of itself often remains unacknowledged. Thus, white people create the world in their own image, but are unable to see themselves doing so, and because white authority depends on this positionality, "white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail" (9). This invisible, self-perpetuating cycle that underlies the whole paradigm of white ascendency has manifested in different ways during different times in history, but the principles always remain the same. Dunwitty's character is an outrageous caricature of the most recent version of this blind supremacy. Utterly unaware of himself, completely confident and secure in a position of privilege, the white man, under the discourse of equality, inclusion, and diversity, can step into the realm of the black with the authoritative conviction of the expert to make sure that blacks do not "sell out," cross the lines, and become too white, because that is decisively not entertaining; that is not what the public wants to see. Such mixing of identities can, in fact, be too threatening. Only the white man is

allowed to play with identity, to pretend to be black, but people of color must maintain their distinct non-white categorical inscriptions; they must stay in the role of the other, both on the screen and off.

Bamboozled positions the white viewer in alignment with Dunwitty, who arrogantly claims to be "more black than black" because he possesses such extensive knowledge of black culture. Watching the film, along with numerous other visual productions depicting past and present struggles of black people in America, the general viewer develops a comfortable familiarity with the surface markers of the black experience. Within this "knowing" the appearance, fashion, music, literature, and resistance of African Americans all become commodities to consume, appropriate, and discard when a more interesting difference enters the market. On a symbolic level, Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) argues, difference is what destroys otherness. What does it mean, he asks, to say that "women are the other for men, or the mad are the other for the sane, or that primitive people are the other for civilized people?" (144). Even to delve deeper under the surface of discernable differences and address alterity in terms of power relations between genders, classes, races, ages, and abilities is too reductionist, because in reality things are never that simple, and because that kind of analysis too assumes knowledge of something that is inherently unknowable. Relational exchanges between beings and things are less a matter of structural difference and mote of a mysterious yin-yang dynamics: "the symbolic order implies dual and complex forms that are not dependent on distinctions between ego and other… The two are not differentiated along a single scale of values: rather, they are mutually reinforcing aspects of an immutable order, parts of a reversible cycle like the cycle of day and night" (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 145). In other words, just like it makes little sense to refer to the night as the

"other" of the day, it is also inherently limiting to construct feminine as other to masculine, Indigenous as other to the European colonizer, or black as other to white. Structural difference brings order and regulation into the relational exchange. Alterity, on the other hand, disrupts and introduces a measure of chaos and unpredictability into it.

What is left of that spontaneous chaotic potential? Observing an 1895 Parisian exhibition of a native African village, the anthropologist Felix-Louis Regnault noted the curious laugh of the African villager as testimony to the child-like "Negro character." "But is it not possible," asks Rony (1996), "that the laugh marked out a space of ironic resistance?" (40). The natives, of course, were fenced in, and any possible demonstrations of defiance were quickly contained, but the challenge created by the returned gaze remained a disquieting dare to a white society that had to sustain its superiority through the systematic disqualifying of the non-white other. When "native villages" in ethnographic exhibitions were discontinued, Rony suggests, cinema took over as a much more cost-effective visual tool for circulating ideologies concerning non-white bodies and cultures, eliminating the "potentially threatening return look of the performer present in the exposition, thus offering more perfect scientific voyeurism (43). Yet, as Mirzoeff (2011) acknowledges, at the same time that hegemonic visuality reaffirms the ruling order, a countervisuality also exists, which reveals the prevailing view's limited understanding of reality. Alternate perspectives, however, are often dismissed and suppressed, and always operate in the margins, but that is because they are actually powerful interrogations of the "right to look" and the "right to the real," offering oppositional readings of mainstream culture while opening up meaningful sites of resistance by emphasizing self-generated representations of subaltern subjectivities. But how effective are these countervisualities when considering the all-engulfing

appropriative power of mass media, of over-simulation and over-stimulation? The returned gaze of early 20th century public science fairs, where Indigenous peoples on display would suddenly raise their heads, look a white observer in the eye, smile, gesture, or talk, may have changed form since those first encounters, but does it still present the same disruptive possibilities?

Although no longer a rare display in the native village of the world fair or the reservation, American Indians as they are represented in the media are still mostly cast in narrow clichéd roles. Whether the image is of a staggering drunk at the Greyhound station, a traditional dancer at the local powwows, or a medicine woman telling stories of healing and resiliency, the Indian identity has been so widely appropriated over the course of American history, that it is now impossible to imagine it as anything but its distilled and essentialized stereotypical representation. The stereotype has seen some profound transformations: from the abject primitive enemy to the romanticized noble warrior, from the barbarian in loincloth to the unappreciated veteran, and from the blasphemous heathen to the sought-after shaman. As Philip Deloria (1998) argues, the contemporary, politically correct typecasting replaces "race" with the less obtrusive "culture," creating an illusion of anti-racist equality. In effect, however, nothing has changed. The signifier "culture" may be the contemporary rhetorical replacement of colonial vocabulary, but the Indian subject is still in impossibility within the group demarcations of the essentialized collective. "Culture," and especially "multiculturalism," are meant to indicate respect and inclusion for histories, worldviews, and lifeways, but in effect reiterate long-standing conceptions of visible differences deeply rooted in skin tone and physiognomic features. The anthropological concept of cultural relativism,

as Deloria shows, despite its deeply flawed methodologies and applications, still pervades popular understandings and mediated representations of different groups of people.

In 1950 the renowned anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber celebrated cultural relativism by asserting that "The most significant accomplishment of anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century has been the extension and clarification of the concept of culture. The outstanding consequence of this conceptual extension has been the toppling of the doctrine of racism" (Deloria 1998, 130). There is now an agreement, Kroeber continues, "that each culture must be examined in terms of its own structure and values, instead of being rated by the standards of other civilization exalted as absolute" (Deloria 1998, 130). Are all cultures created equal? According to Deloria, the assessment is profoundly misguided if not outright hypocritical. It is true that cultural relativism was a sharp, progressive departure from previous, science-based notions of "culture" as a standardized scale measuring human development. On this social Darwinist gradation, Western European societies were positioned as the most advanced, particularly in comparison with non-white peoples who were perceived to exist in an "inferior," "primitive" stage of development. In this context, cultural relativism was perhaps a radically progressive shift toward a dismantling of the scale. Yet while relativist ideas that resist comparison became known and accepted on the surface, they still rely on a certain positivist approach that undermines a true leveling of the field. Even when attempting to disregard the outdated assessment of "culture" in terms of human development, relativism still insists on marking difference and coding cultures according to moral principles and hierarchical categorizations grounded in Eurocentric logic, even when hierarchies are occasionally flipped, as in common contemporary searches for authenticity, spirituality, a return to nature, or anything else that "indigeneity" might offer as

an alternative to capitalist materialism, advanced technology, and the dizzying speed of the electronic superhighways.

In the second half of the 20th century, for example, white youth of various backgrounds across the U.S. became frustrated and disillusioned with growing urbanization, industrialization, and the endless cycles of production and consumption. Intellectual frustration and social alienation motivated activists, artists, writers, and musicians to explore and engage with "unspoiled cultures" of either local minorities or remote, exotic lands, searching for a renewed connection with instinct, wilderness, and community; some sort of an authentic primitivism to counteract the ailments of modern life. "For whites of all classes," argues Deloria (1998), "the quests for personal substance and identity often involved forays into racial Otherness. Among the many boundaries that separated 'inauthentic' Selves from Others imagined to be real and pure, race was perhaps the most visible and the most interesting" (132). And while such racial crossings have a long history entrenched in any form of imperial and colonial expansion, in the late 20th century they took on a particular flavor that reflected a deep confusion regarding national discourses of racial equality, diversity, and multiculturalism; a rhetoric full of promise that sadly stood in contrast to the material and social reality of continued segregation, discrimination, and a de facto upholding of solidified hierarchies in which Eurocentric whiteness remains at the top.

Like Deloria, Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) warns against the seemingly benign sign "culture," arguing that what is has come to signify in anthropology and, for that matter, any representational production, is a group of people that can be identified through certain definite shared characteristics (54). This, in effect, is not that different from the taxonomies of traditional racial discourse and can be just as dangerous regardless of the positioning of

the represented group. It is the method of classification itself that perpetuates a habitual hierarchy of authority over an object of study, and which, in pattern-seeking analytics and generalizing evaluations, risks reinflicting the same epistemic violence it attempts to avoid by replacing "race" with "culture". Ultimately, both terms involve looking for, studying, and affirming difference as a way to "know," possess, and contain the unknown.

Of the many minority groups in America, Jews present a long-standing example of the violence of "culture," as historically, the racialization of Jews was never constructed along physiognomic lines. Whether in Europe, Africa, or the Middle East, to be Jewish meant to practice a non-mainstream religion, to stand out as a Christianity-resistant minority rather than a physically distinct other. This particular difference, as Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) argues, positions the Jews always almost within and still just outside dominant, white civilizations, which are, in essence, Christian civilizations. The Jewish question can be so baffling precisely because they could easily pass for white, and all they had to do in order to fully conform and join the ruling order was to change some habits, modify some traditions, and convert to Christianity. And strangely, for the most part, they refused. "From the outset," Jacobson points out, "scientific writings on Jews in Europe tended to focus upon questions of assimilation, most often emphasizing the race's stubborn immutability—which is to say, its unassimilability" (179–180). In that stubborn refusal lies a historical returned gaze, a quiet, lingering opposition that challenges, by its very presence, the assumed superiority of white Christianity.

In Hollywood, Jewish culture translated into the trademarks of humor, wit, and neurosis. In the modern representational economy of the media, Jewishness has a distinct sophisticated, self-deprecating, neurotic flavor, of which Woody Allen is perhaps the most

well-known master. Annie Hall (1977), for example, laments the universally complicated nature of love and relationships, but also explores the question of assimilation and the ongoing positionality of the Jew as the original, the ultimate Other. Early in their doomed relationship, the protagonist, Alvy Singer (Woody Allen), and his girlfriend Annie (Diane Keaton), are having a traditional Easter dinner with Annie's family in Wisconsin. They are engaged in a polite conversation about food and family outings when suddenly Woody Allen turns to the camera and speaks directly to the audience. "I can't believe this family," he says, pointing out the small talk of swap meets and boating, "normal" things that would have otherwise remained unnoticed. "They really look American," he continues, "very healthy, like they never get sick or anything." What does a "real American" look like? The common whiteness epitomized by the Midwestern family, the scene suggests, is the unspoken core of American national identity, an ideal into which immigrants are expected to assimilate—light skinned ones with greater prospects of success, dark skinned with much less. Are Jews white? Most of them certainly look white, and here is a curious exception to the visuality that rules racial identity.

The definition of race in America changes over time, and with it configurations of whiteness. Naturally, as waves of European immigrants arrived in the U.S. in the 19th century, not all of them were equally welcomed into the melting pot. These immigration waves brought with them a European hierarchy of superior and inferior "races" that were quickly embedded within the formation of the American identity. "Not surprisingly," writes Karen Brodkin (1998), "the belief in European races took root most deeply among the wealthy U.S.-born Protestant elite, who feared a hostile and seemingly unassimilable working class" (80). Eastern-European Jews found themselves at the bottom of the social

order in the new world, living, much like they did in antisemitic Europe, in small, insular enclaves within the developing cities of the East Coast. In the early 20th century, as eugenics theories were gaining rampant popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, scientific racism "sanctified the notion that real Americans were white and real whites came from northwest Europe" (81). At the same time, in post-emancipation America, the definition of whiteness was forced to gradually expand, as to include previously marginalized European immigrants: Catholics, Poles, Italians, Irish, and Jews. The weight of whiteness had to be shifted, so to speak, so that the pressing issues of African American integration and new, Spanish-speaking populations crossing the southern borders could be clearly resolved along color lines rather than ethnic ones. But the most significant factor in the evolving delineation of whiteness, according to Brodkin, was the unprecedented economic boom that followed the first World War. "Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euroethnic to become middle class," she argues, "it was also the case that economic prosperity played a very powerful role in the whitening process" (87). The acceleration of economic growth enabled a broader scope of participation in the rise of the middle class, and ethnic distinctions that were previous grounds for discriminatory laws and practices were now tolerated (and later celebrated) as benign differences that could be overlooked when members of the inferior group proved themselves to be following white Protestant work ethics and liberal capitalistic ventures. Even before WWII, therefore, "mobility of Jews and other Euroethnics rested ultimately on U.S. postwar economic prosperity with its enormously expanded need for professional, technical, and managerial labor, and on government assistance in providing it" (87). Thus, during and after the second World War, Jews in America were already established as middle class citizens that were passing for white in increasingly expanding

professional and social contexts. In the post WWII decades, anti-Semitism went gradually

out of fashion or, perhaps, simply went underground as more pressing forms of racism were

gathering momentum and taking center stage.

Taking a different angle on group identity formation and the racializing of visible

others, Shlomo Sand (2009) argues that the concept of a unified Jewish people was a modern

invention, a response to European antisemitism and global surges of nationalism. In the late

1900s, as the "scientific" studies of eugenics were evolving into antisemitic movements and

purist political parties, Jewish historians and Zionist thinkers began to paradoxically engage

with the same positivist theories of race and culture in a deliberate effort to construct a

"people," a nation, and eventually a state out of numerous Jewish communities scattered

across various countries and continents, speaking different languages, belonging to different

ethnicities and histories, sharing no affiliations other than religious beliefs (21). Sand's study

explains well the power of myth to propagate nationalistic agendas based in racial divides.

The Zionist vision of a Jewish "people" returning to an ancient "homeland" served as a

successful answer to the Jewish question, especially following the Holocaust. But anything

that is built to counter something ends up reinforcing the very thing it attempts to dismantle.

As later demonstrated by nationalistic civil rights organizations in the U.S. (for example the

Black Panthers or the Chicano movement), ethnic pride can be a dangerous thing when it

utilizes the same exclusionist methods by which a particular group was marginalized to begin

with.

It is true that orthodox Jews still wear the garb that clearly sets them apart. They are

thus easy to spot and to quickly cast in the role of the other. When Christianity became the

dominant religion of the Roman Empire and thus spread across Europe, Jews who stubbornly

rejected the sweeping mass conversions were perceived as a fragmenting threat to imperial concord, an enemy to God and to God's earthly representatives—the emperors and monarchs of European nations. A couple of millennia later, that long-standing otherness remains entrenched, even when most Jews on the planet are secular and have no external identifying marks. What is this otherness, then, when there are no noticeable visible variances? Regardless of faith, attire, hair color, nose size, or any other observable features, to be born a Jew, especially in the post-Holocaust era, means to instantly belong to an exceptionally long history of persecution and marginalization. This is something that, despite their genuine efforts, people who choose to convert to Judaism will never be able to fully comprehend. Conversion makes the belief system the focus of identity, when in reality the racialized meaning of Jewishness has no correlation with spiritual consciousness, practices, or tradition. Jewishness is a historical identity category that is fundamentally rooted in exclusion, condemnation, dehumanizing discrimination, violence, exile, dispossession, and genocide. Regardless of skin tone, language, or cultural background, what all Jews share is a profoundly traumatic historical legacy, and at the same time an embodied reflection of the moral failure of white Christianity.

Right before turning to the camera, the Easter dinner scene shows Annie's old grandmother (who Alvy proclaims to be a "classic Jew hater") looking at Alvy across the table and for a brief moment we see what he imagines her gaze to project: an image of a Hasidic Jew in traditional garb and a long beard, which is to say, the stereotypical Jew as the differentiated other. The caricature is humorous, but the effect is powerful, as it emphasizes the fact that even though they easily pass as white, modern day Jews are not "real Americans." True, their assimilation process was relatively smooth, but it doesn't take much

to scratch the surface of American national identity and understand how despite a rhetoric of inclusion and the myth of the melting pot, whiteness, which also corresponds, at least in this case, with Christianity, remains the preferred expression of true Americanism.

This instant racialization that happens on the screen is a quick articulation of what Rony (1996) refers to as the third eye experience. Rony explains the third eye moment in cinema as the point in which the viewer sees herself on the screen with an acute awareness of how she is being perceived by others, how she fits into the world. Building on W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (4), the third eye includes the screen as a sight apparatus through which the experience of racial differentiation is experienced and understood. "For a person of color growing up in the United States the experience of viewing oneself as an object is profoundly formative," says Rony, stressing that this is something that non-white people face every time they encounter a representation of a person of color, while white people are very rarely asked to negotiate their identity outside of their own definition of themselves. The glimpse that we get of Alvy's Jewish double consciousness during the encounter with Annie's grandmother across the dinner table enhances his observations a moment later, when he returns the gaze and lets us see that not only Jews, but whites too, in this case the typical Midwestern, healthy, perfected American family, can suddenly find themselves on display, objectified, performing a role for a scrutinizing observer. Alvy's impression of his all-American hosts triggers a comparison with his own family back in Brooklyn, and to let the viewers follow his train of thought the screen splits and we see the contrast between the peaceful, spacious, orderly, "civilized" Easter celebration in Wisconsin, and the raucous, crowded gathering of New York Jews, where people talk loudly over each other and freely discuss marital

problems, physical illness, unemployment, and other unpleasantries. The question arises, who is on display here? Although in this comparison the Jews appear as eccentric, rowdy and uncouth, Annie's family too suddenly seems unappealingly odd, the camera's returned gaze recasting the so-called "norm" as, in fact, disturbingly abnormal: repressed, rigid, static, and eerily cold. The notion that the "norm" is in fact dangerously hypocritical is reinforced in the next scene, in which Annie's brother Duane (played by the ridiculously hyper-white Christopher Walken) confesses to Alvy his hidden, deranged fantasies. The reserved, proper, all-American whiteness that was just exposed through Alvy's dinnertime commentary, then, has a potent dark side; a frightening, violent force lurking just under the surface, ready to unleash at the right provocation. This configuration of whiteness is far as can be from "normal," and in fact takes on a troubling quality of deviant pathology—something carefully reserved for the taxonomy of the racialized other.

Through the decades since those early classic moments, the alterity of the Jews has taken on new shapes and flavors while always maintaining its pronounced visual difference. Recent Netflix shows such as *Shtisel* (Elon and Indursky 2018 and *Unorthodox* (Winger 2020), for example, grant audiences a particularly voyeuristic viewpoint from which to become intimately acquainted with the lifeways of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish populations in present-day Israel or Brooklyn. The strange rituals and customs of the insulated sects enter living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens all over the world, creating a sense of knowing and understanding of a world that is in fact completely foreign. Thus, the well-defined alterity of the Hasidic Jew penetrates the private space of the viewer, who now, having seen "real" Jews on TV, can presume familiarity with this otherness that nevertheless remains ever more

remote, shrouded in the well-rehearsed stereotypes of strict religious fanaticism and outdated Eastern European garb.

In *Unorthodox*, for instance, the protagonist, Esther Shapiro (Shira Haas), leaves the tight community to explore secular life, undergoing a personal transformation until she becomes "one of us" (modernized, liberated, dressed in tight jeans and wearing red lipstick). Following her dramatized journey, the process of identification affords the viewer a patronizing position from which to condemn the alterity of the Hasidic Jew, which remains intact, solidified, and neatly contained in the confines of visual difference that, in this case, is also backed by a strong ideological and ethical judgment. Esther Shapiro's struggle to free herself from religious oppression, to escape the tyranny of a cult-like community, reestablishes the divide between the dynamic secular humanist subject, individuated and free to express herself in a progressive, globalized, cosmopolitan, hyper-modern culture and the stagnant, repressive, archaic relic of an unwelcomed history that is the traditional Orthodox Jew.

There is always a double bind imminent in visual representations of racial identity. Even the most critical use of a stereotypical image, like that of the black athlete (or entertainer, or gangster) or the Hasidic Jew, reinforces the categorical demarcation at the same time that it exposes its artificiality. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (1999) equates the American film industry with a plantocracy, a particularly efficient mechanism of visuality that relies for its own profitable efficiency, on racial, gender, and sexuality hierarchies that are embedded in the American national psyche. Foster focuses on cinematic representations of captivity and bondage, and her reading of Hollywood cinematic productions reveals how bodies (of actors, spectators, and the populations they represent), are held captive by

oppressive, prescribed images and master narratives of white superiority and its racialized

otherness. While actual slavery of course depends on literal bondage, Foster suggests that

"the Hollywood Plantocracy is dependent upon *theoretically* captive bodies" (48); subjects

that are locked into very rigid conceptualizations of racial identity. It is true that over the

decades, with changing costs and availability of equipment and technology, and with

domestic and global decolonizing movements gathering significant momentum, more and

more cameras find their ways into the hands of non-white artists who use the same medium

that once eliminated the threat of the returned gaze to stare back. The cinematic returned gaze

holds subversive power, and yet it's as if images have lives of their own, and regardless of

intention and commentary, the very sight of them, even when meant to disrupt the

constraining hierarchies, simultaneously serves to re-erect categorical divides.

Mediated representations strip the returned gaze of the potential resistance it may

have had in a direct encounter. "White people," Dyer (1997) writes, "need to learn to see

themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made

strange" (10). But in the economy of the visual marketplace, is that really possible? Raising

the eyes and the camera to stare back may seem like a bold, performative act of contestation,

but if the medium is the message, as Marshal McLuhan (1967) argues, then the ultimate

result is always the same: flatness, sameness, an illusion of inclusion. In reality, any attempts

to challenge the existing order produce clashes, chaos, and upsurges of racist violence. Mass

media, and especially the entertainment industry, mask the actual physicality of such

confrontations with a new mode of subjugation propelled by the rhetoric of multiculturalism,

desegregation, and diversity. In the realms of the hyperreal, cultural appropriation and the

commodification of otherness unfold as the new mechanisms of oppression that celebrate theatrical opposition in order to contain actual resistance.

Dear White People (Simien 2017-18), a television show based on a film by the same title, is an admirable production that attempts to challenge contemporary modes of containment, but even that is problematic due to the inherent neutralizing effects of visual representation. The show's popularity on Netflix, I suspect, relies heavily on its sensational protest of white entitlement, of the one-way street of playing Indian according to which only white people get to choose their identity, wearing otherness as one wears a fashionable new outfit. The dramatic oppositional logic in *Dear White People* experiments with the notion that entertainment, despite its glaring limitations, may be the only avenue left for addressing the persistent, unresolved questions of racial constructs in America. As grassroots activism, petitions, and street marches lose their potency not only to increased surveillance and police militarization, but, more importantly, to the screening technologies of the hyperreal, mediated performances of fictionalized protest are the only available tools for returning the gaze. The show may be a daring and provocative production, but by its very nature as a televised spectacle it teeters on the dangerous cliff of the replication abyss, inadvertently revisiting the horror scenarios of *Bamboozled*, which Spike Lee so aptly lamented, where performance and identity are inextricable, and the blackface minstrel show is available for whites to appropriate and discard as needed, while people of color are forever trapped in it, can never wipe the dark paint off their faces at the end of the night.

In the fetishized blackness of *Dear White People*, the actresses are gorgeous, their dark skin a seductive invitation intended to draw the viewer into the intense conflicts, the provocative language, and the steamy sex scenes. This is what is expected of entertainment

involving the black-white divide. No doubt, there is merit in the anger and political awareness raised by the show's relatively realistic representations of race relations, but the question remains whether this kind of in-your-face blatant drama, infused with the same old visual tropes that cast black performers in the role of the exotic, sensual, potentially dangerous other, can have any significant deconstructive impact, or whether mass mediated entertainment is doomed to ultimately reinstate the familiar hierarchical orientations of belonging and differentiation.

Nevertheless, the returned gaze celebrates many moments of a distinct and poignant effort to topple white hegemony's claim to neutrality and to destabilize its position as the unmarked standard from which all other races deviate. For example:

- "Dear white people, our skin color is not a weapon. You don't have to be afraid of it."

- "Dear white people, please stop touching my hair. Does this look like a petting zoo to you?"

- "Dear white people, the minimum requirement of black friends needed to not seem racist has just been raised to two. Sorry, but your weed man, Tyrone, does not count."

- "Dear white people, this just in: Dating a black person to piss off your parents is a form of racism."

- "Dear white people using Instagram: You have an iPhone and you go on hikes. I get it."

- "Dear white people, here's a little tip: When you ask someone who looks ethnically different 'what are you?' the answer is usually a person about to slap the shit out of you."

- "Dear white people... You know what? Never mind."

In the end, it is that "never mind" that might express a most sober acknowledgement of the deeply embedded foundations of racial classifications, and the futility of the attempt to make whiteness strange, to dislodge it from the seemingly innocuous blandness that, as Dyer

(1997) argues, keeps it in power. It's a statement of defeat, yes, but at the same time a raising of the stakes, as it calls into question the efficacy of mediated confrontation and with it the artificiality of all mediated constructs. In the end, it suggests, videotaped returned gazes, expertly produced wit and nuance, and sharply written humor and play may be too subtle to penetrate the rigid visual taxonomies of group identity. Even much-acclaimed self-representation, as the above examples and countless others demonstrate, too often inadvertently swallows up the particularity of the individual, obscuring it in the persistent imaginary of mass alterity. The preoccupation with skin color as the dominant aspect of identity is not a one-way, top-to-bottom hierarchical structure, but a circular entanglement in which minorities are compelled to define their identity by its visible difference, reinforcing the power of mass-produced stereotypes over the discrete and distinct particularity of personal subjectivity, thus maintaining all the familiar ordered divisions.

Visual narratives, by their very nature, promote identities that emphasize drama, conflict, the charged exchange of gazes, and the dynamics of seeing and being seen. When race is the central identity-defining factor in every story in which the main character is a non-white person, the rhetoric of multiculturalism, inclusion, equality, and a color-blind society becomes a laughable myth. In a long list titled "Daily Effects of White Privilege," Peggy McIntosh (1990) points to economic, political, social, and relational freedoms that white people take for granted, and that are rarely experienced by non-white minorities. Out of this list, the one I believe is most crucial for understanding the oppressive power of group categories is this: "I am never asked to speak for all the people in my racial group" (3). The ability to define and express one's own identity along personal lines of traits, skills, tastes and inclinations, beliefs, a specific family heritage, and even gender or class, is something

white populations in America don't consider a special right, but it is hard to deny that only white individuals—even immigrants, even the poor, disabled, old, or marginalized—enjoy the privilege of individuality, and are never expected to speak for or otherwise represent a whole race.

In workplaces, doctors' offices, financial institutions, or school admissions forms, every questionnaire asks the respondent to identify as one of several possible categories, with the recent addition of the option "some other race, ethnicity, or origin." In other words, alterity can fall into an established form of non-white, or be cast as a new, less familiar kind of "other." If we are to adhere to the rhetoric of inclusion and the vision of a colorblind society, these specifications are meant to ensure the fair treatment of all groups, supporting equal opportunity and enabling affirmative action. And yet every such list of populations to be affiliated with further erases individual traits, qualifications, strengths, and weaknesses, as they are quickly absorbed into the apparently much more telling label of "Asian," "African American," "Latino," or "Middle Eastern"—a mark that is, at its core, a visual indicator. What do such categories mean, one must wonder, to an actual blind person filling out the form, to someone who has never seen any black, yellow, brown, or red "other," or, for that matter, never had a chance to examine her own reflection in the mirror?

Chapter Three

Virus and the Other

A highly contagious virus appears on the global scene, and it is a novel one: little is known about its origins, its patterns, or its lethal capacities. Epidemiologists, immunologists, and biostatisticians are working overtime to collect facts, figures, expert prognoses and evaluations—anything that would provide reassurance that there is a way to control and predict the proliferation and contagion rates of the disease. Out of the blue, the virus spreads like wildfire, demobilizing everything: the work force, transportation, commerce, education, cultural events, and all social interactions. A war is declared, and as in well-rehearsed science fiction narratives, for once it is not a war among nations but one that unites the human race in unprecedented solidarity against a common foe, invisible but deadly. Unlike other wars, however, this one cannot be fought by charging, but on the contrary—by retreating. Unlike in traditional confrontation with a bullying entity, this is not a show of power, and what is required is not action but extended protective measures of defense. To win this battle, we are told, we must run and hide, duck and cover, and await further orders. Surprisingly, amidst frustrations with this uncharacteristic docility, we find that withdrawing, at least in the relatively affluent parts of the world, may not be as difficult as we thought, and perhaps even has some advantages. From the comfort of a couch in front of a screen or a home office work station, fighting an invisible enemy certainly entails protective measures and careful conduct, but also strategic distractions through endless streams of repetitive information and entertaining diversions.

This chapter considers symbolic parallels between the sensationalized threat of the pandemic and familiar historic notions of terrorism, arguing that from a semiotics point of

view, these two forms of radical alterity could signify the moral question mark articulated by

Emmanuel Levinas in his exploration of alterity as an ethical inquiry into the nature of the

self. This inquiry, however, is systematically evaded, as formulaic constructs of "normal"

and "deviant," "safe" and "dangerous," "same" and "different" circulate repeatedly in

American mass media. Looking at representations of terror in the mediated productions, the

study points to symbolic exchange processes through which the technological mechanisms

that inform, warn, and protect human populations also obscure, distort, and alter a collective

perception of historical events. The public rhetoric that positions the virus as the abhorrent

other, I suggest, is not unlike other media-enabled war narratives involving human villains

and terrorists out to destroy the U.S. In these mythological enactments of good vs. evil,

"America" suggests reason, benevolence, purity, and innocence, while the terrorist is the

embodiment of irrational, immoral, barbaric violence. Considering a long-standing tradition

of cultural amnesia in the U.S., a close reading of visual and rhetorical expressions of

otherness unfolds a potential opportunity for reevaluating forgotten historical responsibilities

as well as the current state of being in an America that is ruled by elaborate technologies of

information exchange, communication, and mediated simulation. Utilizing Jean Baudrillard's

semiotics of the hyperreal and Levinas's critical investigation of the meaning of alterity, my

aim is to observe and assess a current culture that is increasingly dependent on electric

circuits, microchips, fiber-optic communication, and LCD screens, a culture that more and

more is defined by the separation of isolated human bodies and the hyper-connectivity of

machines.

In the age of mass media, cyber-optic technology, and the globalized free markets of

late-stage capitalism, alterity appears to serve mainly as a counter-reinforcement of group

identity, leaving one-on-one actual interactions behind as the interpersonal challenge is being transferred onto the symbolic level of mediated encounters. For example, Muslim rejection of North American ideologies based in excessive consumerism and extreme individualism, perhaps the last vestige of resistance to the widespread powers of the American Empire, is constructed through the symbolic language of mediated representation so that ideological differences become synonymous with violent fundamentalism. Yet, as Edward Said (1978) argues, without carefully examining forms and methods of representing Islam and the Middle East, "one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (3). While the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is commonly characterized by historians along lines of uneven power dynamics in which the West was able to politically dominate and imaginatively narrate the East, Said emphasizes the insubstantial nature of the two conceptually manufactured regions. "As much as the West itself," he writes, "the Orient is an idea that has a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other" (5). The otherness that is produced by arbitrary dividing lines of geography, faith, skin color, or culture is then quite naturally reproduced ad infinitum by conventional systems of representational signs.

As a sign, the reproduced face of Islam in mass media is an essentializing obscuration of actual difference. A representative figure far removed from the realities of actual Muslim individuals, the simulated image is epitomized, interestingly, by physical layers of cloth: face coverings, headdresses, and the radical menace of the keffiyeh. Here, the exotified,

villainized, turbaned men and hyper-sexualized, veiled women of early colonial Orientalism have been reconfigured at the same time that they've gathered additional symbolic value. No longer conquerable, the East, as Said emphasizes, is not as much of interest "as the East made known, and therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public" (1978, 60). What is being shown, and therefore known, however, still thrives on the latent threat of a radicalized alterity. Symbolically, the niqāb often functions in mainstream U.S. mass media as an emblem of religious fanaticism, and the keffiyeh as the flag of terrorism.

The modern visual vilifying of Muslims, as Jack Shaheen (2001) points out, is a startling demonstration of the media's power to construct an image that then becomes a reality. In numerous cinematic and television productions, Arabs "are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, the abusers of women" (8). These roles have been reinforced over more than a century of both entertainment and news channels, evolving, in recent decades, into the ultimate Other: the heartless terrorist, the embodiment of Evil. The scarves, cloaks, and shrouds of Islam, originally meant to promote modesty and humility before God (or simply protect the delicate skin from the harsh elements of desert climates), are now the ultimate signifiers of unwanted alterity, standing in stark contrast to the bare-all exhibitionism of U.S. popular culture, countering at once capitalism, Christianity, whiteness, and the American way of life.

Terrorism is so effective because of its shock value, because it has no point of origin, no organized structure, and no predictable patterns. It is impossible to fight because it is not a coherent entity but a fragmented plurality, a loose but persistent thread that runs with no beginning or end, weaving itself into the local and the mundane, where it gathers momentum precisely because we all assume and expect our everyday to be secure, predictable, civil, free

of the horrors reserved for designated combat soldiers on faraway battlefields. The symbolic resonance of the rebel keffiyeh is so potent because it points to the frightening mystery of the covered face of the other, of that which resists representation, and which can therefore be anyone. Under the protective layers of the fabric that wraps around the face, however, the eyes remain, and so does the gaze. "The Other manifests itself by the absolute resistance of its defenseless eyes," Levinas ([1947] 1987) writes. And this defiance, the challenge the gaze poses, "brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory" (294). I may not see the terrorist clearly, but the terrorist sees me, calling into question not only the nature of my existence but my very right to exist.

Radical alterity such as foreign (or even domestic) terrorism and deadly contagious diseases both lurk among the unsuspecting, threatening to debilitate, derail, or destroy life as we know it (or think we do). Not to say that these forces are interchangeable, but they do share certain commonalities that are worth noting. Writing about the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) reflects on what he terms the "superconductive" variations of viral threats, highlighting the signifying overlaps of their impact. "Infection," he writes, "is no longer confined within a given system but can leap from one system to another" (37), and while different in form, the symbolic nature of perils such as plagues, radical organizations, and even computer viruses are similar in that they all spell the demise of the system and announce total catastrophe. When the media, along with science, technology, familiar means of knowledge production, the entertainment industry, and the consumption-driven everyday all contribute equally to the construction of a secure existence, the unstable, erratic uncertainty of large-scale crises such as viruses and terrorism rattle the very core of the solid, reliable mechanisms of our society.

Like the devastating horrors of American wars, argues Marita Sturken (1997), the realities of the AIDS epidemic were quick to be transformed into meaningless nostalgia by popular media's construing of the events as remote anomalies and by the mass memorializing of victims. Juxtaposing the glorified commemoration of the Vietnam War fatalities with the media treatment of AIDS patients as already dead, Sturken points to popular cultural expressions of mourning as mechanisms that circumvent present truths by constructing narratives of personalized remembering while, ironically, encouraging a collective forgetting. "Traditional history," writes Sturken, "has a paradoxical relationship to the body of the individual who has lived through a given event—the Vietnam veteran, the Gulf War veteran, or the person with AIDS. The survivors of recent political event often disrupt the closure of a particular history; indeed, history operates more efficiently when its agents are dead" (5). Thus, through repeated broadcasting of documentary imagery and the quick erecting of national memorials, the actual suffering of disease and the brutality of war (as well as the lingering effects of both catastrophes) recede into the innocuous container of memory, creating a safe distance between victim and viewer, reassuring the spectator that all is well now, the danger is over, nothing substantial connects the present or the future to the unfortunate past.

Although human enemies still have eyes and a challenging gaze while a virus does not, when considered as parallel disruptions of the innocent familiarity of the everyday, the masked terrorist and a spreading virus are equally effective in their function as the other. Their hidden, nerve-racking presence holds the power to destabilize what we presume to be the concrete ground of factuality and render the common tools and procedures of knowing undependable. Just like death, the unknown is an intolerable negation. Possessed by fear, we

fight by clinging that much harder to what we believe is our source of truth: the media. Paradoxically, as Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) notes, "we attempt to escape from uncertainty by relying even more on information and communication systems, so merely aggravating the uncertainty itself" (43). If the relentless stream of constantly changing updates, statistics, warnings, commentary, assessments, and projections provide a sense of safety and a measure of control, it is not because of the reassuring content, but because that very stream has seamlessly merged with the self and has gradually, without us noticing, taken charge. On the collective level, existence rarely holds meaning anymore without communication and mediation technologies, an elaborate system of electric circuits that manage every aspect of social life and circumscribe an understanding of how the individual fits into the social. The stream is how we get "authenticated."

The mechanism of simulation can be imagined as a symbiotic force of mutation that both feeds on and alters phenomena, working both inside and outside individuals and society. The validation it provides becomes a necessary reassurance that disguises the deep insecurities it creates. The dependency on artificial intelligence, information technology, and audio-visual stimulation distorts our perception to the point where it is increasingly harder to differentiate the authentic from the reproduced. This interblending not only colors the way we experience whatever is happening now, but also divorces the present from its temporal context. "We forget a little too easily," Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) writes, "that the whole of our reality is filtered through the media, including tragic events of the past. This means that it is too late to verify and understand those events historically, for the characteristic thing about the present period, the present *fin de siècle*, is the fact that the tools required for such intelligibility have been lost" (91) For instance, films and television productions (including

documentaries) commemorating slavery, the plight of Native Americans, or the Holocaust, do not add to an understanding of these atrocities, nor to the possibility of drawing connections between them and what is happening now. Instead, they create an illusion of knowing, while reinforcing distance, disengagement, and doubt. "We shall never know," for example, "whether Nazism, the concentration camps or Hiroshima were intelligible or not: we are no longer part of the same mental universe. Victim and executioner are interchangeable, responsibility is diffrangible, dissoluble—such are the virtues of our marvelous interface" (91). The events of the past, less comprehensible than ever, and completely exhausted by repetitive representation, disappear into a monitor whose perpetual glare leads to the inevitable question: did that really happen?

The turning of historical horrors into screened spectacles, reproduced simulations, and potentially profit-generating events leads Marita Sturken (2007) to examine this cultural amnesia through a framework she refers to as "tourism of history." Within a consumer-oriented and media-dependent system that is quick to broadcast, sensationalize, and commodify large-scale tragic events, Sturken shows, terrorist attacks, like other wars and battles both on U.S. soil and abroad, are processed through a production line of memorabilia that casts a nostalgic, innocent light on the event, promoting an image of America as a victim of evil mishap, rather than a full participant (often as perpetrator) in a global scene of political tension and in contentious historical precursors to contemporary violence. "In such places as the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Ground Zero," writes Sturken, "the practices of sorrowful pilgrimage and tourism are intermixed and often inseparable; one can cry and take pictures, leave a personalized object, and purchase a souvenir" (11). This all-American tradition of traveling far to visit national memorials, documenting the visit by

taking pictures at the site, and collecting overpriced trinkets such as snow globes, keychains,

T-shirts, paper weights, or baseball caps, creates a safe distance between the American public

and the meaning of historical accountability. The memorial site, along with the adjacent

museum and gift shop, create a simulated experience that enables the illusion of taking part

in the tragedy. Reinforced by layers of mediation—the televised footage of the actual event,

the endlessly recycled images of shocking horrors, the photos and videos taken by the

visitors and circulating on social media—the public processing of national trauma reflects the

overall political refusal to examine America's part in a global history of war, violence, and

unwarranted death.

In documenting the pilgrimage to sights of terror, war, and death, and in collecting

the appropriate souvenirs, the act of remembering in fact turns into a collective forgetting, as

the loss of real lives becomes a celebration of involuntary martyrdom. By enlisting victims to

serve as war heroes, national myths of freedom, peace, and innocence are elevated as ideals

worthy of untimely, violent death in the hands of constructed "evil" enemies: a radical other

who, rather than shed a moral light on national responsibility, becomes an agent of systemic

amnesia. Because formulaic public rhetoric still warns against forgetting, artificial memories

are being implanted in the public consciousness, replaying the catastrophe, but, Baudrillard

([1981] 1994) argues, "much too late for it to be able to make real waves and profoundly

disturb something, and especially, especially through a medium that is itself cold, radiating

forgetfulness, deterrence, and extermination in a still more systematic way, if that is possible,

than the camps themselves" (49). The Jewish Holocaust, for example, was an

incomprehensible event even as it was happening; a horror so devastating in its intensity and

magnitude it left a paralyzing dark void in our ability to logically understand what happened.

The testimonies of both German perpetrators and Jewish victims, the images of starved

prisoners and heaps of skeletal corpses, the numerous scholarly analyses of the historical

events, the archives amassing documents and evidence, and the block-busting fictional

productions based on "true stories" (for example *The Hiding Place*, *Schindler's List*, *The*

Pianist, and the various adaptations of *The Diary of Anne Frank*) cannot penetrate the

incomprehensible hate and cruelty, and there is no logical framework that can comprehend

the causes and conditions. Risking auxiliary epistemic violence, such productions cannot

fully convey the depth of the personal losses nor the complexity and lingering implications of

the horrors. Instead, they further entrench the Jews in their victimhood and their otherness,

ensuring the dead are remembered in masses as nameless ghosts, and the survivors are

revered as relics whose sole function is to serve as living monuments: walking memorial sites

there to evoke sorrow, pity, and guilt.

It is perhaps for this reason that Hannah Arendt (1963), when covering the Adolf

Eichmann trial, was critical of the spectacle created by the internationally publicized event,

and of the overstated, melodramatic aspects of the procedures, which the state of Israel was

utilizing in order to justify its right to exist, and which the rest of the world watched in grave

fascination, seduced by the incriminating details of unspeakable acts of violence. Arendt's

analysis refrained from participating in the grand celebration of "justice." In fact, she was

more interested in redefining legal systems and the concept of justice itself so that they could

begin to come to terms not with the specific genocide of the Jews but with the unprecedented

crimes against humanity in which Gypsies, gay people, disabled people, communists, and

anyone suspected of resisting the Nazi regime were systematically gathered, imprisoned,

tortured, and executed. "The trouble with Eichmann," according to Arendt, "was precisely

that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together" (276). Arendt's "banality of evil," as Judith Butler (2011) clarifies, refers not only to the "normal," mundane, progressive, cold, calculated, machine-like ways in which the assaults were carried out, but to the astonishingly effective suppression of critical thinking that these routinized atrocities implemented. "Indeed," Butler writes, "at one point the failure to think is precisely the name of the crime that Eichmann commits. We might think at first that this is a scandalous way to describe his horrendous crime, but for Arendt the consequence of non-thinking is genocidal, or certainly can be" (280). The immense and unfathomable loss of the Holocaust, therefore, is not limited to the physical suffering and death of millions or the traumatic psychological aftermaths of the event. On a philosophical, existential level, the loss of thinking leaves a void that no documentary or fictional representational production can mask.

Perhaps, Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) suggests, a void like that should be treated as such. To fill it up with information does not lead to understanding but is in fact an injustice to what should be honored as unknowable. The most perplexing thing about the holocaust, he notes, is not the torture, death, or dehumanizing of millions, but the *way* in which it was done—the methodical, efficient, cost-effective coldness with which the Nazis orchestrated the project. The historical significance of the Holocaust, accordingly, is that "it was the first major events of cold systems, of cooling systems, of systems of deterrence and extermination that will then be deployed in other forms" (50). Such utilizations of machine-efficient coldness include the nuclear bombs that the U.S. dropped in Japan, the Cold War, and the

rise of the media as the supreme empire that dictates all human life: the personal, political, social, ethical, and psychological (McLuhan 1967, 26). The media, with its forced remembrance through artificial imagery, then, is an extension and an expansion of a systematic coldness that has no intention to ask moral questions or to contemplate the incomprehensible. By its very function it obscures, diverts, and distracts. Ultimately, all media is distraction—an avoidance that dominates our existence.

The otherness that the German Jews epitomized so perfectly that they had to be systematically exterminated was an otherness that, like Abel, never posed any physical threat, and yet possessed a difference profoundly dangerous in essence, perhaps precisely because of its docile complacency, the unassuming manner with which they assimilated, and the simultaneous stubborn pride with which they maintained a separate identity. As nonconfrontational as the gaze of the Jew was, it still resisted and therefore called into question Christianity's ascendency and German nationalism, along with their growing ethical contradictions, which eventually culminated in the concentration camps and the gas chambers. Nevertheless, not only did the face of the Jew survive the impressively methodical genocide, it also still grips the German collective social conscience in lingering guilt and unprecedented national shame. At the same historical moment, Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps across the U.S., and two massive nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians and with them the myth of American exceptionalism. The guilt and the shame that still seem to haunt the German national identity, however, somehow managed to skip over the moral sensibility of the American people. While much of Europe was recovering from the devastating destruction left by the war, American mass media immediately started producing

and broadcasting self-congratulatory narratives that effectively eliminated any potential doubt regarding the means that led to victory. In the popular imagination, the parallel events of the Holocaust, the Japanese internment camps, and the nuclear bombings are never discussed as sharing similar ethical associations, and if they are presented as interrelated at all, it is usually with the clear-cut positioning of the Jerrys and the Japs as Evil, and the Americans as the good guys, forced against their will into the war, the bombs an unfortunate necessity in the honorable mission to ensure the victory of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This story is repeated over and over again in countless reiterations in books, films, and television productions. History turns into entertainment, and nowadays both the Jewish and the Japanese holocausts recede into their respective time capsules, screened specters shrouded in immateriality. Mediated productions do not merely reenact drama, but enhance it to induce excitement, total engagement, and cathartic experiences that dwarf any possible real-life events. This is the seductive power of the hyperreal—it magically captures our attention and instantly offers escape into a world that offers brighter colors, sharper images, the ability to travel through time and space, to live all our dreams as well as our nightmares vicariously.

Without a collective awareness and self-reflexive accountability, as Lisa Yoneyama (2016) demonstrates, any historical discourse is empty, and any attempt to enact justice is futile. Focusing on the U.S. bombing of Japan during WWII, Yoneyama connects American military and political involvement in Japan with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, pointing to the imagery and the rhetorical strategies that enabled the American media to construct a glorified and nostalgic understanding of the post–World War II occupation of Japan and the ensuing tight political and economic collaborations between the two nations as a grand success. The

popular narrative of self-defense military victory, which is repeated diligently to effectively

obscure the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is bolstered with a continuous celebration of

American freedoms that include the liberation of "oppressed" Japanese women and the

deliverance of the whole population from the dark ages of imperialism and communism into

the progressive light of capitalism and consumerism. These nostalgic tales of post-WWII

"success" and the various scripts of American benevolence repeated in both the U.S. and

Japan during the Cold War, Yoneyama demonstrates, worked well to rally public support for

the first Gulf War in 1990 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as justify other (ongoing)

forceful interventions in the Middle East.

Through an awareness of "transwar connectivity," Yoneyama emphasizes the need to

reconsider national culpability: "to make connections, to perceive affinities and convergences

of geohistorical elements that have worked together to constitute mid-twentieth century

violence" (2016, 49). Closely examining the rhetoric produced by mainstream news reports,

historical documentaries, fictional films and television shows, and the commodified

proliferation of American ideologies such freedom of speech, democracy, women's rights, or

individualism reveals the progression that links WWII forgotten atrocities with Cold War

alliances and the post–Cold War period with the present-day global "war on terror." What a

nation remembers and what it forgets directly defines how it continues to repeat violent acts,

both domestically and abroad. The attentive investigation of what a culture distorts or

subverts provides a critical lens through which to understand how our present conditions are

deeply embedded in the colluding historical legacies of capitalism, militarism, and

imperialism (Yoneyama 2016, 192). Submerged in cultural amnesia, even today it is still all

too easy for the U.S. to condemn Nazi Germany for the unimaginable horrors of the Jewish

Holocaust without ever stopping to consider the parallel mass murder inflicted on Japan.

In the American popular imagination, Pearl Harbor appears as a unique,

unprecedented attack that stands alone in its bold, uncalled for violence, removed from the

aggressive American political, economic, and military maneuvers that came before and after

the event that "forced" the U.S. to get involved in the war. The reproduced iterations and

tourist-oriented commemoration of Pearl Harbor, along with the Oklahoma City bombing,

the Columbine high school shooting, or the 9/11 attacks, fortify a distinct image of the U.S.

as a model nation of peace and tolerance, suffering, in all these "random" instances,

exceptional and unjust brutalities. These familiar narratives of innocence, Sturken suggests,

"perpetuate the myth that American society is not violent, despite the dominance of gun

culture and the high numbers each year of deaths from gun violence; despite the violence of

late twentieth-century U.S. involvement in the wars in Southeast Asia, Central America, and

the Middle East; and despite the racial violence that has deeply marked U.S. history" (2007,

16). Such national myths, as Roland Barthes (1957) suggests, like other forms of modern

myths propagated by popular culture and mass media, are so powerful precisely because they

do not lend themselves to contradiction or complexity. In the spheres and the media in which

they propagate themselves, there is no room for doubt. The images, language, and frame of

reference that enable modern mythologies are easy to absorb and repeat because they are

essentialized, simplified representations of a tangled, problematic, complicated reality (269).

As modern myths loosen the framework of history and past horrors appear more and

more disconnected, fragmented, and insubstantial, present events too rise out of nowhere like

phantoms, bringing with them unforeseen drama and chaos before falling, just as suddenly,

into nothingness and into the soothing drug that is mass media. The terrorists of today have nothing to do with the wars of the previous century, and even less with the conflicts of tomorrow. The "Axis of Evil" of the early 2000s has little to do with the "Axis powers" of World War II, and if connections are drawn at all in the American popular imagination, they sweepingly point right back to the founding fathers' vision of America as the Empire of Liberty, a light unto the nations, divinely ordained to spread the good news of "freedom" throughout the world. When other nations might have different ideas for what freedom means (it is, after all, a vague and relative term), when they have ideologies and agendas that do not fit smoothly with the globalized proselytizing of the American way of life, there is no choice but to declare those nations enemies, and proceed to liberate them from anti-imperialistic sentiments using the most sophisticated weapons available, waging wars that, in the social conscience, fail to signify death and destruction, but rather proudly symbolize liberty and progress.

It is true that the eyes of the keffiyeh-clad Muslim still confront the West with a gaze full of hurt, hate, and explosive rage. It is a gaze that raises, without the need for words, penetrating inquiries concerning ideologies the West rarely stops to examine, such as capitalism, democracy, a very particular concept of "liberty," and the default superiority of Christianity and European thought. It is perhaps the only thing that remains of Levinas's understanding of the other as an ethical dilemma, a force without which the self stagnates in moral inertia. It is also true, however, that this gaze, like those of the capitalized Others that came before it, is distorted by representation—by the insatiable reproductive urges of media technology. While the West has not yet swallowed and appropriated it as familiar, entertaining, or fashionable, mass media still works as a disarming agent by the very fact that

anything that is processed through a screen loses its measurable referents. Without substance, the image becomes a phantom. It haunts and disturbs, but unless there is an actual terrorist attack that affects individual bodies directly, it stays contained in the realm of simulation, in the safe stream of information that remains just outside the definition of "reality" at the same time that it dictates our experience of the "real."

Like a virus, today's terrorism is perceived as a force of pure Evil, isolated from causes and conditions, and of course devoid of any correlation to the collective self's moral standards, although the ethical conduct of the collective other is quickly condemned as utterly abominable. It is perhaps no longer possible to properly contextualize and historicize terrorism, but, according to Baudrillard (2002), we can start with the understanding that an eruption on the scale of the seemingly unimaginable September 11, 2001, attacks "goes far beyond the hatred that the disinherited and the exploited of the world feel for the global, hegemonic superpower—those who happened to fall on the wrong side of world order" (404). In the immediate wake of the September 11 events, news media relentlessly drilled the footage of the collapsing Twin Towers into the collective memory until it became just that: a remembrance, an evocative mirage, an emblem of trauma. Never pausing to contemplate the loss, television shows including *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Late Show with David Letterman* decided to simply cut out all background pictures containing the World Trade Center from their opening credits. "Hollywood followed suit," reports Lindsey Ellis (2017), "by cutting shots of the Twin Towers from such films such as *Zoolander* (2001), *Serendipity* (2001), and *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001). *The Time Machine* (2002) and *Men in Black II* (2002) removed entire scenes that involved the towers, with the latter swapping in the Statue of Liberty" (https://www.vox.com/2016/9/9/12814898/pop-culture-response-to-9-

11). This is cultural amnesia at its best, a fast and seamless erasing of the actual event in favor of fictionalized simulation. It is also a telling demonstration of the system's efficient obliteration of any historical perspective. The September 11 attacks, according to television, came out of nowhere. That was how America experienced this dark day, and no attempt has been made to consider the context: the obvious fact that it was a delayed counteroffensive in the American-Arab war that had started in 1991 with the invasion and destruction of Iraq, a horrific event in the collective experience of millions of Arabs and Muslims across the world, known in America in its commercial name the Gulf War, or its catchy, expurgated, Hollywood-style title Desert Storm. Furthermore, this dissolution of meaning disregards completely the possibility that the terrorism of today corresponds not only with the American humiliation and annihilation of Iraq in the 1990s, but the sheer devastation of Vietnam in the 1960s, Korea in the 1950s, and the bombing of Japan in 1945.

The distortion of reality that the media generates moves temporally in both directions, into the future as well as the past. If the event's sickening images quickly lost their initial shock value as they were ceaselessly televised, we can also consider how globally-broadcast American popular culture may have fertilized the grounds of resistance long before that festering defiance turned to real-life action. To examine the origins of such a catastrophic event, we may want to examine an immense number of cinematic productions that are obsessed with similar catastrophes. Throughout the 1990s, for example, following the first Gulf War, films such as *Under Siege* (1992), *Passenger 57* (1992), *True Lies* (1994), or *Air Force One* (1997) were hot export commodities that traveled overseas to provide the world with first-class Hollywood entertainment. In these productions, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Steven Seagal, Wesley Snipes, and Harrison Ford heroically carry the message of freedom to

global audiences (applauding and skeptical alike), advertising the exceptional righteousness of American violence, warranted as a necessary means for upholding justice.

However, pushing propaganda is not all that these films do. By dramatizing and accentuating terror, they "conjure it up thanks to their power of images, while drowning it in special effects. But the universal attraction they exert, equal in that aspect to pornography, shows that the passage to the act is always close. The system shows more of its velleity toward self-destruction, the nearer it is to perfection or absolute power" (Baudrillard 2002, 405). Is it possible, then, that such popular cultural productions reveal, under the celebratory glorification of America as a fearless and gallant global superpower, a deep anxiety about the instability of it all, about the ever-present threat of demise? Looking back, Hollywood's fascination with grand-scale disaster started long before the popular action films of the 1990s. From alien invasions and scientific experiments gone wrong to Russian spies and Muslim terrorists, American cinema is filled with a variety of apocalyptic visions in which the infiltrating imaginary other, insidious and conspiring, must be exposed and gotten rid of if the world is to escape total destruction. In this light, amusing classics such as *Them!* (1954), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), or *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) are but early links in a long chain of growing insecurities, ever more apparent now with inexhaustible reiterations of familiar end-of-the-world themes, whether by terrorists, zombies, radioactive insects, sinister aliens, or unstoppable pandemics.

By the year 2020, the public imagination is programed to visually link zombies, terrorists, and viruses, who all strike randomly and without any provocation, presenting an immediate threat of decomposition not only to the vulnerable physical forms of human beings, but to a whole way of life. Invaders spell catastrophe, and we have seen enough

stages apocalypses to know that in order to stop the rapid spread of a particularly contagious pathogen, for example, restrictions of movement, commerce, and social interactions must be enforced. And yet, despite the countless cinematic scenes embedded in our psyches, we are taken by surprise as swiftly, like dominos, entire economic, political, and social systems fall. The stock market is crashing, jobs are eliminated, offices close, and with them schools, churches, gyms, playgrounds, and shopping malls. Suddenly, innocent civilians must negotiate the terms of their survival alone, apart from external structures, removed from the reassuring security of the everyday. Like terrorism, the virus destabilizes the subject not merely by harboring death and disrupting our routines, but by asking questions we normally take great care to avoid. Who are we, not as participants in the public domains but alone, in the privacy of the domestic space? What makes our existence count? What right do we have to live, if we are to survive while others are dying?

Unlike zombies, aliens, and terrorists, a virus is invisible to the naked eye. For a moment, the media falters, unsure how to represent that which resists representation. The great equalizer, the medical mask, comes to the rescue. In a world that demands visual representation, it becomes the sign of the times, a most recognizable icon that stands for "pandemic." While worn in hope of reassuring protection, its blank universality becomes charged, ironically, with a distinct expression of terror and panic. Like all masks, it covers and obscures, thus creating an unsettling fear of the unseen, the unknown. Like terrorists, viruses move freely among us, undetected and imperceptible until they erupt with chilling, indiscriminatory coldness of which the face mask is in fact the perfect illustration.

Furthermore, fitting for the age of globalization, here is an agent of death that levels the playfield and attacks the West as much as the Rest, the haves as much as the have-nots,

regardless of race, ethnic origin, gender, creed, or status. The alterity of the virus does not

question the right to exist of one person over another, of one population over another, but of

the species as a whole. And, as Baudrillard ([1987b] 1990b) speculates, "if we consider the

superiority of the human species, the size of its brain, its powers of thinking, language and

organization, we can say this: were there the slightest possibility that another rival or superior

species might appear, on earth or elsewhere, man would use every means at his disposal to

destroy it" (114). Fitting, too, with the best science fiction nightmares in the history of

entertainment, a rapidly multiplying invisible parasite is the epitome of otherness; an

abominable subversion beyond our understanding or control, threatening to eradicate a

species we believe to be invincible and whose preeminence we take for granted as absolute,

God-given truth.

Figure 2. Palestinian Protesters. Photograph by Musa Al-Shaer, October 14, 2015.

Figure 3. Coronavirus in the Occupied West Bank. Photograph by Mohammed Salem, September 10, 2020.

"An outcome is fatal," writes Baudrillard ([1990] 1993), "when the same sign presides over both the advent of something and its demise" (40) as is the case with the surgical mask, which illustrates perfectly the instability of postmodern semiotics and the ensuing implosion of meaning. A continent-hopping pandemic threatens more than our physical existence. As commerce, education, services, facilities, and all public spaces shut down one by one, the virus becomes a reflection of the notion that, in some respects, "the whole system is globally terroristic. A greater terror than the terror of violence and accident is the terror of uncertainty and dissuasion" (42), a suspicion we are not ready to consider. But the beauty of the hyperreal is its infinite mazes of avoidance. In a determined attempt to distract ourselves from the unknown, we rely even more heavily on the media, and luckily that is still in place, with unlimited access to aggregated information, digital communication, and audio-visual entertainment. We cling to what validates existence and provides security, unable to see how these very things exacerbate instability.

Viruses, like terrorism, appear out of nowhere, turn the world upside down in an instant, shatter the everyday with the persisting anxious question: will things ever be the same again? Even a killing pandemic, however, can be traced, at least as a signifier, back to trends that have gathered momentum over the past few decades. The 1976 film *Boy in the Plastic Bubble* presented the true story of a boy born with a rare disorder that severely compromises his immune system. This meant that in order to live, he couldn't have any contact with the outside world—with unfiltered air or unsanitized surfaces—and had to stay in his room where even his parents could not touch him or spend too much time with him. His homeschooling, play time, and socialization were done by the most advanced computers available at the time and, of course, television. The tear-jerking drama is a prefiguration of a future in which we are all going to find ourselves confined to our rooms, instructed by computers, engaging with screens instead of living beings, obsessed with sheltering ourselves from the uncertainty of the other, and from intruding bugs, pests, and germs. The story of the boy and his bubble, Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) observes, "epitomizes the kind of vacuum-sealed existence hitherto reserved for bacteria and particles in laboratories but now destined for us as, more and more, we are vacuum-pressed like records, vacuum-packed like deep-frozen foods and vacuum-enclosed for death… That we think and reflect in a vacuum is demonstrated by the ubiquitousness of artificial intelligence" (61). We all know that the outside world can turn on us, and we are also quite skilled at staying indoors and disinfecting our surroundings. Is it possible, then, that a real virus, when it hits, simply mirrors to us what is already in the making? Are we not already well on our way to a life in a bubble, a life in the safe and sterile sites of the hyperreal?

Over the past few decades, many other productions, more apocalyptic in their premise and more terrorizing in their affect, have ensured that a deadly contamination is nothing new in our collective psyche, and yet what is presented as entertainment fails to register properly when an actual event happens. While sign exchanges go both ways, the transference mechanism between what is on and off the screen is never exact, as signifiers and referents constantly slip, slide, and lose relevance. While simulation draws on the actual, and the actual in turn mimics the fabricated, the system is full of glitches, as the two worlds circle one another in an ongoing competition for stimulation, excitement, and sensationalism. The film *Outbreak* (Petersen 1995), for example, opens with a quote from Nobel laureate in Physiology and Medicine, Dr. Joshua Lederberg. "The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet," Lederberg warns, "is the virus." This is perhaps scientifically true, but in the context of a fictional drama, it's hard to tell what to take seriously. The surgical masks, isolation suits, and face shields worn by Dustin Hoffman, Morgan Freeman, and Rene Russo look intimidating at first, then normal, and eventually almost sexy. In *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2003), a raging virus transforms the infected into mutant zombies with an insatiable hunger for human flesh. As governments fail to contain the epidemic, mass evacuations turn into mass bloodbaths. The post-apocalyptic world into which the protagonist wakes up eerily foreshadows the desolate streets and abandoned shopping malls of COVID-19. Traffic signals keep blinking, neon signs keep advertising seductive products, but the human factor has been removed from the picture, gone into hiding. Unlike *Outbreak*, where the classic battle between Good (the honest, warm, charmingly human Dustin Hoffman) and Evil (the cold, conniving Donald Sutherland) ends, predictably, with Good cathartically winning and order being restored, *28 Days Later* offers a

grim**,** radical critique of the shortsighted dysfunction of governments, authorities, and the capitalist system, and the cannibalistic urges that lurk behind the façade of "progress" and "civilization." Nevertheless, as a fictitious production, the film's political and social commentary gets lost in the vicarious horror of an irreparable catastrophe. Just entertainment, we delight. Nothing, we are sure, could look that bad in real life.

Conversely, the documentary series *Pandemic* (Castro, LaPenne, and McGarry 2020) features real-life scientists, hospitals packed with influenza patients, and expert physicians who gravely announce that a novel, incurable strain of the flu is "not a question of if, but when." Here too, however, warnings mean little when they are packaged and marketed as a thrilling television show, starring a young and beautiful female epidemiologist who, like Dustin Hoffman, risks her own life to save others, fights for what's right, and makes the protective gear look like high-tech fashion accessories. Moreover, with the rapid advances of the actual virus, such a documentary becomes dated faster than it has a chance to make an impression, as it is already competing with live reports showing images of the sick, the dying, and their grieving families, doctors working day and night in overcrowded clinics, close-up interviews with specialists stressing the sacrifices that must be made in order to stop the disease. The real, as soon as it happens, gets decoded and reprogrammed by the hyperreal. And in spite of endless images of panic and hysteria, the screen maintains unwavering faith in the superpowers of the human species. If we come together, the media insists, cooperate and collaborate, we can defeat the bloodthirsty alien. We have seen it in the movies, so it must be true. Governments around the world (led by America, of course), will join forces and share resources. The best scientific minds will work around the clock to

develop a vaccine. The most altruistic doctors and nurses will dedicate their lives to the cause. With a little faith, inspiration, and determination, we shall overcome.

Like all wars in the age of simulation, a battle against a virus is characterized by the "what ifs" of potentiality and speculation. Enemies in previous wars had a face, and later a keffiyeh and raging eyes, but here is a body-snatching microorganism with no identity, no skin color, accent, or pungent spices in its food. What kind of other is this? The threat is particularly powerful precisely because it is insubstantial, transparent, obscure. In a media-dominated world, however, nothing is valid without an image. And visual representation produced the illusion of control, the belief that we know what we're dealing with and therefore know how to deal with it. Hence the surgical mask, a mandatory prop that signifies both danger and salvation: a reassuring sign of science and an emblem of uncertainty that stands for death. Because the war is televised and its images resemble so closely the fictitious entertainment productions that precede and are bound to follow it, the actual damage, experienced by the public as a mediated event, loses its material quality and dwells somewhere between reality and the screen. The hyperreal, in its excessive and unstoppable stream of information and visual stimulation, swallows up the death drama automatically, turning it into a staged act, one that as it is happening is already registering as a distant memory—a specter—rather than an authentic experience. Behind the panic, the dread, and the inconveniences, a large-scale crisis such as a war or a pandemic is best dealt with from the comfort of a well-wired home and a well-stocked pantry. The bunker is already dug, all we have to do is settle into its disinfected surfaces and tune in, log in, plug in.

As the pandemic-related restrictions demonstrate, the virtual world of the hyperreal can be a safe and comfortable alternative to the perilous unpredictability of unscreened

interactions. Overnight, anything that requires physical presence becomes dangerous, and things that seemed essential, such as work, school classrooms, travel, shopping malls, and social gatherings, are rendered superfluous. For those with home computers or even just smart phones and a sufficiently reliable internet connection, it is perfectly possible to slip into a new form of existence, one that does not include the physical presence of the body. And of course, for many years prior to the crisis, social media outlets seem to have anticipated the unwarranted dangers of in-person interactions, and supplemental apps such as Facetime, Zoom, and Skype ensure that we can still "meet," "chat," "visit," "hang out," "date," and much more. In the world of phenomena, it appears, corporeality might be outdated, as we find that our projected selves inhabit the virtual realms with ease, and with the added special effects, poise, and glamour afforded by digital polishing.

The paradox of a retracted human experience and an expanding technological system leads Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) to suggest that the far-reaching streams of simulation not only distort or neutralize meaning, but reduce it to a superfluous, withering, unnecessary thing of the past. Mass media as a system is not concerned with events—only with the *staging* of events, with the act of presentation and representation. Form, style, and design diminish content, and in an endless cycle of replication that has long ago lost its origin, and in which signifiers circulate endlessly without actual referents, signification dissolves not only theoretically but on the practical level of social experience. "Everywhere," Baudrillard observes, "socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages. Whoever is under-exposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial" ([1981] 1994, 80). In much of the world, regardless of the sophistication of the technology used, to be a social being means to be connected to a device. Communication, interactions, and connections depend on electronic

machines, and the reference points to a social structure that exists outside the structures of technology are gradually disappearing.

As the organic formation of the human body becomes increasingly self-sufficient, connected to the outer world through mediated circuits, the function of alterity becomes obscured. For Levinas ([1984] 2001), the meaning of alterity emerges not from stated differences, but from the inarticulate phenomenon through which the other emerges as simply not the self. "Before any attribute," he writes, "you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is your alterity. This alterity is not justifiable logically; it is, on the contrary, logically indiscernible. The identity of the I is not the result of any knowledge whatsoever: I find myself without looking for myself" (49). Here alterity does not define identity by contrast, as the core, continuous sense of being the self is a reality that does not require definition. What the other does is to suddenly present a question that was not there before, a doubt in the very core of my awareness, a fissure in the continuity of my separate existence. The presence of a living being outside myself is the primary commencement of a discriminating consciousness, one that is capable of at least momentarily *disidentifying*. This sudden break from the totality of the separate self, Levinas suggests, is immediately accompanied by an ethical uncertainty regarding what's right and what's wrong.

Following Levinas, alterity is a moral demand that defies categorical differences, that penetrates much deeper than demarcations of collective disparities. The challenge to the self would still arise even if only two people were to live on the planet, and even if they were of the same race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, social standing, and political affiliation. The irreducible mystery of the other, along with its inevitable threat, potential conflict, and latent

violence would all be there even if these two people were brothers, as the biblical story of Cain and Abel illustrates so well. One brother appears to be favored by God. The other, enraged with jealousy and insecurity, kills him. But the relatively quick elimination of one brother's body means the agonizing destruction of the other's soul. The brother who lives is the one who continues to suffer—banished by God, he is condemned to exile, doomed to spend the rest of his days wrestling with his marred conscience, forever haunted by the memory of his brother's blood crying out from the soil.

"Are 'friends' electric?" asked pop icon Gary Numan in a 1979 hit single. Four decades later, the question is rhetorical. While contact with other human beings is deemed too dangerous, electronic devices are much more reliable, sanitary, and reassuring. Bodies occupying space, sensory experiences, and the range of possible interactions among living beings are things of the past. The visuality of the screen is no longer an imitation; it is the ruling power that has come to dominate our world as everything outside of it acquires the quality of supplemental, peripheral, optional add-ons. What cannot be recorded and replicated—touch, smell, taste, spontaneity, chance—is demoted, its validity doubtful and insignificant. "Media, by altering the environment," writes McLuhan (1967), "evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act--the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change" (41). As the battle against the virus mandates more and more closures of institutions and facilities, it becomes increasingly evident that the unpredictable, unhygienic, potentially hazardous world of the real, while still a nice optional feature, may not be necessary anymore. Anything imaginable can be purchased online, offices and agencies can offer most of their services remotely, as do many hospitals and clinics. Doctor's appointments, consultations,

psychotherapy sessions, board meetings, conventions, religious ceremonies, mass protests, birthday parties, family dinners, or just coffee with a friend—all of it can happen on the screen, with the aid of live video cameras, voice recognition, automated human captioning, and the exciting new implementations of 3-D technologies. Under the illusion that we are in control, life in the simulated hyperreal is pleasant and satisfying. We click, scroll, capture, embed, authorize, choose our own backgrounds, colors, themes, and avatars, "like" what we like and block or delete the rest. Here, I am master of my universe, I am both the director and the star of my own show, and the fact that millions of others are doing the same on their own private screens doesn't bother me at all. There is no competition. This, in many ways, is much more appealing than the unruly, unpredictable, infected outside world, a "real" that is gradually rendered superfluous, soon to become obsolete.

Where does that leave the definition of the subject? Perhaps, Walter Benjamin's argument that the aura—the particular vitality and unique impact—of art is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction can be applied to humans as well. As an individual is being mediated, processed, and reproduced, its original presence dissipates, becomes lost in simulation technologies. At the same time that it is stripped of its authentic potency, a work of art that is copied and circulated assumes a symbolic function that has little—if any— connection to the social and historical contexts in which it originated. This process of symbolic exchange is part of the logic of commodity fetishism, which applies to subjects as well as to objects so that now I too can duplicate myself in digital form as a photographed, recorded, videotaped, televised, streaming, or embedded rendition, propagating myself through essentializing images that take on a life of their own, leaving me, their living master copy, far behind. Without pausing, we pass right into the mesmerizing haze of the virtual.

Without hesitation, we are ready—and have been for a while—to trade a corporeal existence for a cybernetic one. Here we are sheltered, immune, and invincible.

What becomes of identity without the one-of-a-kind face of the other before it was defused and appropriated by the media, before it was masked and distorted beyond recognition, the face which "resists possession, resists my powers" (Levinas [1963] 1991, 197)? Without that refusal, the self can indulge in an orgy of its own subjectivity with nothing in the vicinity that could reveal its boundaries, its substantiality, or its ethical obligation. Under these conditions, identity too, like the oppressed and the persecuted of the past, is liberated through representation to the point of meaninglessness implosion, of impotence and futility. All I can do is reinvent myself, polish and rearrange the pixels that will become my hologram. Free to mimic anything, play multiple roles, construct and deconstruct my various personas, I too am pulled into the untethered streaming spirals of the hyperreal, where the "I" circulates without a concrete referent, without origin.

"Let us imagine," writes Levinas (1989), "all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. One cannot put this return to nothingness outside of all events. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness. The indeterminateness of this "something is happening" is not the indeterminateness of a subject and does not refer to a substantive" (30). For Debord and Baudrillard, that nothingness is no longer imaginary. It is the hyperreal into which organic forms are being flung, losing their signification in a swirling web of mediated simulation that drains all signs of meaning. Subjects and objects alike, historical others and present selves, dissolve into a realm devoid of reference points. Who do we become—as individuals, as a community, as a nation, as a species—in this hollowed circuitry? Hypothetically, existence does not

necessitate existents. It can take on an independent construct that is completely removed from biology, from our current understanding of subjectivity. "Like the third person pronoun in the impersonal form of a verb, it designates not the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author" (Levinas, 1989, 30). Such an existence, however, has no discernment, no consciousness, and therefore no moral implication. Without the grounding references of subject and object, there is also no identity and no alterity. The meaning of self and other, therefore, entails phenomena: embodiment, substance, encounters, sense perceptions, the conflicting forces of the internal and external. Out of these clashes ethical questions arise and seek to be answered. This is not a choice, it's an obligation that is inseparable from consciousness itself.

To be a conscious being is to hold moral responsibilities, and as Arendt warns, the failure to think that comes with simply following orders and going with the flow of popular ideologies signifies ethical failure as well. Gitta Sereny (1974) affirms this notion in her thorough psychological assessment of Franz Stangl, the Nazi commander of Treblinka, who in 1970 was convicted in West Germany for his part in murdering 900,000 people. The portrait that emerges from Sereny's numerous interviews with the imprisoned Stangl is an in-depth confirmation of the banality of evil and of the astonishing failure to think of an intelligent, respectable individual, a law-abiding citizen and a loyal family man. Cognizant and rational, Stangl keeps claiming that his conscience is clear, that he was doing what he was told, that despite being in charge of torturing and killing thousands of men, women, and children, despite witnessing daily the most extreme human suffering and routinely wading through piles of corpses, there was never any doubt in his mind that he was doing exactly the right thing. Sereny finds no answer to her persisting question, "Whether evil is created by

circumstances or by birth, and to what extent it is determined by the individual himself, or by his environment" (1974, 13). Mirroring the Eichmann trial in Israel several years earlier, the Stangl trial was another proudly publicized spectacle which allowed Germany to proclaim accountability and justice to itself and to the world. The captured monster that the media advertised, Sereny notes, was a fantastical beast that appeared to have little to do with the quiet, clean, courteous man Sereny sat with for long conversations during her prison visits (21).

Cogs in the machine, automatons devoid of the capacity to think independently, to discern right from wrong, to learn from history, and to cultivate a moral core, Eichmann and Stangl have become sensational icons of evil that are meant to shock and appall the conscientious reader. Sereny's work, like Arendt's, stands out as an unusual form of representation, one that is invested in the question rather than the answer. Constructing a narrative grounded in inquiry, these texts are philosophical in nature and therefore untethered by the particular historical moment they address. The remembering they encourage is not limited to the specific horrors they engage with, but extends to a moral dilemma that is, in essence, timeless. Under certain hypothetical circumstances, they ask, could I be an Eichmann? Given the right incentives, would I become a Stangl? As the famous 1961 Stanley Milgram experiment in obedience and authority suggests, the answer is a definitive yes. Do the 2020 presidential election riots in the U.S. not demonstrate the persistent resurgence of white supremacy, racism, and violent hate? Is the state of Israel not a contemporary model of an apartheid regime that thrives, much like Nazi Germany before it, on segregation, oppression, and the active persecution of Palestinians? And from an even bigger perspective, is the rising domination of advanced technology not in itself a form of

technological imperialism, a system that controls and orchestrates not just national but also global economic trends, political moves, information exchange, commerce, medicine, and culture? Plugged into cold machines of calculated programming, the average user of advanced technology may no longer be fully conscious, capable of autonomous thinking, unaltered by the medium's self-bolstering message. If that is the case, then the average user is also ethically impaired, unable to recognize the right questions, let alone address them.

Reproduction, adapted representation, and simulated otherness remain trapped in the circuits of symbolic exchange, and are not likely to arouse lasting disturbance in the world of phenomena, the world of the sensory reactions and material encounters. For alterity to function as a radical question mark, it must be embodied (Levinas 1989, 38). It must present to the self an alternative to its own being that is equally subjective, equally capable of taking up space and time on the same continuous plane. In the far edges of the real, mostly out of sight and certainly out of mind, such otherness still exists, remaining, for now, inaccessible to replication technologies, or simply lacking any market value. Undocumented immigrants, severely handicapped people, disabled veterans, drug addicts, hopeless alcoholics, criminals, or the extreme poor constitute negligible minorities that on occasion still present a face that is beyond knowing, beyond possessing. In the times of COVID-19, the homeless are a suitable example. Unlike the hospitalized, institutionalized, or incarcerated, which are easier to ignore, the homeless are contained neither by the media nor by the authorities; they are outside any recognizable system, free to roam among us and disrupt the surface order in their nonconformity. This caste of "untouchables" rarely enters mainstream concerns as anything more than a distasteful eyesore: an unfortunate lot, menacing, perhaps even dangerous at times, unpleasant, inconvenient. Somewhere between human and animal, the living and the

dead, the homeless population can often register as resembling the Hollywood zombies we are familiar with, and while we may be slightly afraid, we can't exactly take them too seriously. We have become very skilled at averting our gaze; deflecting the real. In this reversal of the signification process, here the spectacle has the power to manipulate experience, to construct and contextualize the encounter. In this case, the reign of the media is clear: a fictional creature replicated tirelessly in numerous zombie movies gains the status of an "original," while the homeless people, inadvertently mimicking a popular culture image, are mere imitations, easily-dismissed apparitions.

Nevertheless, an encounter with the homeless does have the potential to stir discomfort, to pose questions. To begin with, every time a disheveled figure in tattered rags dares to gaze up, every time there is eye contact, a silent doubt arises: Who is the real zombie in this scene? After all, I am the one who spends most of my life as a human extension of electronic devices, while the unshaven drifters are out there, day and night, in a reality so tangible its visceral effects are literally inconceivable to me. I carefully roll down the window at the stoplight, hand the person a dollar, and drive off to the safety of my bubble, where to "live" is to click, scroll, drag, copy, paste, delete. If I am not a zombie, certainly I must be a cyborg.

A deadly virus breeds a new order commanding the public to stay at home. That is, if you have a home. The rules made for registered voters and compliant cyborgs are impossible to enforce on the living dead. Vulnerable as they are, and even more feared now that their very presence indicates *exposure*, the homeless are exempt from the inconvenient restrictions that inhibit movement, cancel events, crash the stock market, eliminate jobs, devastate small businesses, and force social distancing. Following Debord ([1967] 1994), the quarantines,

closures, and policy of "social distancing" are only official expressions of a growing alienation that has been at the core of existence for decades—a necessary component of technological and economic structures. These postmodern arrangements "are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender 'lonely crowds'" (20). In other words, social distancing, a nominally new concept, is, in fact, a reiteration of an already existing condition: not a cluster of ad hoc measures but a fancy term for a chronic reality that relies on alienation, isolation, and loneliness in order to successfully market fashionable, must-own products such as high-definition flat screens, noise-cancelling earphones, digital dating services, one-click shopping platforms, and other options that further distance us from human contact and the physical world. In separate little bubbles, the moral dilemma that is embedded in an actual encounter with an other in a shared space in real time is suspended and disabled, rendered unnecessary.

After weeks and months of closures, lockdowns, social distancing, and quarantines, the attempt to stop the spread of the pandemic is only marginally successful. Ambiguity persists, and infection rates are still on the rise. Like terrorism and other unwanted disruptions to the convenient routine, the virus is understood at large not through direct experience, but through mediated abstraction. The spontaneous eruption of grand-scale annihilation, a global catastrophe that destabilizes all man-made systems and defies containment, could serve as a mirror, but it is one we are not prepared to look into. In truth, we may be unable to consider what is being reflected, because it resides just outside the frame of reference of the presumed superiority of our species. Is it possible that as the human

race moves towards a more fragmented, insulated form of existence, its presumed superiority is gradually declining, giving way to the rise of machines of various kinds as the dominant force on a degrading planet? Could it be that those machine, their elaborate networks, and their endless circulation of information and entertainment are having a debilitating effect on our capacity to consider not only long histories of atrocities and destruction, but present deteriorating realities as well? Are the mechanisms of simulation as benign as they appear to be, or do they promote, by their very nature, a state of mass amnesia that makes it harder and harder to engage with the parts of physical phenomena that do not lend themselves to the representational dominions of symbolic exchange?

"Whenever we hear the promises of tech being extolled," writes Ruha Benjamin (2019), "our antennae should pop up to question what all that hype of 'better, faster, fairer' might be hiding and making us ignore" (48). Benjamin's recent work on algorithmic computations and the perpetuation of conventional racial divides in digital media calls attention to the unprecedented cultural reliance on machines. In truth, the term "culture" can no longer be separated from the mechanized apparatuses that produce or document it, and yet the devices and procedures upon which culture now depends can be easily-dismissed as negligible features. Nevertheless, they do merit acknowledgement as critical factors in contemporary mimetic practices that obfuscate unwelcomed discrepancies between the real and the hyperreal.

The threat of a novel virus is alien, terrifying, and impossible to comprehend not only because, like terrorism, it is dynamic, adaptable, and unpredictable, but also because it emerges from the uncharted territories that lie outside the screen. The fraying real, which is where disease, decay, and death occur, is getting more and more remote, difficult to access

because we no longer know how to consume and digest an open narrative that does not conform to the familiar formulas of mediated historical narrative and commercial storytelling. The approach of death, writes Levinas ([1947] 1987), "indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity" (43). The debilitating totality of such a threat is an adamant question mark that demands attention, but currently we are all a little busy uploading ourselves onto the high-resolution monitors of cybernetic existence.

Figure 4. A Police Car Passes Homeless People in Los Angeles After Covid-19 Restrictions Went into Effect. Photograph by David McNew/Getty Images.

Chapter Four

Cyborgs

While following pandemic-related orders and retreating into domestic isolation, the screens that surround most individuals, at least in the wealthier parts of the world, ensure that we stay properly occupied with streaming films, television shows, music to fit any mood, podcasts, and of course the constantly updated news. Social media allows us to feel well connected to the intricate web of the communal hyperreal, where all professional and personal relationships transcend the limitations of time and space by cyber optic technology, while physical bodies remain securely seated in the same spot, safe from the raging threat of the virus. Although the "shelter in place" order did not introduce any new technologies, it did elevate internet-enabled work duties, social interactions, commerce, and communication to a default status, turning high speed Wi-Fi into an elementary necessity, along with a good cell phone plan that includes enough data to facilitate a virtual connectivity. When the Pew Research Center started systematically tracking internet usage in the U.S. in early 2000, about half of all adult Americans were already regularly connected to the World Wide Web. In 2021, the percentage has risen to 93%. In headcount terms, that is still less than the numbers recorded in India and China (Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband). According to a 2013 report in Forbes Magazine, more people have mobile phones around the world than have access to an indoor, flushing toilet (Worstall 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/03/23/more-people-have-mobile-phones-than-toilets/?sh=65315ba76569). Given that the water closet was invented several centuries ago and cell phones are only about 30 years old, the statistics are certainly alarming when

considering glaring inequalities in living conditions, and yet clearly reflect the prioritized prominence of portable, cordless communication devices. And while these trajectories have been steadily solidifying over the past two decades, the COVID-19 global crisis has brought them into a clear focus, as actual outings must be drastically reduced to a minimum, and face-to-face encounters that are not absolutely essential gradually seem increasingly outdated, awkward, time consuming, logistically inconvenient, and of course extremely unsafe.

This chapter contemplates the increasing cultural and social dominance of digital technologies, along with the growing human dependency on the internet, screened devices, and image-based information. In this exploratory study I examine correlations between artificial intelligence and human cognitive processes, suggesting that the constant exposure to streaming information might be altering human experience to the point of changing modes of producing, receiving, and processing knowledge. The similarities are evolving not only because computer programs are designed to imitate human mental faculties, but because these very programs then become models that set standards for human functioning, prescribing calculated manners of thinking, behaving, and relating by repeatedly demonstrating efficient and precise coding and decoding practices. I continue the examination of rhetoric and imagery related to the COVID-19 pandemic, looking at how representations of the emerging catastrophe position the "knowing" self in relation to the unknown other. In the midst of a global crisis, local upheavals erupt, attempting to contest and upturn systems of discrimination, and yet under the prescribed instant appropriations of mass media, which rely on spectacle, shock value, and prospective marketability, even spontaneous outbursts of resistance, it appears, are subject to the laws of simulation and cash-

nexus, as the mechanisms of the hyperreal quickly devour the contents of radicalism,

highlighting the drama of struggle and diminishing the potential for an actual destabilization

of social and political power structures.

Contemporary subjectivity, writes Colin Koopman (2019), is an informational

subjectivity, contingent on the amassing of personal data: the methodical buildup of

information that now precedes the person. Starting with our birth certificate and continuing

with our school records, medical records, driver's license, bank accounts, work performance

reports, insurance policies, retirements plans, and all the various profiles we might create on

work, business, or commercial websites, not to mention social media, this representation of

who we are in the form of collected data will outlive us long after our death certificates are

properly processed through the official channels. Building on Foucault's genealogies of the

biopolitical and disciplinary subject, Koopman tracks the shift that began in the early part of

the 20th century and continues today, a procedural systematizing of all possible human

activities for the purpose of compiling enough data to assess, by means of algorithmic digital

data managing, a person's place within scales and measurements of categorized population

subdivisions that include race, class, gender, age, ability, productivity, and monetary net

worth. At some point in the past few decades, through the accelerated rise of technologies of

tracking and chronicling, information began to define human life. It is now possible for

information systems to draw up persons, in vivid detail that includes facts, figures, pictures,

and videos, as if from out of nowhere. From the cradle to the grave, human lives are being

recorded and uploaded into databases that are not restricted by the physical space old file

cabinets required, and that are not subject to the natural laws under which human bodies still

decay, wither, and die (Koopman 6). To legitimize existence, the life of every registered

citizen in any region on the planet is now digitized, neatly and safely stored in hard drives and accessible clouds, where it can also be dissected and processed for the purpose of determining the correct placing and potential value of each individual.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this digital authentication of human life to a clear focus. Strangely, after a while, the "new normal" does not seem that new after all. The transitioning from the physical to the virtual has started long before the lockdowns. The American higher education system, for example, has already been investing more and more in developing online courses that successfully compete with traditional face-to-face offerings. "Between 2015 and 2016," writes Hyungjoo Yoon (2019), "among about 20 million American students (17 million undergraduates and 3 million graduates), 6 million students took more than one distance course, and approximately half (2.2 million undergraduates and 0.8 million graduates) were exclusively online learners" (65). The Covid-19 closures and the shift to online educational modalities highlight the many already-established advantages of the virtual campus: students from all over the country and the world can have access to college education, instructors and administrators can work from the comfort of their private homes, expenses go down when classrooms and study halls remain unused, and unlike janitors and maintenance crews, IT personnel can be outsourced, eliminating the need for proximity and actual presence. Similarly, online shopping, which was also already creating dramatic changes in consumption habits, now simply becomes the safest and easiest way to purchase just about anything, making even the most loyal customers of certain chains wonder about the immense space and enormous resources taken up by real stores, not to mention the hassle of driving and parking, and of course the high risk of contracting disagreeable diseases.

The news reports that are being updated daily (if not hourly), struggle to accurately depict a living creature that does not easily lend itself to mediated representation and yet possesses incredible multiplying powers, replicating itself and traveling to all corners of the world at an astonishing speed. As people are instructed to shelter in place, quarantine, or self-isolate, communication and information technologies—when these are available—enable the continuation of common life functions such as employment, schooling, shopping, and getting together with colleagues, family, and friends. As all of these assume their virtual form, a semblance of normalcy is maintained, contingent upon access to good Wi-Fi and a dependable interactive screen. The web-enhanced conditions created by the contagious virus may have further muddled the boundaries between the real and the virtual, but they did not invent the blurring of the lines. The technological infrastructure was laid out long ago, and the system of the hyperreal has been in full operation for several decades now.

The changes introduced by media—by the distortion of scale, pace, and meaning—suggest that as a species we might be moving toward a different kind of existence, one that correlates with machines in an ever-tightening interdependency, and one in which method directs all thought and perception. Rationality and logic, Marshall McLuhan (1967) argues, are equated with linearity, continuity, and uniformity, and are thus contingent "on the presentation of connected and sequential facts and concepts" (45). As the real is increasingly confused with its simulated and mediated depictions, everything must be performed and understood in the shorthand, universal language of ordered visual signs; outlines that we can process quickly and efficiently, as machines do, by simply decoding information spreads according to the grids and frameworks of a uniformly programmed operation system.

For example, the news portals all feature charts that update daily and report, with great presumed accuracy, on the trajectory of the COVID-19 curve. The tracking of the infected, the dead, and the recovered, and the graphs that illustrate the virus's advancements eerily resemble stock market boards that trace, moment by moment, the ups and downs of economic trends. The figures and the arcs are essential for identifying patterns, and as viewers and readers of the information the media presents to us, we have no choice but to process the information according to the method of presentation, by focusing on numbers, measurements, and calculations. The mechanism, as McLuhan (1967) argues, transforms the user so that nothing is left untouched: all environments and experiences are perceived and experienced differently as humans necessarily conform to the system's modus operandi. "Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information" (63). In terms of cognitive processes, "our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition" (63). As computer programs take over the tasks of collecting, sorting, and arranging quantifiable data, humans are guided towards seeking recognizable and repeatable formulas, ones that will provide a measure of order and a sense of control over the unknown.

The constantly updating COVID-19 charts relieve the uncertainty of an impending apocalypse by the controlled detachment with which the daily reports are presented. On television, internet news portals, and phone apps that flash with updates every few minutes, the information highway races along its unseen tunnels and overpasses in a massive flood of facts and figures, analysis and commentary. In charting the progress of the dreaded enemy, the "curve" has become a visual symbol of the virus's vigor and stamina, a sign of

catastrophe. And since a direct battle with an invisible opponent is not an option, the goal is to "flatten the curve," because curves, as we know from lessons in economics, are only productive within limited allocated margins. Small ripples are fine, but big waves indicate disaster. An occasional bump here and there can be controlled, easily absorbed by the surface appearance of equilibrium, but tall waves are unwelcomed because, like the other, they stand out in their alterity, in their menacing, subject-negating totality. A representative of the tenacious microorganism, the curve is the postmodern Grendel we must destroy, deploying the best technologies of the hyperreal, namely a collective retreat into controlled environments where the screen orders us to await further instructions.

Religiously tracking every minor shift, we, the viewers, operate like morgue room statisticians as the dead, conversely, become individually insignificant compared with their numeric representations, and with the global obsession with flattening the curve, which would symbolize, in the universal language of colorful diagrams, victory. It is likely that in the future, after the virus is defeated, narratives will emerge, in the form of historical documentaries or fictional horror movies, that will attach names, faces, and identities to the quarantined and the infected, the observers and the observed. For now, however, the terrorizing alterity of the virus is neatly contained in columns, maps, and grids, as our scientific reasoning finds reassurance in carefully administered configurations, even—or perhaps especially—if so far those configurations might indicate catastrophe.

Going south
New confirmed cases of covid-19 by region, '000
2020, seven-day moving average

Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE   *To June 5th
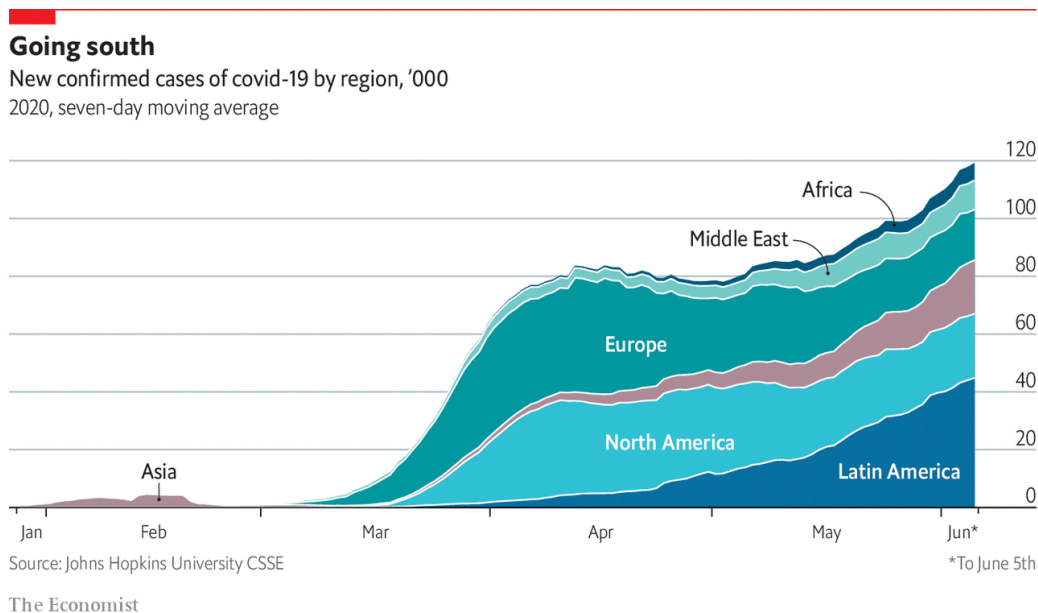
The Economist

Figure 5. Going South: New Confirmed Covid Cases by Region, '000: Seven-Day Moving Average. John Hopkins University CSSE, June 2020.

Figure 6. S&P 500 with Moving Average. Pippa Stevens, CNBC, October 2, 2019.

To accompany the computation techniques of aggregated data, the media also offers a seductive spectacle of the plague in numerous, repetitive pictures of the doctors, nurses, and patients, all faceless and nameless as well under the mandatory surgical masks. The images complement the charts in their elimination of the subject, portraying well-sanitized hospital

rooms where the infected lie under bright neon lights, hooked up to ventilators, tubes, and monitors—a clean and controlled scene supervised by astronaut-resembling health care providers encased from head to toe in protective gear. If the detailed graphs tracking the COVID curve are reminiscent of stock market reports, the photographs represent the virus within the same familiar visual framework of science fiction movies, where the sets, the lighting, and the props signify a terrifying threat, panic, and catastrophe. Here again, the simulation predates the real, and distinctions between the two are unclear. Much more than an organic, naturally-occurring disease, the virus has assumed monstrous proportions as it is cast in the role of the menacing invading alien, an abomination that must be contained and destroyed by the best means available to the human species: the sterilized detachment of the scientific method and the representational technologies of the media.

Figure 7. COVID-19 Patients in China. Video, Reuters, February 2020.

Figure 8. The First US Deaths Related to Coronavirus Might Have Occurred Weeks Earlier Than Previously Thought. Photograph by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP via Getty, April 2020.

A fast-moving, life-threatening, invisible microorganism easily complements the media's familiar terror-producing formulas. As *Alien* (1979) director Ridley Scott explains in an interview with Variety's reporter Susan King (2019), the best horror and science fiction movies are those that reveal as little as possible and imply—rather than expose—the presence of an unfathomable otherness. "The best screening room in the world," he suggests, "is the space between your ears, which is your brain. So, it's learning to tap into the human brain to show just so much. Let the brain do a lot of the work. That's where you start to tap into people's anxieties." What generates profitable suspense in *Alien*, especially the first film in the series, is the imagined, not the seen. Slow cinematic pacing, prolonged shots of empty corridors, murky lighting, suggestive dialogues, and lengthy silences all contribute to the claustrophobic tension and the building terror of what is hidden, what is unknown. So it is with the information about the Corona virus: the scientific attempts to analyze, predict, and

contain the threat leaves us baffled, worried, plagued with disturbing uncertainty when the virus continues to spread, suddenly erupts, or quietly mutates.

As we study the daily charts tracking the virus, what we would really like to see is the recognizable formula of the best-selling narrative arc of all popular culture, be it the latest blockbusters, our most cherished television shows, good old superhero comic books, or the trendy short stories in the *New Yorker*. The tried-and-true recipe rarely deviates from the normative method of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. While the virus is raging in exciting places like New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris, we become the loyal audience to a narrative that is presented to us in the most familiar of terms. The "action," so to speak, rises along the colorful lines of the graphs, and although there are discouraging, unnerving delays, the upward climbing arc can inherently only lead to a final spike that will signal the turning point and the satisfying culmination of the episode. It is not the content, but the simplicity of the mode of presentation itself that provides comforting reassurance, even when what is being depicted is utterly unpredictable.

Figure 9. Standard Narrative Arc. Image by Jeff Manghera, April 2020.

In many ways, the original 1979 *Alien* provides a curious symbolic precursor to the 2020 virus invasion. First, there is the prophetic positioning of the computer as the surrogate director, the artificial overseer of all human activities that has become so much part of our reality we no longer pause to question it. In the film, the spaceship's navigation system, maintenance, and proper operation are completely dependent on a central computer the crew members fondly call "Mother." This simulated supervisor is what wakes up the crew after a long, prescribed hibernation, and is responsible for the well-being of the astronauts who, upon awakening, discover that something went wrong while they were sleeping. Problems begin when the humans, out of uncalled for comradery, disobey Mother and break her strict quarantine orders, thus allowing the parasitical alien to infiltrate the vessel. After disappearing into the dark mazes of the ship's engine and storage chambers, the creature grows, evolves, learns the ways of the humans, and mutates accordingly so it can successfully prey on them.

The film, as Barbara Creed (1993) observes, presents a visual expression of humanity's primal fear of the unknown and unknowable. The threatening unknown, she suggests, is semiotically feminine in nature, as it points to an ahistorical life force that is symbolized in *Alien* by various means: the repeated retreat of the creature into the dark tunnels of the spacecraft, its erotic physicality, its flexibility and adaptability. The shapeshifting creature, then, is a fetishized rendition of a primal feminine energy that has the ability to produce, out of the formless void of the womb, a living being. "The central characteristic of the archaic mother," Creed writes, "is her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle. She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation" (27). Such an energy is indiscriminatory

in essence; destructive as much as it is productive. Like nature itself, it is outside morality, law, or any dualistic distinctions between good and evil. Beyond the terrorizing entertainment it offers, the speculative value of the film suggests that the slow killing of the crew members is random but not necessarily senseless. From the alien creature's point of view, which is the fetishized point of view of nature, death is neither good nor bad, but simply a necessary component of life's creation process. Why, then, should human life (ironically already governed by the biomechanical mother computer) be worth more than that of the mother creature, who remains unseen throughout the film, but who protects her offspring and guards her eggs as fiercely as any other mother?

Figure 10. Nurses Attend to a COVID-19 patient at the Pope John XXIII Hospital in Bergamo, Italy. Photograph by Marco DiLauro, April 2020.

Figure 11. Ridley Scott's Alien, 1979. In *Wired*, June 2020.

Because we have the ability to discern and differentiate, categorize and catalogue, condone or condemn, a volatile interaction with a nondiscriminatory creature—be it a fictional monstrous alien or an actual (but invisible) virus—is a threat to the notion of human superiority, which we never stop to fully question. On Earth, this notion is undebatable, which is why science fiction often takes its speculative inquiries to outer space, where the perspective is expanded enough to reconsider the very foundations of human existence: moral principles, government, law, science, culture, language, religion, interpersonal relationships, and the unspoken anthropocentric belief that, despite Galileo, not only the sun but the whole universe revolves around us. Away from our home planet, all that we take for granted becomes subject to interrogation, including our obsession with method. In Stanislaw Lem's (1961) *Solaris*, generations of scientists who attempt to study the apparently conscious plasma that covers the distant planet Solaris become living (or dying) testimonies to the limitations of method. Libraries filled with records, charts, measurements, calculations, dissertations, encyclopedias, volumes upon volumes of neatly filed observations and

hypotheses are eventually abandoned, as the foreign and formless substance refuses to follow any predictable patterns. It does respond to experimental provocations, but not consistently, and not in any way that makes sense. After years and decades of elaborate research, the scientific community has as little understanding of this alien entity as at the time of the very first encounter.

On the abandoned space station floating above the ocean that can shape itself into many unfathomable, both spectacular and grotesque forms, a handful of defeated researchers are left to face not the uncooperative other, but their own forgotten demons. The mysterious forces on the planet are able to produce living replicas of people with whom the crew members have had a significant history, and who have left disturbing imprints in their psyches. These haunting, impossibly materialized apparitions too are studied, to no avail. The station's researchers lock themselves in their private quarters in an attempt to deal with the terror of the fleshed-out manifestations of their respective dark secrets. All try to kill the "visitors," but the uninvited guests magically reappear as new within a few hours, and with no recollection of the murder attempt. In a virtual conference call on their computer screens, the three remaining men discuss their observations and pose their theories. The main question is, what are these creatures? "They are not autonomous individuals," observes one of the scientists, "not copies of actual persons. They are merely projections materializing from our brains, based on a given individual" (Lem 1961, 102). But what is the motivation for constructing such unsettling figures for the facility's crew? "It is natural enough to assume," the improvised symposium continues, "that we are the subject of an experiment. When I examine this proposition, the experiment seems to me badly designed. When we carry out an experiment, we profit by the results and, above all, we carefully note the defects of our

methods" (103). But the shapeshifting, reactive plasma of Solaris does not conform to familiar protocols. When the creatures are destroyed and disposed of, they reemerge exactly as they were, with not a single detail modified in any way. The preciseness of the model and the lack of alterations lead the researchers to the question not only of motive but of individuality, of which, they agree the ocean has no comprehension. All of its activities, including these cruel experiments on the humans, are not premeditated, and have no malicious premeditation behind them.

Left with no explanations, no rational course of action, and no choice but to face the pestering terror of their cloned guests, the scientists, one by one, must admit the failure of their prescribed methods of knowledge production, and ultimately the collapse of knowledge itself. While the artificial replicas that appear on the space station demonstrate a range of human traits and emotions such as rage, suspicion, vulnerability, playfulness, shyness, dependency, joy, and despair, the humans adhere, at least at first, to the cool, calculated, reserved manner of impartial scientific research. Like many other speculative narratives involving robots, clones, or cyborgs in human form (a few popular examples include *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, and *Battlestar Galactica*), *Solaris* engages with the age-old Promethean question: What makes a human human? What differentiates the master copy from its mechanical reproductions? As the façade of stable objectivity deteriorates, and as the presence of the visitors leads to increasing exhaustion and repeated mental breakdowns, the scientists are no longer able to rely on objective, measurable facts. Within the parameters of unresolved doubt and unpredictable subjective experience, moral dilemmas become open to new interpretations. Under some circumstances, they discover, lying is the only conceivable option, and the same applies to stealing, manipulating, killing, or, when all else fails,

committing suicide. There are no unbreakable rules or universal truths. Away from planet Earth, as science and its methods deteriorate to the point of futility, ambivalence, unreconcilable contradictions, and uncertainty emerge as the predominant properties of existence.

In many ways, the reality of the 21st century has surpassed the speculative premonitions of the best science fiction productions of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. "Am I a man or a machine?" asks Jean Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) rhetorically, because in truth "this anthropological question no longer has an answer" (57). In the conflating of the real and the simulated, subject and object, and cause and effect, a blending of the physical body with the devices that surround it occurs as well. In an excessively visual culture, even looking itself is not the independent act of an autonomous subject—it is a function that is guided by and repeatedly directed toward the screen, readily mediated by the lens of the portable camera that leaves nothing outside its scope. Every instance of looking, then, becomes gauged by its usefulness in relation to the screen; to the inputs and outputs of circulated information. Thus, although sight has become the disproportionately dominant sense through which we experience the world, vision is in fact increasingly limited, reduced to the parameters of our electronic devices, applied according to the technical dictates of computer chips.

The obsession with image, with sight as the ultimate instrument of cataloguing, organizing, and ordering, makes us into walking computers that are programmed to register, process, and taxonomize information by merely glancing at something. In fact, we rarely actually look anymore; glancing is more than enough to fit the visual signs into their proper place in the grids and charts of our methodical interpretations. And while extraterrestrial life forms may throw us off, we were especially skilled at processing visual data when it comes

to other members of the human species. This is one reason why after decades and centuries of reputable scientific evidence to the contrary, skin color still plays such a major role in the human fixation on divisions of "same" and "other." What is most visible is what holds signifying power, and it only takes a split second to process images of humans according to racial distinctions.

In the midst of a global pandemic that resembles a science fiction movie, another form of exciting action—much more human and ordinary—sweeps over the U.S. as race riots flare up in various cities after a white police officer restrained a black suspect in the streets of Minneapolis by pinning him to the ground and forcefully pressing his booted foot on the man's neck. The unarmed, fully surrendered black man dies. After weeks of prolonged quarantine, angry protestors abandon precautions and pour out of their homes in order to show solidarity with the grieving and outraged black community in Minneapolis and all over the U.S. The protests quickly turn into violent clashes in which fires burn, people are injured, and many get arrested. All of a sudden, attention shifts from the obscure, novel virus to the more common, visible, and recognizable form of alterity: the African-American Other. The media celebrates this orgasmic release of tension with repeated footage of demonstrations that start out as peaceful, nonviolent gatherings à la Martin Luther King's sit-ins and marches, but quickly escalate into a war zone of enraged crowds, burning dumpsters, torched buildings, looted stores, tear gas, water hoses, beatings, shootings, and arrests.

Social media explodes with more of the same: posters, slogans, photographs, and video clips all documenting the new social movement that is intent on eradicating, once and for all, racial inequality and all other forms of discriminatory practices. Minority groups form Zoom-enabled alliances, and every supporter quickly proclaims heartfelt encouragement

through enthusiastic social media posts advertising the movement's trendy catchphrases: "Black Lives Matter," "White Silence is Violence," or "I Can't Breathe," which becomes an ironic pun when coupled with the mandatory face mask. No longer interesting, no longer new, the global virus is thrown off the stage in favor of a widespread virtual uprising intent on reinstating justice. In the age of the hyperreal, and of course during the pandemic, one is not required to actually march the streets with the angry crowds or even leave the house at all. Joining the movement is made easy by attaching the right hashtags to Facebook and Instagram posts, donating to the cause (the Black Lives Matter website accepts all major credit cards as well as PayPal), and buying the official merchandise, which includes T-shirts, sweatshirts, tote bags, coffee mugs, yard signs, bumper stickers, baseball caps, and—of course—face masks. In addition, to be an antiracist, one is expected to shop at businesses owned by people of color and catch up on appropriate entertainment by choosing to watch social-justice-themed films and television shows (Netflix immediately started advertising special lists of recommended must-see productions).

The appropriation and commodification of black lives and the visual representations of social struggle are not a new phenomenon. Leigh Raiford's (2011) examination of photography as a tool of resistance used by grass roots African American movements reveals the uneasy dynamics by which self-defining images intended to challenge the dominant order are taken up, publicized, and commercialized by the very mainstream culture they originally attempt to counter. Photography, Raiford argues, was used with careful intention by early twentieth century anti-lynching campaigns as well as the civil rights and the black power movements to mobilize participants, define goals, narrate histories, and construct visible identities for marginalized individuals and groups marked for racial exclusion. While visual

self-representation "offered activists a seemingly democratic and versatile medium through which they could visually reference, reframe, or reject dominant political categories" (9), it only partially succeeded in reclaiming and remaking black identity. Because, as Roland Barthes ([1957] 1980) suggests, the subject in a visual representation merges with the object that is the photograph and becomes one with the medium, the distinction between signifier and signified becomes unclear. The human eye perceives things as they appear in their simulated depiction, and as the medium itself (of photography or any other visual recording) does not offer or encourage critique, it is the viewer, the observer, the interpreter, who must subvert the convincing façade of mediated documentation. Following Barthes' commentary on photography's stifling, fixing quality—the "death mask" that images carry as they suspend subjects in time as unchanging presences—the pictures, video footage, manifestos, merchandise, and catchy slogans of social movements appear to emancipate as they simultaneously capture and pin identities, reinforce racial hegemonies, and hold subjects imprisoned in history and memory. Within the contradictory tensions between liberation and entrenched captivity (now aggravated and accelerated by digital media), the struggle itself seems to collapse into a vortex of endless regurgitation of defunct verbal and visual information that *advertises* resistance, protest, or dissent, but ultimately fails to achieve lasting change.

According to the logic of advertising and consumer culture, the self-congratulatory actions of purchasing politically correct products, flaunting the right gear, and planting the appropriate sign in the front yard are apparently sufficient to end centuries of racial inequality and move on into a bright and promising future. "Now We Transform," as the home page of the Black Lives Matter website declares. In the society of the spectacle,

enhanced by the wonders of technology and the confinements of the pandemic, theatricality seems to be the only currency that holds value. "Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one's own existence" writes Baudrillard ([1990] 1993), "there is nothing for it but to perform an *appearing* act without concerning oneself with *being*." The main thing about social change in the postmodern era, according to the logic of the hyperreal, is the *appearance* of the change; the ability to promote, advertise, endorse, and consume justice as a fetishized commodity. When manufacturers of fashion accessories equate advertising as activism, customers are taught to recognize and purchase popular products that will allow them to build, in their own homes, ready-to-wear, made-in-China, one-size-fits-all antiracist ideologies and identities.

In her critique of white liberals who take it upon themselves to represent and speak for the marginalized other, Gayatri Spivak (1988) questions the motives and forces behind such rescue missions. What drives the elite left, for example, to fight passionately alongside the downtrodden proletariat? "The link to the workers' struggle," she proposes, "is located in the desire to blow up power at any point of its application" (67). Such solidarity, then, has less to do with the specific, everyday conditions and hardships of the actual working class, as those remain securely removed from the experience of the upper-class activist, and more to do with elegantly jumping on the rolling wagon of resistance. Thus, as this joining of forces "is apparently based on the simple valorization of *any* desire destructive of *any* power" (67), in this meeting point of objectives the subaltern's authentic longing for the end of suffering becomes a conduit for the generalized liberal's ideological desire to overthrow the government. And while on the surface there is nothing wrong with such a merging of aspirational forces, the actual result is a perpetuation of the victim role the marginalized are

expected to perform, and a full endorsement of what Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—the political deployment of reductive group identities as a means of mobilizing a resistance movement. Black Lives Matter is a contemporary case in point, as it loudly calls attention to the very visual racial distinctions the movement proclaims to adamantly oppose. Through the technologically-enhanced emphasis on appearance, spectacle, and the drama of protest, the non-white other ceases to exist as an individual as it is elevated to a symbolic level, becoming—willingly or unwillingly—a recruited representative of the oppressed. Depending on the context, the shell of symbolic representation can signify suffering, rage, defiance, martyrdom, etc., and the particular lives of individuals matter only to the extent that they lend themselves to the symbolic functions of both injustice and resistance.

At a time when a novel virus, a colorless and color-blind microorganism that kills without discrimination, that, like classic science fiction aliens, does not differentiate or prioritize its killing, the resurgence of racial upheaval is, perhaps, a comforting familiar alternative. To bring the focus back to the human other may be an understandable reaction to the terror of more radical forms of alterity. The color line, after all, has been around much longer than the Corona virus, and it is where the human species gets to exercise discernment, categorization, and calculated taxonomies of visual difference—powers the novel virus does not possess. Like the monster in the original 1978 Alien movie, the Corona virus is, as the admiring android scientist, Ash, observes, "the perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility… A survivor ... unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality" (1:26). It is precisely its purely utilitarian, undiscriminating nature that makes the alien creature, as well as the virus, into a form of alterity so incomprehensible it is, apparently, intolerable. If attention is directed to clearly visible, tried and true racial divides,

the new resistance movement seems to say, then there might be hope for subverting the equalizing threat of the virus and regaining control over the question of difference. Once more the human other is absorbed into an efficient system of representation that diffuses its potential ethical inquiry. Black Lives Matter rises as a promising insurgent force in cyber space, takes social media by storm, and people respond with all the excitement of new hope for change. And then, just as quickly, the riots are quelled, the gatherings disperse, and the noise subsides. The medium has absorbed the message, devoured and neutralized it, and the world goes on with its racial structures intact and uninterrupted.

Online, on the attractive websites of the resistance and on social media, justice seems attainable, solidarity feels radical and hopeful, and a colorblind society appears like a plausible prospect, provided all white folk commit to the correct rhetoric of antiracism. With their reliable objectivity, equal access to all, and their unbiased operation systems, the virtual realms of advanced technology offer a convincing vision of a better future, one in which visual differences no longer matter. However, as Ruha Benjamin (2019) demonstrates, that premise might be a disappointing illusion. In response to Mark Zuckerberg's vision of AI development as the modeling of machines after what users are interested in and are most likely to respond to, Benjamin asks the pertinent question: who are these users? (53). The current trends in the programming of AI, she argues, are predisposed to racial biases, favoring certain dominant modes of thinking that reinforce white, male, heterogenic preferences and values. This is true in both profit-oriented and nonprofit websites, social media platforms, and every application that utilizes advanced algorithms to engage its users. "Racist robots," as Benjamin refers to these AI systems, "represent a much broader process: social bias embedded in technical artifacts, the allure of objectivity without public

accountability" (53). The presumed neutrality and scientific precision of computers, then, successfully masks the creation of a virtual social order that is just as hierarchical and discriminatory as the "real" system from which it emerges. The danger with racist robots, however, is that they don't (yet) have an identity, and cannot be accountable for the inequality they might produce. Without a body, a face, or a personality, machines—perhaps like viruses—represent the detached, reliable objectivity of pure science, the transcendent impartiality of method.

On a semiotic, symbolic level, antiracism is just as fixated on seeing and accentuating difference as racism, and just as obsessed with regulating and directing the melodrama of otherness. "The political and ideological critique of racism," as Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) argues, "is purely formal in that it tackles the racist obsession with difference without tackling difference itself *qua* illusion" (131). A mutating virus, however, intent only on self-propagation, sees through the illusion, and disregards difference altogether. To its blind survival instincts, there are no preferences: any human host is as good as any other. But seeing racially is so ingrained, so habitual, and so intrinsic to the human mind and especially to the American national identity, that it takes on a life of its own, not unlike a defunct computer program that runs its repetitious computations in endless loops, albeit with occasional slight variations. When antiracism suddenly rises as the new fad for the progressive left, Spivak's question of true motive must be applied, lest more epistemic violence is unleashed by well-meaning defenders of black lives. As Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) points out, "the risibility of our altruistic 'understanding' is rivalled only by the profound contempt it is designed to conceal. For 'We respect the fact that you are different' read: 'You people who are underdeveloped would do well to hang on to this distinction

because it is all you have left'" (132). What would be left of America if the racial distinctions were indeed suddenly eradicated? Who would people of color be as individuals, without their symbolic value of visible otherness? What would identity look like without the fanatic fixation—either discriminatory or celebratory—on conventional visual difference? As a species that relies so heavily on ordered taxonomies, we are at a loss when encountering the utterly arbitrary killing of the alien virus. Its inability to see color, its unpredictability, invisibility, and unknowability are better left safely contained within the mediated virtual realm, and accessed only through the screen, as thrilling science fiction movies rather than a catastrophic reality.

In the original *Alien* movie, the pedantic scientist, Ash, turns out to be a Trojan horse: an infiltrating robot with deceivingly human looks and manners who poses, in some ways, a bigger threat than the monster itself. He is the one responsible for letting the alien life form on board the ship to begin with, and eventually reveals his secret mission, known only to the mother computer, to bring the creature back to Earth. The crew members, to him and to the computer, are dispensable, and human life is not a priority. Perhaps in 1979, an android passing for human may have been an entertaining, if terror-inducing, concept, and audiences were surely relieved as Ash the traitor machine was gruesomely destroyed by the wonderfully human Ripley, the brave heroine who fights the alien with all her might, and even manages to rescue the spaceship's cat—a symbol of the victorious human spirit, which can be ruthless when it comes to monsters and robots, yet compassionate and merciful with snuggly pets. Forty years later, however, Ash becomes a mirror we adamantly turn away from, refusing to look at our own cyborgian reflection. Even the obsession with racial, ethnic, or gendered differences is governed by technology, dictated by computerized calculations,

and of course projected onto mediated platforms. Subjective perception, or the

phenomenology of "being," as Baudrillard refers to it, is essentially obsolete, because in its

individuality it does not stand a chance against the growing power of mass trends and mass

movements. Similarly, the particular, which is always in flux, cannot compete with the

assured fixity of method and seeming solidity of statistics, charted data, and expert analysis,

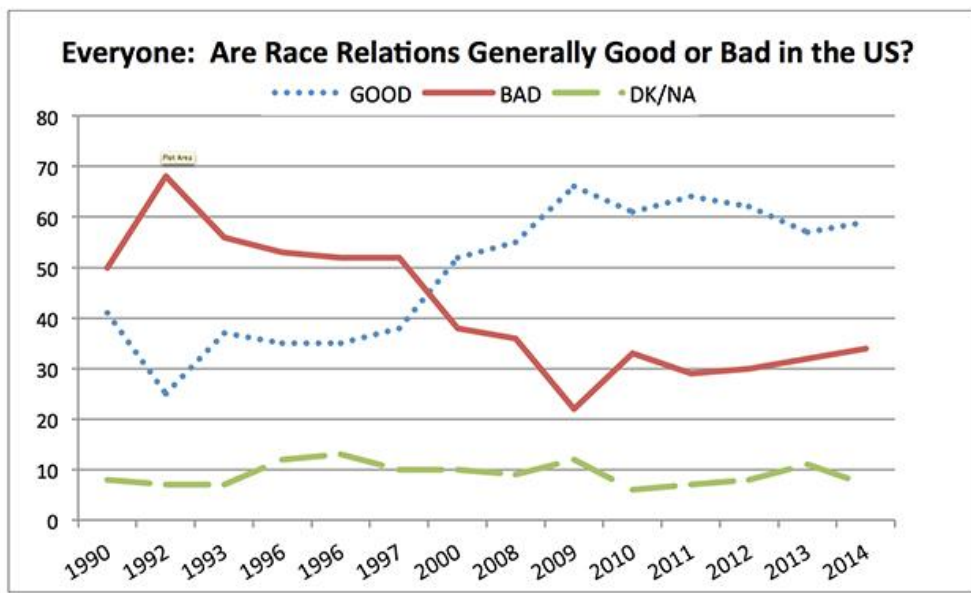which these days are all, of course, computer-generated.

Figure 12. Everyone: Are Race Relations Generally Good or Bad in the U.S.? Image from
University of Connecticut, July 2014.

We see difference because we are programmed to look for it, and we tackle inequity

in the same way that we attempt to tackle an economic crisis, a natural disaster, or a global

pandemic: there are graphs and diagrams, there are procedures and predictions, scripts,

codes, and formulas; there is a method by which we must perceive, assess, calculate, think,

and act. When in doubt, check the daily updated charts, the operation manuals, and the list of

commands, and then make sure to follow proper conduct by uploading the appropriate

commentary onto social media portals.

If artificial intelligence was (and still is) the great fascination of science fiction, as James Barrat (2013) argues, it is now the farthest thing from fiction we can imagine. Our whole existence, in fact, depends on it, from the monitors that every woman in labor is hooked into in hospital delivery rooms, to those that track a dying person's departure. Search commands, voice recognition, computer sensors, digital vision, and affinity analysis are but a few familiar examples of common, daily AI applications that we all depend on without even noticing. "Not so long ago," says Barrat, "AI was not embedded in banking, medicine, transportation, critical infrastructure, and automobiles. But today, if you suddenly removed all AI from these industries, you couldn't get a loan, your electricity wouldn't work, your car wouldn't go, and most trains and subways would stop. Drug manufacturing would creak to a halt, faucets would run dry, and commercial jets would drop from the sky" (203-204). Over the past 30 years, slowly but surely, AI has taken over every possible aspect of human life, and our reliance on it is taken for granted. Rarely do we stop to ponder what life would look like should glitches in our advanced technological system increase, or should the system, for some unforeseen reason (say a particularly resilient virus), collapse altogether.

Algorithms not only control the infrastructure and arrange our surroundings but dictate internal processes as well. Affinity suggestions on Google, Amazon, Netflix, and all social media, employment, or dating sites direct us towards choices that penetrate the most intimate chambers of our existence: what we wear and eat, how we bathe, who we interact with, what career path we follow, who we marry, how we raise our kids. We assume that technology is there to serve us, that we are the masters of our various electronic devices. However, as Barrat (2013) suggests, "the endgame for first creating smart machines, then smarter-than-human machines, is not their integration into our lives, but their conquest of us"

(30). Until not very long ago, as the great works of science fiction demonstrate, what scientists and philosophers alike were preoccupied with was the question of self-awareness: would supercomputers become so advanced that they would develop human-like consciousness? Free will? Autonomy? This scenario still evokes numerous speculations and concerns. After all, it wasn't until Frankenstein's monster saw himself as a monster that he began to behave like one, and it is impossible to predict what machines might do if and when they reach that point. This hypothetical question, however, is no longer relevant. Singularity, according to Barrat, should be redefined in alignment with the recent paradigm shifts that have accelerated technological advances to the point of no return, and rather than sometime in the projected future, that point is in fact already behind us. The following graph shows the exponential growth of AI function rates over the past century:
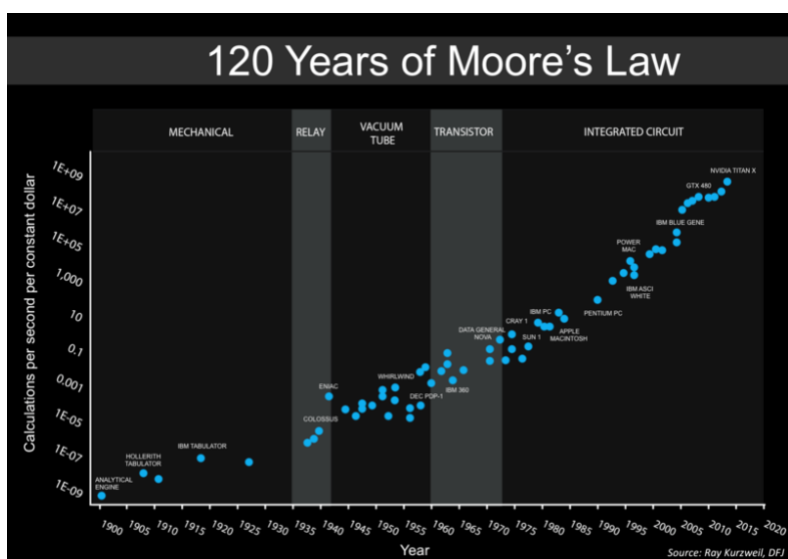

Figure 13. An updated version of Moore's Law Over 120 Years (based on Kurzweil's graph). Graph by Steve Jurvetson, 2016.

It is interesting to note that Moore's "law," as R.W. Keyes (2006) explains, is not exactly a law, but an observation-based prediction which tracks the exponential increases in the number of transistors in integrated circuits. According to the general prediction, that

number doubles about every two years, as transistors get smaller and smaller, and as semiconductor design improves. What this means for technological applications is that artificial intelligence becomes faster and more productive, and electronic devices get smaller at the same time that their functions and capacities increase. As transistors get smaller and more efficient, the price of production goes down as well, making advanced technology more available and affordable to the general public and allowing for sophisticated AI applications to be implemented at any given level of human existence, from remotely guided weapons of mass destruction to auto-correct apps that complete words and sentences as they are being typed on a computer or smart phone.

The speed leaps in calculation and communication capabilities are staggering. What would the robots do once they surpass us in cognitive functions and efficacy, and once they gain consciousness? It may be, however, that this classic question itself is outdated and in need of revision. "While superintelligent machines can certainly wipe out humankind, or make us irrelevant," he says, "there is also plenty of fear from the Ais we will encounter on the developmental path to superintelligence" (Barrat 2013, 31). In other words, it is not the future that is disconcerting, but the present; not the speculated horror of sudden AI revolt, but the gradual permeation of partial autonomy, which is already operating all around us and growing daily, and which is not only efficiently replacing human functions, but restructuring them at their core.

Digital technologies, algorithmic robots, and a data-dominated culture raise epistemological questions not only in regard to knowledge production but to the very nature of knowing, especially, it can be argued, knowing the self. As Sun-ha Hong (2020) asks, "What does it mean to 'know myself' if that knowing is achieved through mass-produced,

autonomously operative devices?" and "What kind of relationship to knowledge is produced when machines communicate ceaselessly with the body and with each other along channels that my conscious reflection cannot ever access?" (7). Data-driven consciousness, Hong argues, is not about empirical knowledge, experience, or truth-seeking, but about aggregated information that convincingly passes as "real." The massive databases and the tools and formulas they rely on—calculations, informed predictions, unlimited cross-referencing, diagrams, graphs, and charts—generate a culture not of knowing but of speculating. The illusion of order and stability, however, seduces users into a relationship of complete trust in their machines, an unconditional confidence that far exceeds any possible reliance on another human being or, for that matter, on the self. Continuing Baudrillard's posthumanist vision of the hyperreal, Hong demonstrates how traditional social and political ideals such as fact-based media, objective information exchange, transparent governments, and well-informed publics dissolve and lose their meaning in the face of impervious and complex technological systems that operate beyond the reach of human scrutiny. Within this impenetrable matrix, human empowerment, self-sufficiency, and authorship may be outdated concepts as well.

The traditional relationship between man and machine, as Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) observes, is marked by alienation, by the cold estrangement between workers and the machines they operate. The new technologies, on the other hand, those with user-friendly interfaces, interactive features, and hyper-responsive touchscreens, are of a different order. The configuration of this new order "is one of subordination, not alienation—the structure of the integrated circuit. Man or machine? Impossible to tell" (58). Despite maintaining illusions of species superiority, control, mastery, and knowing, the merging of individual minds with computer processors and artificial intelligence is the reality—or, more accurately,

hyperreality—in which users are programmed as much as they program. On every level, from the most basic cell phone to the most advanced networks, humans adapt and conform to the ways of the machine, developing a symbiotic relationship of increasing dependency and subservience.

Chapter Five

The Curse of Method

In popular rhetoric, the term "knowledge" carries connotations of an in-depth inquiry that unfolds along three plains: the experiential, the analytical, and the ethical. In biblical etymology, knowledge indicates a profoundly intimate, unmediated connection with and familiarity with an other, represented by the union of sexual intercourse. On an ethical and spiritual level, it signifies a conscious ability to discern good from evil, as epitomized by the tree of knowledge in the Old Testament, a symbol that repeats in various traditions, for example in the image of Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, the Ashvattha tree in Hinduism, or the Bodhi tree in Buddhism. The philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1966) argues that definitions of knowledge changed drastically with modernity, which saw the rise of the scientific method to a position of authority which diminished the importance of both the experiential and the ethical. A formalized process, broken into a set of prearranged procedures, became the focus of inquiry, and knowing became synonymous with the systematic gathering of data, a logical assessment of information, and the foregrounding of detached objectivity. "Method is projected as a form of the process of knowledge," Blumenberg writes, "which is separable from the concrete reality of the individual thinker and researcher, and which can be indifferently carried over from one to another, from generation to generation" (444). The Eurocentric, modern ascendance of a prescribed system of knowledge production assumes a universal form of reasoning that disregards individual histories, experiences, or abilities, thus risking reducing the subject from a full participant to an impassive observer. In search of repeatable designs, scientific operations also tend to discount the particularities of the studied object, favoring instead the focus on exhibited

similarities and recognizable patterns. Method, then, changes the early definition of knowledge from one that depends on direct encounter and moral evaluation to one in which the epistemological apparatus itself takes precedence over both subject and object, rendering both peripheral.

This chapter reflects on the role of method in academic knowledge production, and the call made in recent years in American studies for an awareness of changing practices both within institutions of higher education and outside of them. Considering the undisputed validity of conventional academic protocols of data collecting, decoding, and interpreting, my aim is to examine the pronounced trajectory of radical opposition in American studies scholarship that seeks to subvert hierarchical constructs of self and other and make room for the previously silenced voices of marginalized populations. On the one hand, this innovative vision indeed gives rise to many important viewpoints that tend to be suppressed or subsumed by mainstream conversations. On other hand, it seems that even the most radical "pedagogies of dissent," to quote Kandice Chuh (2018), can still revert to formulaic divisions of subject and object when they adhere to the conventional demands of academic expertise. Asking what alternate pedagogies might look like, the study explores the meaning of "knowledge" in light of technological advances that reinforce rules of computation, precision, and pattern recognition. Within these scientific rationales of observation, controlled research, structural taxonomizing, deductive reasoning, and the dialectic subject-object dynamics, is it possible to examine constructs of identity and alterity outside familiar categorical allocations based in differences of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, ability, or sexual preference? What complementary discursive practices might allow for otherness to

emerge as an unclassified totality, an independent manifestation of a mystery that resists the mastery of "knowing"?

To see how the representational practices that the above and many other American studies scholars challenge can be limited and reductive, it might be helpful to consider the properties they share with the principles that govern mass media and technology. Like academic knowledge, mediated technology emerges as an apparatus of great "objective" conviction whose mode of operation, according to Marshall McLuhan (1967), is more important than any ideas it is designed to circulate. The same can be said about academic pedagogies that assess the value of knowledge according to strict guidelines focused on form of presentation rather than content. All topics are equal to the *process* of knowledge production, as in mediated simulations all replicated signs are stripped of their subjective significance: their origin, their particular histories, their incoherencies and inconsistencies. In this way, knowledge becomes equated with information, and is evaluated by the efficacy of its distribution; by volume, speed, and popularity rather than by depth, weight, or lasting effect. If the scientific method ushered a separation of subject and object, mass media and technologies of simulation obscure direct contact between the two even further, eliminating the subject as an active factor in the acquisition of knowledge. On the information highway, as in academic circles, subjectivity is a hindrance, countering the desirable objectivity that makes substance interchangeable and therefore often inconsequential.

Spiraling away from the regimented reason of modernity, postmodern logics revolve around fast-forward movement, fragmentation, pastiche, and oversaturation. The excessive reproduction of all original forms, the dissecting and piecing together of replicas, and the voiding of signification may be the results of rapidly evolving technologies, but they may

also indicate the historical aftermath of modernity's victory of permission in every sphere. In this sense, they correspond to the "orgy" of various spontaneous revolutions; the thrill and ecstasy of social and political movements that promised to change the world, and have either achieved their goal or have failed and dissolved. The freedom vision of emancipation movements has become so ubiquitous that its meaning is in danger of becoming lost in its ever-growing iterations: postcolonial independence; women's, gay, and queer liberation; civil rights reforms; free markets; free love; free speech; free Nelson Mandela, Tibet, or Palestine. "We have pursued every avenue in the production and effective overproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies, and satisfactions. Now everything has been liberated, the chips are down, and we find ourselves collectively with the big question: WHAT DO WE DO NOW THAT THE ORGY IS OVER?" (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 3). Because true liberation has not been achieved yet, what we do is try to revive the revolution, rekindle the fire under the fight for freedom, and search for the "real" in the overload of the hyperreal.

In the simulated realms of digital technology and mass media, everything that has been liberated enters a state of circulation. The cinematic documentarian, fact-driven restaging of past revolutions has no more or less value than contemporary fictionalized drama, fantastical science fiction sagas, or the latest news. Time has no meaning on the screen, and faraway galaxies are just as tangible as this particular planet. The postmodern hyperreal, by way of supply and demand calculations and the supreme powers of electronic transmissions, aspires to transcend the laws of physics. What was previously bound to time, space, and finality can now be reproduced indefinitely, preserved forever not in the human brain's memory cells but in hard drives and flash drives, in digital repositories and cloud archives that have attained immortality. This is technology's equivalence to religion's

promise of eternal life, a quelling of man's fear of death, complete with a disabling of an awareness of his own transience. Furthermore, mechanical reproduction not only supports immortality, but polishes it to perfection. Long after the flesh returns to dust, the hologram lives on, a projection of fragmented images released from the constraints of atrophy, deterioration, and death.

Perfect separation occurs, Guy Debord ([1967] 1994) argues, when "images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at" (12). This process of continuous fragmentation and regrouping is not a theory, nor is it a passing phase, but an inevitable evolution that follows early modern developments such as electricity, industrialization, mass reproduction, photography, cinema, and long-distance communication technologies. It is a living demonstration of Marx's notions of commodity fetishism and alienation, which now apply to much more than manufactured objects, as the natural world, animals, people, history, events, ideas, and ideologies can all be fetishized, removed from their origins and turned into a marketable attraction. "Understood in its totality," as Debord writes, "the spectacle is both the result and the project of the present mode of production. It is not a mere supplement or decoration added to the real world, it is the heart of this real society's unreality. In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment—the spectacle is the model of the prevailing way of life" (13). Paradoxically, however, the perfecting of separation between sign and referent does not sharpen the distinctions between existence and nonexistence but instead blurs them. When the media dominates being and the displayed representation can no longer be told apart from the

authentic, critical distinctions between cause and effect, active and passive, or subject and object disappear as well.

All mass media, and the entertainment industry in particular, operate through an irresistible allure that allows the subject to escape the conscious awareness of its limitations, and reinvent itself as something else, new and improved, different, free of the tethers of its materiality. Within the operative seduction of simulation, both identity and alterity enter the realm of symbolic exchange in which, in accordance with the logic of consumer culture and the society of the spectacle, they must perform as desirable commodities. In the trading circuits of representation, otherness too becomes a sign without a referent, removed from its material origins, without a past or a future and stripped of its ethical question. A harmless figurative object that can be carefully examined from a safe distance: "the other is no longer there to be exterminated, hated, rejected or seduced, but instead to be understood, liberated, coddled, recognized" (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 125). When all moral decisions have been made by executive producers, commercial visual representation can profit from emphasizing difference while conveniently eliminating the conditions of differentiation, creating a familiarity that flattens both subject and object, a convincing illusion of knowing that assumes the objective truthfulness of the consumed mediated information.

In this way, following Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal as the generator of the real, the map is seen as preceding the terrain. In New York, Paris, or the deserts of the American Southwest, everything that was once "authentic" has been tamed, domesticated, and neatly reproduced in textbooks, travel brochures, or Hollywood movies, so that nothing is left for the traveler to discover. The images endlessly repeat familiar landmarks, cuisines, or cultural events. The Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, or the Grand Canyon,

delicatessens, bistros, and cantinas, the music, the accent, the vibe—all of these fabricate a self-reproducing representational collage that makes a place, a culture, a people so familiar there is not much left to be experienced in person that cannot be experienced on the screen. What is not included: poverty, unemployment, and crime, the extreme heat of summer and deadly cold of winter, pollution, dog poop, homeless people, cockroaches and bedbugs, raging fires, seasonal flashfloods. In other words, the discarded vestiges of the real that are useless, for now, to the commodification strategies of the hyperreal.

The same is true for alterity. Little is left outside the circuits of representation, and what is left out can generally be discerned as unwanted, unforeseen, or unprofitable. Freedom, justice, and the plight of the marginalized Other are no exception. On the screen, in films, television shows, the news, or social media, identity politics are all the rage, turning minority groups into trendy hot commodities. What remains of the materiality of otherness, of its returned gaze, now that the troubled histories of blacks, Asians, Indigenous nations or Latinos in the U.S. are turned into dramatized spectacles that celebrate inclusion, multiculturalism, and diversity? "Otherness denied," Baudrillard ([1990] 1993) notes, "becomes a spectre and returns in the form of a self-destructive process" (122). To refute alterity, then, leads not to reinforcement but a negation of subjectivity. For Baudrillard, the elimination of otherness is a characteristic of the pervasive postmodern mode of operation that seeks to reproduce, expose, name, package, and sell anything that will lend itself to the laws of market exchange. Regarding what is not yet known, either as a curious marvel or a dangerous threat (and often both), this mechanism insists on mass-disseminated simulated representation as a reliable manifestation of truth. The result is an impression of signification,

a conflation of information and knowledge, generated by data overload and an unprecedented dependency on visual "evidence."

Not unlike in the mass-mediated realms of entertainment, minority representation has become a profitable trademark of liberal progress in institutions of higher education as well. Designated ethnic studies departments or specialized courses in English and history departments proudly stress cultural diversity—a fashionable catch phrase that celebrates inclusion at the same time that it leaves existing hegemonic paradigms intact. Following the Civil Rights era and its growing social and political unrest, hyphenated populations have been finally granted permission into the guarded walls of academia, where they could be properly represented under the caveat that they remain outside the established canon, safely removed from what is agreed upon as the acceptable foundations of the dominant culture. Aesthetic and stylistic literary distinctions, for instance, became selling points that market Hispanic-American magical realism, African American vernacular, or Native-American shamanism as exotic marginal decorations to the center piece of Eurocentric genres that are considered the "norm." Thus, through the policy of diversity, any threat such "nontraditional" forms or their host grassroots movements posed to the political and social order was efficiently deactivated, without any need for violence. In the formalized context of the university, difference becomes an undisputed fact, and otherness is again disabled by annexation, commodification, and presumed knowledge. What does knowing the "reality" of the other mean now that anyone can take a course in ethnic studies and become versed in the *theory* of hyphenation? What impact does the face of the other have, now that it is replicated, dispersed, and used to promote the university's progressive curricula, anti-racist policies, and commitment to diversity?

Humanity's growing dependence on machines and pre-programmed operating systems sheds light on these questions. In *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) examine the various ways in which machines are replicating and replacing human functions. From factory labor to stock market brokerage, from military drones to the self-charging, automated vacuum cleaner in suburban homes, machines are taking over jobs in every possible realm of human life. AI is now capable of conversing and responding to questions and commands much in the same way that a good friend would, and sex robots are becoming increasingly popular alternatives to sex workers among those who can afford them. Interrogating the notion of technoliberalism, which they define as "the political alibi of present-day racial capitalism that posits humanity as an aspirational figuration in relation to technological transformation," Atanasoski and Vora demonstrate a dramatic recent rise in the use of machines that operate as surrogates to humans in all spheres of life, enabling greater efficiency while "obscuring the uneven racial and gendered relations of labor, power, and social relations that underlie the contemporary conditions of capitalist production" (4). Higher education, its output, and modes of production operate under the same conditions. Like advanced technological apparatuses, the well-oiled academic procedures of systematized observation, data collection, standardized decoding, objective presentation of findings, informed projections, and resolute conclusions preside over any experiential or ethical knowledge, obscuring the materiality of the object of study.

When it comes to the relationship between identity and alterity, a common notion in academia, including in American studies, is that the latter defines the former, giving it substance and cohesion by negation. The self, in other words, derives its meaning from what

it is not, and otherness functions as a validating force that confirms the self's superior position in an imaginary hierarchy. This common interdependence can be applied to personal encounters as well as collective ones and, as Stuart Hall (1997) stresses, takes on an important political significance on national and international levels. To establish and maintain a national identity, a solidarity must be created among the citizens, and that bond tends to rely on negation: the English are English not because of specific shared traits, but mainly because they are not French, and the French, in turn, are proud not to be English, or Algerian, or African, or—God forbid—American (22). Constructed negation defines not only whole nations but various groups and individuals as well. To take a common example from American history, for many centuries now the black population in the U.S. serves as the ultimate Other to white domination, which was first established through the institution of slavery and continued to evolve and transform well after the Civil War, taking on new manifestations and disguises, including the current rhetorical celebration of multiculturalism and inclusion. This is not to dismiss the great progress toward equality achieved by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s but to emphasize that white supremacy in the U.S. is on the rise, and the country as a whole is far from being the color-blind society it pretends to be.

Since the 1990s, American studies as a discipline has been increasingly dedicated to scholarship that is attuned to social struggle in the context of neoliberal policies, and to a fierce critique of the American Empire and its increasingly globalized oppressive structures of domination. George Lipsitz (2001) describes American studies as an unusual field, one that "enjoys both institutional and extrainstitutional life" (32), a unique positioning that calls for a pronounced focus on the dynamics of power, which in turn requires heightened awareness of scholarly practices. In light of the development of the neoliberal state, explains

Lipsitz, overarching concerns in the field center on the transformation of industrial economies to information-based systems, increasingly open global markets, migrations that create new political subjects, altered relationships between place and culture, and the relentless dissemination of American ideologies in international circles. Drawing heavily on his own experience as an activist in the 1970s, Lipsitz sees American studies as responsible for theorizing and interrogating these processes and their impact on marginalized populations, while also reaching beyond academia to connect with grassroots movements and radical leftist organizations dedicated to social justice.

As an academic discipline, according to Lipsitz, American studies has always been in conversation with crisis. The field's whole trajectory, since its emergence in the economically turbulent 1930s, through its engagement with the dramatic political, social, and cultural changes of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, to its present-day preoccupation with the continued struggles of minority groups, has evolved as a response to the "crisis of representation" (Lipsitz 2001, 95) and has been grounded in the fight for equity and inclusion. Centering the transformative political mobilization of the 1960s, as well as the ensuing radical shifts in race and gender positioning in the following decades, Lipsitz emphasizes the need to stay as connected as possible to the revolutionary spirit of the civil rights era. "Oppositional movements," he stresses, "ask people to take risks, to imperil their security in the present in hopes of building a better future," and this is what American studies scholars must do as well. "Building insurgent consciousness entails speaking back to power, subverting its authority, and inverting its icons as a means of authorizing oppositional thinking and behavior" (173). In academic terms this means closely examining the discourses

of nation, empire, and identity formations, contesting the familiar popular narratives that circulate in a variety of public sites, and aspiring to reframe and re-envision these narratives.

The reconfiguring of national and imperial paradigms with a focus on social justice struggles has gathered new momentum in the past two decades, as evidenced by the many publications that circulate in the field, as well as in the vision of several presidential addresses of the American Studies Association annual meeting. Matthew Frye Jacobson's 2013 address, for example, calls for creating alliances with other disciplines as well as with non-institutional social movements in order to counter oppressive neoliberal agendas. Within the academy, the urgent need to fight for "a social vision beyond the market" (287) means, among other things, paying careful attention to the practices of knowledge production frameworks, and a pronounced emphasis on understanding all U.S. history as a history of empire, which consequently implies that American studies must devote itself to a critical engagement with empire. As Meg Wesling (2013) elaborates:

> From settler colonialism to the dispossession of Native peoples, the recruitment of Asian laborers, the importation of Africans in chattel slavery, and the partial and always selective incorporation of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, and others whose lands were annexed but "unincorporated," this is a history that scholars of American studies have become adept at bringing to the foreground, revealing the complex layers of political, ideological, and historical contradiction that set the conditions for our contemporary understandings of national identity, as well as of race, of gender, of personhood itself. (291)

The focus on empire and the plight of conquered, exploited, and discriminated minorities has led, over time, to a shift from the initial notion of interdisciplinarity in the field, which was based in the search for overlaps of literature, art, anthropology, geography, history, law, and political science, to championing the seeking of intersections between the various branches

of ethnic studies, and emphasizing their conjunctions with gender, sexuality, and queer studies.

In the 2016 ASA annual meeting, Robert Warrior notes, the conference program included "83 sessions in African American studies, 52 in gender studies and 23 in women's studies (many of these overlap), 52 in queer studies (including 7 in transgender studies), 41 in Indigenous studies and 20 in Native American studies, 34 in Chicana/Latino studies, 23 in Asian American studies, and 18 in disability studies" (2017, 205). For Warrior, the centering of Indigenous studies is particularly significant in the revising of national narratives and the fight for justice and fair representation. For Lisa Duggan (2015) it is queer people of color who hold a previously dismissed key to the transformation of theory, methodology, and social structures. Kandice Chuh (2018), on the other hand, draws attention to the important contributions of Asian-American studies to the growing umbrella of American studies. In 2019, Roderick Ferguson revisits Lipsitz's articulation of the discipline's deep connection to non-institutional movements, centering in his address the black community's continued struggle for equality and the instrumental role past and present civil rights organizations play in the ongoing fight for social change.

From a more philosophical, existential, and relational perspective, however, otherness is not simply a negation that can be used to either reinforce or contest dominance. The more complex function of alterity is not necessarily the dismantling of political and social orders, but the destabilizing the self. In a personal encounter—even an academic one—to study and know the other must involve recognizing the self's limitations and blind spots. As an ethical inquiry, the face of the other "opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Levinas [1961] 1969, 201). Beyond any exchange of words or expressions, what the face of

the other communicates by its very existence is the simple commandment "though shall not kill." Rather than a request, "there is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all" (Levinas [1961] 1969, 89). The threat of the other, accordingly, is never on the level of the physical, political, cultural, or religious—it is a much more fundamental possibility of destruction through seeing moral truths and accounting for them.

The technological advances made in the second half of the 20th century offer new solutions to the discomfort that otherness causes and the potential threat it poses. Without resorting to physical removal, mediated channels as well as formal studies allow for a flattening of alterity through the seemingly benign practices of representation, by which everything becomes an attractive, colorful show, an orgy of differences based primarily in the ascendence of the spectacle. Despite a strong illusion of a coherent and cohesive understanding, human cognition is altered, as McLuhan (1967) suggests, when information is organized solely according to codes of visual stimulation. "The rational man in our Western culture is a visual man," he writes, "and the fact that most conscious experience has little 'visuality' in it is lost on him" (45). The superiority of systematic modes of representation is established by the fact that they have no need for coercion strategies—they govern by seduction and diminish lived experiences by overloading one sense at the severe expense of the other four, so that perception becomes increasingly myopic.

Following McLuhan and Baudrillard, in the semiotic context of the implosion of meaning in the media, whatever is revealed becomes immediately obscured, so that whatever the viewer perceives as "knowing" is diffused by the added functions of the mechanism

itself: the mesmerizing screen, the passive absorption of endless streams of information, and the deactivating of critical thinking, or, perhaps, of any thinking at all. Circumventing the relational, mediated simulation suspends cognitive faculties that depend on actual interactions, so that "by hypertrophying thought as an operational process it frees us from thought's ambiguity and from the insoluble puzzle of its relationship to the world" Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 58). Direct experience is no longer an option; everything is processed through electronic devices, and it is the human that depends on the machine, not vice versa. The suspension of conscious inquiry, along with the sameness fabricated by the screen, facilitate the paradox of falsified inclusion by which foreigners, minorities, and marginalized populations become more and more familiar at the same time that they become less and less consequential. Losing their ambiguity and insolubility, they are conveniently neutralized. In this voyeuristic celebration of structural variances, surface differences multiply ad infinitum, while true alterity is castrated and disposed of.

As the face of otherness dissolves into pixelated, mass-disseminated visual representation, difference can now be celebrated as a fashionable garment, an attractive accessory designed to add color to the drab monochrome of sameness. This is another effective mode of postmodern appropriation, a classic maneuver of commodity fetishism by which the strange, the foreign, and the potentially dangerous is repackaged and marketed as "cool," "hip," and "rad." Through simulated transformation, racism lives on, thriving on the accentuating of meaningless differences that become endowed with value by the "psychodrama of perpetual introjection and rejection of the other" (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 129). By clinging to surface marks, the racial reference (now politely termed "diversity" or "multiculturalism") remains as clear as ever, selling products, cuisines, clothes, accessories,

lifestyles, and of course entertainment that highlight difference in the service of wiping it out, stripping away the history, the depth, and the mystery of otherness, along with its announcing of the unraveling of the subject.

The systematic production of otherness, Edward Said (1978) emphasizes, is not limited to political rhetoric, mass media, or profit-generating popular culture. Academia, he demonstrates, plays a major role in the construction of categorical hierarchies, and it is a dangerous fallacy to assume that formal knowledge production, even in the seemingly neutral and benign humanities, is devoid of political aligning. All academic knowledge is political, whether or not scholars are aware of it, and whether or not their work intentionally serves— or contests—imperialist agendas. To bring awareness to the positioning of academic authority, Said centers two methodological devices. The first, strategic location, draws attention to where scholarly authority situates itself in relation to the object of study. The second, strategic formation, highlights the momentum through which groups of texts build on one another to gain mass recognition, validity and referential impact (20). As these modes of analysis reveal, the academic production of alterity emerges in the intertwining of knowledge and power, and establishes authoritative influence through processes of repetitive circulation and cross-referenced accumulation of weight. In this sense, it is not so different from the reinforcement of stereotypes in television, films, or digital media, where representational molds become standardized by endless replication and "updated" reiterations.

In institutions of higher education, however, the process of debilitating alterity by appropriation manifests in more subtle and discreet ways than in mass media. On the surface, when examining the methods of knowledge production, things like research, analysis, and expertise are associated with ideals of originality, creativity, direct inquiry, and moral

integrity. However, much like popular culture, academia as well thrives on repetition, constriction of perspective, and a dangerous conflation of knowledge with massive amounts of information. As Mark Hewson (2018) points out, much of academic discourse derives its validity not from its content but from adhering to customary manufacturing methods. The very term "knowledge production" indicates factory-like strategies—volume, speed, efficiency, proper packaging, and fitting products into potentially profitable marketing niches. In fact, as Baudrillard ([1970] 1998) argues, knowledge no longer exists outside the logic of cash-nexus, which is the driving force of all postmodern systems. "Our society," he writes, "thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes *itself* as consumer society, a" *idea*" (193). This devouring is the inevitable effect of industrialization, surplus, and mass distribution. The mechanisms of institutionalized knowledge productions are intimately linked to those of globalized capitalism—open markets, international exchange, communication technologies, accelerated processes, excessive visual stimulation, advertising, and commodity fetishism. No longer tied to place, history, ethics, or phenomenology, the value of knowledge is translated into the language of production and consumption, where profit, rather than insight, is the ultimate aim. Instead of deep investigation, knowledge is assessed according to considerations of costs and benefits, so that what can be understood is replaced by what can be gained, whether in terms of money, status, prestige, or popularity.

In order to comply with the trends of globalization, formal knowledge production underwent a profound structural rearrangement, as it now must compete with the portals of mass media—the real instructional agencies that deliver information in much more appealing forms than a drafty classroom and a cracked chalkboard. To reinvent itself, the university, as

the central generator of "knowledge," had to shift its modes of operation to better fit with the contemporary demands of the business world. To say that the university *resembles* a corporation, argues Bill Readings (1996) would be inaccurate, because the fact is the modern university *is* a corporation, and should be regarded as such (22). The public university, therefore, must be understood as an independent bureaucratic organization that is no longer invested in progress, culture, ethics, or character-building, but mainly struggles to promote its own growth and longevity. What this transition means is that in order to survive, the university advertises itself through the vague sign of "excellence," which could stand for both high standards of education and desirable achievements such as a marketable degree, social status, and financial growth. Like any other business, the University of Excellence must adhere to traditional laws of economics: supply and demand, costs of production, profit, and competition. Furthermore, to sustain itself in a globalized arena, the university must cut its local ties and be open to far-reaching exchanges. Foreign students are encouraged to apply, and athletes from other states win generous scholarships that have nothing to do with intellectual merits. Standardized accreditation allows for credit transfer that eliminates possible discrepancies between universities located in Massachusetts, California, North Dakota, or New Mexico. There is, in fact, little difference between universities located in England, Hong Kong, or Lebanon. Standardized curricula, established canons, and formalized accreditation in every discipline are similar across the board, and identical procedures of evaluation ensure that the method is recognized universally as what determines the "worth" of knowledge.

"Like a great weight descending," writes Nick Sousanis (2015), "flatness permeates the landscape" (3). This flatness is an idea of "knowledge" as the formulaic assemblage of

information in which the individual subject's critical faculties are funneled to the specific requirements of method. This reduction of the subject into the agent of method may have had its roots in the industrial revolution, the Enlightenment, and science's rise to power, but it is certainly exacerbated by the postmodern mechanisms of globalization, mass media, consumer culture, cybernetic communication, and computer programming. Academic knowledge production, then, has become similarly automated, and similarly designed for profit. Confined to neatly arranged levels, labels, categories, and protocols, the world of education is defined by its ruled and regulations, standardized evaluations, and prescribed forms of research and presentation. A student in this institution of learning enters a two-dimensional world that blots out the most vital components of knowledge: curiosity, experience, discovery, contrast, roundness, depth, and moral assessment.
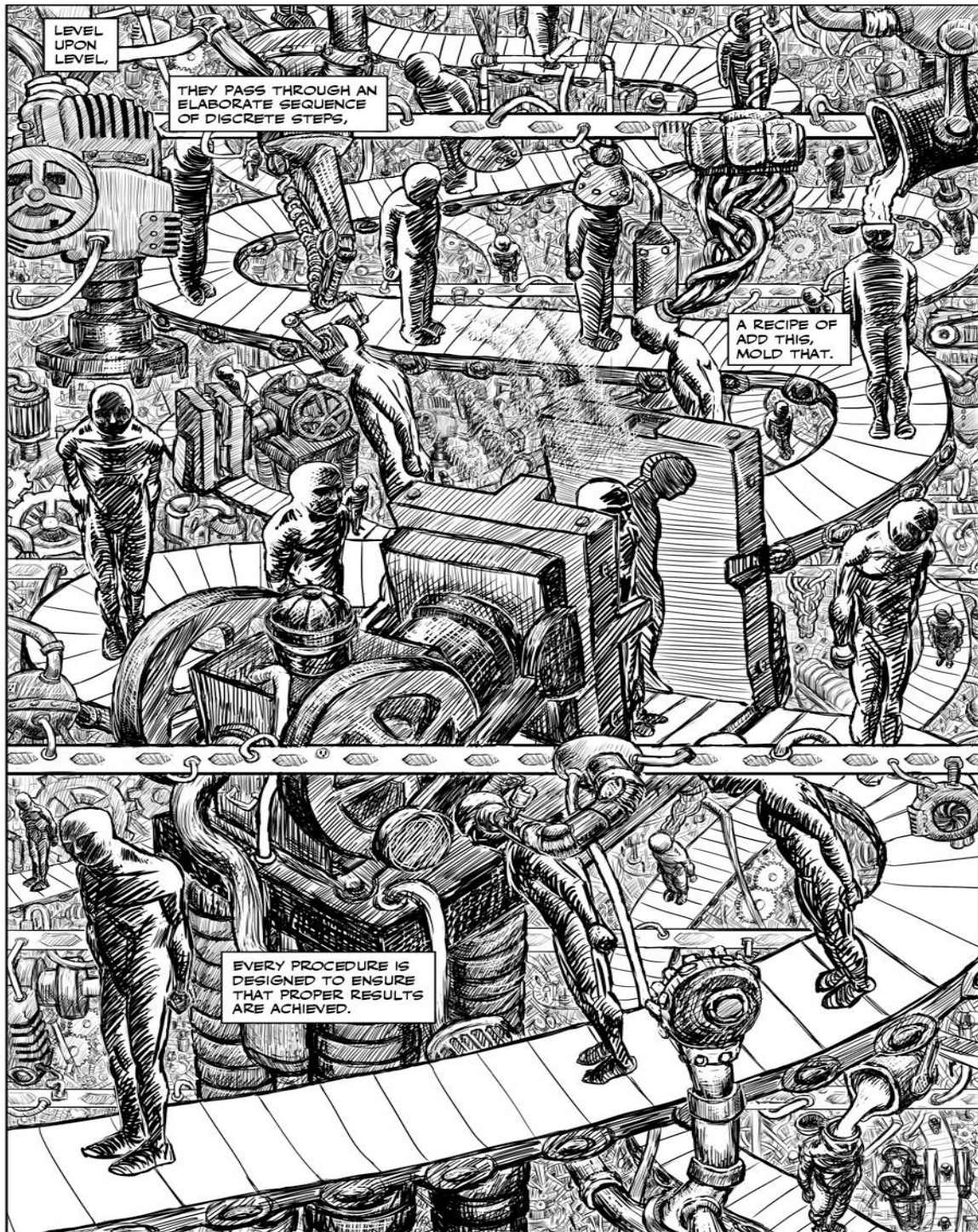
Figure 14. Jsmall-Sequence-Steps1. Drawing by Nick Sousanis, 2012.

Following a business model and resembling a mechanical assembly line, knowledge production does not encourage direct encounter or unsupervised exploration. The expected end result is a neatly packaged bundle of information, collected and analyzed according to strict guidelines, and much like the incessant stream of media-generated messages, the content of the parcel of "knowledge" is irrelevant compared with its form and functions of the mechanism itself. Elaborate networks of mediated symbolic exchange create an illusion that information is meaning, and we are conditioned to believe that aggregation, repackaging, and redistribution of discourse facilitate knowing. Such notions are so ingrained that it seems as if the very foundations that hold our current global society depend on them, and would collapse without formal education, communication technology, and mass media. What we fail to see, though, is that it might be already collapsing. The methods of knowledge production, like the prescribed operations of advanced technology, narrow our perception and erode our meaning-making capabilities, leaving the subject in a state of voided, deferred existence.

Is it possible to examine questions of identity with a clear awareness of the void left by the elimination of subjectivity? How can we write about alterity and yet allow the other to remain remote, unique, peculiar, and impenetrable? As knowledge becomes more and more dependent on method, there seems to be less and less room in academic discourse for self-reflexive inquiry and the mystery of otherness. Scientific principles grounded in systematic ordering, repeatable patterns, resolute analysis, and objectivity may limit the impact of the "pedagogies of dissent" that Chuh (2018,)calls for. In an attempt to figure out what that would mean in practical terms, Lisa Duggan (2015), for example, advocates an "intellectual antiparochialism that refuses 'aboutness' and its practices—the adding of populations to

classrooms and topics to syllabi without any fundamental reconstruction of our knowledge projects" (285). If Chuh focuses on Asian American studies as an opening through which to interrogate whiteness, assimilation into the progress narrative of modernity, and current trends in the circulation of capital, Duggan emphasizes queer studies as a parallel augmentation of American studies that shares a similar refusal of identity politics. Rather than serving as a representational token of institutional policies of minority inclusion, queer theory engages instead with "historical political economic forces and political aesthetic questions" (285). In his 2012 American Studies Association presidential address, Matthew Frye Jacobson (2013) points to the problematic links between the history of empire and the history of higher education. It is essential, he argues, "to think about the dynamic relationship between the history we inhabit and the knowledge we produce" (269). "For scholars who have long been interested in the imperial politics of education," adds Wesling (2013), "it has been particularly disheartening to witness the steady disarticulation of the public university from a notion of the public good and the democratic possibilities so radically fought for in previous decades" (293). Untangling the ideological intersections between nation building, imperial expansion, and academic curricula, then, appears to be a pronounced goal of American studies, and that goal entails continuing to reassess the lenses, spectrums, and methodologies the discipline utilizes.

Strong ties to noninstitutional social change movements present a predominant avenue for self-reflection. However, the activist, altruistic, idealist vision advocated by Lipsitz and his successors may raise its own unforeseen challenges. Such connections, despite the seemingly radical pedagogies they endorse, place American studies scholars in a problematic position that can be traced back to Gayatri Spivak's 1988 essay "Can the

Subaltern Speak?" In her examination of institutional scholarship engaged in postcolonial discourse, Spivak's main concern is that as institutional scholarship sets out to support and "empower" previously or presently colonized peoples, they in fact, by virtue of working within prescribed recognized research systems and methodologies, reaffirm oppressive legacies of Eurocentric political and cultural domination. Spivak considers the ways in which theory and criticism in the U.S. and in Europe are entrenched in a male-dominant, superiorly positioned epistemology that is not self-aware enough to avoid classifying and analyzing subaltern populations using the same tools and procedures of the very imperialist regimes the scholarship attempts to unsettle. What are some alternatives, then, to the inadvertent discursive silencing of marginalized peoples? How do we allow for and linger in the empty spaces created by past and present histories of subjugation, exploitation, and dispossession?

An intense emphasis on group identity, as Viktor Frankl (1946) warns, can easily create false assumptions and unwarranted condemnations. Recounting his experiences in four different Nazi concentration camps, Frankl stresses the uncomfortable fact that the boundaries between groups in the camps were always overlapping and never as well-defined as an outsider might imagine. "The mere knowledge that a man was either a camp guard or a prisoner," he writes, "tells us almost nothing" (93). There was no uniformity among the prisoners, Frankl reveals, not by the fact of their Jewishness and not by the extreme suffering they endured. Within the daily realities of camp life, "it was a considerable achievement for a guard or foreman to be kind to the prisoners in spite of all the camp's influences, and, on the other hand, the baseness of a prisoner who treated his own companions badly was exceptionally contemptible. Obviously, the prisoners found the lack of character in such men especially upsetting, while they were profoundly moved by the smallest kindness received

from any of the guards" (93). So moved were the prisoners, Frankl recalls, that after

liberation, as the Grand Alliance forces were hunting down and capturing Nazi officials,

several young Jews hid a particularly caring SS commander in the Bavarian woods,

eventually turning him in to the hands of an American liberation unit only after being given

formal reassurance that no harm would come to the man (93). Once again alterity has little to

do with collective demarcations and everything to do with the ethical question it brings to the

fore. The distinct singularity of each situation, each incident, each individual, in Frankl's

view, carries much more weight and meaning than any generalized patterning, as justified as

it may initially appear.

Explaining the principles of logotherapy (meaning-focused therapy), Frankl discusses

individual as well as collective pathology, suggesting that in both cases the road to

overcoming debilitating neuroses might be smoother and more productive if it refrained from

pattern-seeking and from excessive intention invested in fixing the problem (1946, 126–127).

Paradoxically, acceptance of and even a good measure of detachment from the affliction, its

origins, and its professionally-administered cures have proven to be much more effective in

delivering long-term results. When applied to problems of social inequality in the U.S., this

principle might explain the well-meaning attempts—academic or activist—to heal the mass

pathology on which race, gender, class, or ability differences are constructed. The need to

dissect the problem and bring it to the center of attention is understandable and admirable. At

the same time, it is possible, as Riley (2014) suggests, that this intense focus does not

actually help but in fact might hinder an actual overcoming of the problem?

Moving away from external efforts to liberate the oppressed, John McWhorter (2006)

redirects the social justice conversation to the internalized victimhood that often underscores

the cultural and rhetorical paradigms of non-white struggle for justice. The efforts that began

with civil rights activism in the late 1960s, he argues, have evolved into a collective popular

and popularized identity that is defined by defiance, filled with empty gestures of speech and

vocabulary, music, fashion, body language, attitude, and many self-destructive ways of being

in the world, from broken families and domestic violence to widespread drug abuse, crime,

and gang violence. Antagonistic blame and the ethos of victimhood keep the problems

growing and fuel a vicious cycle of self-sabotage. At the core of this cycle are the

extravagant expressions of therapeutic alienation: "alienation unconnected to, or vastly

disproportionate to, real-life stimulus, but maintained because it reinforces one's sense of

psychological legitimacy, via defining oneself against an oppressor characterized as eternally

depraved" (6). Ironically, this psychological mechanism of opposition, which is often quite

theatrical and purposefully provocative, was not invented by non-white or otherwise

marginalized communities. It can be, McWhorter notes, as white as Masha in Anton

Chekhov's *The Seagull*, or the pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The attention-seeking

enactment of alienation and resistance has nothing to do with race: it is a universal feature of

human social interactions.

But again, to critically reconsider the efficacy of the empire saga and its alluring good

vs. evil simplifications is to risk the end of the fight and the dismantling of several identities:

the non-white victim, the liberal social justice activist, or the radical intellectual dedicated to

an altruistic cause. Could it be that there are other avenues from which to examine questions

of inequity? That the dogmatic rejection of anything that might move the conversation away

from race could be too limiting and oppressive in its own way? That the prescribed academic

modes of inquiry, grounded as they are in the seeking of recognizable patterns, historical

"truths," and system-focused solutions, could be expanded to include a greater range of approaches? Even (or especially) in higher education, argues Adam Grant (2021), the clinging to certain ideologies and habitual practices can be detrimental to creativity and innovation. Updating beliefs, trying different viewpoints, and acknowledging that which is uncertain, according to Grant, are difficult things to do in any given situation, but an academic setting makes them even more challenging. When knowledge and expertise are constantly assessed and rewarded, so are lasting convictions in ideas, beliefs, and causes. Convictions make for a stable world, and, much like therapeutic alienation, provide a sense of confidence and security. The problem, however, according to Grant, is that "we live in a rapidly changing world, where we need to spend as much time rethinking as we do thinking" (16). Working with not knowing, then, from the place of inquiry rather than conviction, could be a useful tool not just for adjusting to the novel developments of accelerated technological advances, but for tackling lingering problems of a social or political nature.

Three overlapping forms of expression, Grant (2021) suggests, dominate current human expression: that of the preacher, prosecutor, and politician. Each has its own function. The *preacher* comes out when we sense that our beliefs are threatened. To defend our values and advocate our principles we then turn to didactic, self-righteous lectures. The *prosecutor* is employed as a way to point out faults in other people and prove them wrong. And because most of us still need approval and recognition, we turn to the politician for some diplomatic, surface-level negotiations (21–22). These three modes of communicating leave little room for self-reflexivity and for questioning the validity or efficacy of what we hold to be true, and Grant proposes a return to the pure objectivity of the scientific method, which is indeed built around an uncompromised openness to new possibilities and unforeseen developments. As

noted earlier, however, this objectivity carries its own set of confines, because it too searches for answers in method, in routine and repetitive procedures that tend to reject anomalies, paradoxes, and non-rational incongruities.

As method and discursive conventions devour both identity and alterity by creating a sameness based in differences, alterity is in effect contained and flattened by "knowing." On the surface, with the post-revolution establishment of departments and specialized courses dedicated to fair representation, victory was declared, and progress was achieved. This resolution of the crisis, however, did not lead, as was expected, to a deconstruction of hierarchical race, class, and gender orders. What happened on U.S. college campuses, just like in the media, was a rhetorical shift in which pronounced antiracist language and policies proved to be successful means of quelling the unrest while maintaining white centrality. This is poignantly illustrated in Alice Walker's 1973 short story "Everyday Use," in which a young African American woman living in New York pays a visit to her mother on a little farm in the rural South. At the end of the awkward visit, the daughter, now educated, liberated, and proud of her African roots, asks to take a couple of handmade quilts with her back to New York. The mother has a hard time understanding how these used old quilts, which had been in the family for generations, have suddenly become "folk art"—valuable displays of black heritage to hang on a wall, use to educate people, or possibly, eventually, sell to a museum or a wealthy collector. As differences are put on display, repackaged, and properly studied in accredited institutions, they are not only safely contained, but efficiently commodified and marketed as African American history, Native American literature, Chicano culture, the Asian American experience, and so on and so forth—trendy products

that by the authority of representation are carefully amputated from the material realities of racial inequalities.

The historical rejection of the demoted other and the self-congratulatory embracing of difference are, essentially, two sides of the same coin. Once the biological theories were conclusively disproven, racism shifted its focus to cultural variances, surviving in opposing fronts on the same shallow grounds. The problem is, no one stops to question the validity of the very term itself, and the assumptions on which it is based. Its meaning has collapsed and dissolved into void. Until difference itself is tackled as an illusion, as a relative and ever-shifting signifier, all critiques of racism amount to no more than vain discourse. "There is no such thing as the proper use of difference," writes Baudrillard ([1990] 1993), "a fact revealed not only by racism itself but also by all anti-racist and humanitarian efforts to promote and protect differences" (131). Blind to their own failure, anti-racist efforts still fall in the trap of defining alterity along embarrassingly Eurocentric lines, when it was European colonialism that initially established difference as a tool of domination.

The double bind of rhetorical inclusion is that regardless of the content, the message of the method stays the same; it is a mechanism designed to disregard both subject and object while still maintaining uneven hierarchies in which Eurocentric epistemology presides over the process of knowledge production. The terminology might change, multiculturalism may seem like a major advancement toward social change, but as long as individuals are subsumed by generalizing categories and taxonomies of difference, not much is actually changing. As Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) points out, the idea of culture operates just like its predecessor, race, in that it enhances differences for the purpose of cataloguing and organizing human populations. The term does have some advantages, as "it removes

difference from the realm of the natural and the innate. Whether conceived of as a set of behaviors, customs, traditions, rules, plans, recipes, instructions, or programs... culture is learned and can change" (55). Herein, however, is also the problem: although the intent is to avoid essentializing, the underlying question behind "culture" is this: if it is learned, why can't it be unlearned? If all those differences are not innate, why can't *they* be more like *us*?

One possibility for moving away from the confines of structural method might be to shift the emphasis in research and writing from neutral, scientific patterns to the relational and the random, or, put another way, from the spectacular to the particular. A deliberate resistance to systematic evaluations could, potentially, reinstate the subject as well as the object as equally engaged participants in a collaborative project. Whether such complete reestablishment of subjectivity is indeed possible in the postmodern hyperreal remains questionable, as the pace in which the system is propelling itself keeps accelerating, and signification practices keep mutating to fit with the flatness created by mediated representation. Nevertheless, by opposing the epistemic violence of terms like "culture" or "race," narratives that accentuate the unknowability and inconsistency of otherness may offer an alternative to the science-based assumption of universal reasoning processes that must adhere to neat structural process analyses. If nothing else, they can remind us that unlike machines, "individuals are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events, undergo ups and downs in various relationships and changes in their circumstances and desires, face new pressures, and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 59). Those are the particulars of the everyday; glitches that do not conform to method and—much like unpredictable accidents—stand out in their unspectacular, unmarketable grit.

On television, computers, or electronic devices, as well as in academic knowledge production, the spectacle of the other enters the private domain in an intimate way, not as a corporeal presence but as an insubstantial iteration, an apparition. The face, the voice, or the situation are no longer a moral dilemma but a means to an end that can easily turn into a caricature, regardless of the seriousness of the production. Staring at animated images, the self does not encounter another being but a projection, so that "the Other, the interlocutor, is never really involved… for the screen itself as locus of the interface is the prime concern" (Baudrillard [1990] 1993, 54). Similarly, when a "culture" is studied in an academic setting, collective identity always threatens to swallow up the individual, so that the encounter is always with a concept rather than a presence. Methodically, mediated abstraction disarms otherness of its gaze, and of any potential that gaze ever had to reach the relational core of the self. Ethical questions dissolve and melt away. The subject is no longer challenged by the existence of the other, only by the vague *suggestion* of such an existence, neatly contained and under control, more subdued and sterilized than ever. Moreover, that distance is so effective precisely because it is produced through the illusion of closeness. Through the confidence of having completed the "special topic" course, and the intimacy of the television in the bedroom or the smartphone in the pocket, the self comes to believe it can know the Other, can learn its ways and its history, understand its suffering and its resilience, master its identity narrative. The method of mediation transforms the process of relating into an artificial exchange in which identity encounters not alterity but a flat sameness. Dissolving otherness by appropriation, the process suppresses all disagreements and all possible conflicts.

The presumed knowing that this simulated closeness creates leads to a new kind of eradication of otherness, one that leaves a dangerous sense of uniformity which has nothing to do with equality, inclusion, or freedom. The body, the face, and the returned gaze of the other are all gone, effectively defused by representation. The numbers of ethnic studies programs in universities rise steadily in tandem with trendy films and television shows depicting non-white or non-mainstream communities acutely demonstrate the danger of presumed sameness. White viewers watching such productions, much like university students writing their final papers, believe that they now have a good understanding of what it means to be black, or Hispanic, or Indian, or queer. The superficial marks of alternative identities are available to be reproduced, commodified, consumed, and imitated; they are visual and cultural products completely removed from the bodies and lived experiences of actual people, not to mention from a long history of oppression whose legacy continues in a present still plagued with glaring disparities.

In the mediated visual representations as well as in institutionalized procedures of research and writing, method tends to debilitate the probing nature of encounters with alterity. As Ferguson (2012) shows, in the 1960s and 1970s, when Civil Rights movements stirred up unprecedented waves of discontent on both sides of the Atlantic, mass demonstrations and organized revolts were accompanied by the notion that of all public institutions, the university was not only capable of but indeed responsible for transcending the social order within which it operates (25). In the U.S. in particular, Jodi Melamed (2011) elaborates, the crisis was focused on democratic representation, and public universities, which until then were largely segregated and housed mostly men, had to transform in accordance with the loud demands of historically oppressed minorities for cultural visibility.

Admissions procedures were quickly changed to make room for formerly excluded

populations, and new programs of study were created that celebrated multiculturalism by

creating segmented canons for each ethnic group (95). By the 1990s, however, with

deindustrialization and the rise of the information superhighway, new economic demands

meant a restructuring of academic institutions as well. To meet the challenges of rapidly

changing political and economic climates, "U.S. universities needed to produce knowledge

about racial difference, but not for the same ends as the student movements. Rather, the

essential function of the university in this period was to make minoritized difference work for

post-Keynesian times—to produce, validate, certify, and affirm racial difference in ways that

augmented, enhanced, and developed state-capital hegemony rather than disrupted it"

(Melamed 2011, 95). By formalizing alterity, institutionalized representation objectifies the

other by methodically rearranging it into clearly defined elements that can be understood

according to capitalistic modes of reasoning: orderly classification, commodification, market

value, supply and demand.

　　　With institutionalized cultural appropriation, alterity becomes a fragmented collection

of traditions and artifacts to be bought and sold, a commodity in its own right, an open

signifier floating in the open markets. Hinging on taxonomy and classification, otherness is

reinforced as *difference* by representational overproduction while simultaneously being

drained of its countering possibilities. Is it possible to tell of a direct encounter with another

without the telling serving as an example of a pattern, suggesting implications, serving as a

case study, or claiming certain knowledge? What is the value of conveying a random meeting

simply for the sake of its passing human connection, poetic value, and ethical dilemma? To

represent any "other" or to study any "culture," Abu-Lughod (1991) argues, is to risk

participating in an ongoing colonial project in which academia plays a central role. In the

name of a systematic search for "truth," traditional institutional research obscures the subject

by claiming objectivity, fossilizes the object by forcing it into fixed preconceived boxes, and

maintains, through the foregrounding of method, a clear position of power. Those who

research, write, and publish their findings, Abu-Lughod suggests, assume expert familiarity

with their object of study, and the uneven dynamics between the producer of knowledge and

the studied specimen contribute to the perpetuation of a long-standing historical hierarchical

structure in which the apparatus of knowledge production upholds the West's white, often

male-dominant position of authority (56). If according to Eurocentric epistemologies to study

something means to gain mastery over it, to possess and contain it, then when it comes to

representations of otherness, these established methods of knowing carry with them alarming

ethical repercussions. To presume knowledge of the other is, in effect, to strip alterity of its

mystery, of its potential to pose ethical questions for the individual self and the collective

consciousness.

A big part of the Eurocentric authority Abu-Lughod attempts to undermine has to do

with voice, with the assured objectivity in which findings are presented. One of the clear

marks of traditional academic writing is the removal of the researcher's individual

experience, flare, tone, and style from the knowledge production process. Objectivity is held

in such high regard that it often stands as its own goal, again overpowering the content of the

study. Tracing the historical evolution of objectivity as what defines scientific validity,

Lorrain Daston and Peter Galison (2010) argue that scientific inquiry was not always as

attached to the concept of neutrality as it is today. In the nineteenth century, with the

industrial revolution and the introduction of mechanical precision into the daily lives of

people in Europe, scientists engaging in recording and documenting their observations began to yearn for the "blind sight" of machines, an uninvolved exactitude that would, presumably, reveal absolute truths. "To be objective," Daston and Galison write, "is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower—knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving" (17). The term itself, Daston and Galison point out, emerges from an obsession with finding and fixing the "true nature" of the object of study, and with it the removal of the observer from the process of observing. In different disciplines and under changing circumstances, the motivation for this removal can vary: "the criterion may be emotional detachment in one case, automatic procedures for registering data in another, recourse to quantification in still another, belief in a bedrock reality independent of human observers in yet another" (29). Over time, these elements came to be fused together into what is understood as objectivity: a concept as well as a set of specific techniques of research and of presentation that are rarely examined as potentially problematic.

The confidence and decisiveness of the objective voice bolsters the reliance on systematic quantifications and qualifications of knowledge, leaving little to no room for what may be impossible to know, for ambiguity, mixed feelings, indefinite conclusions. "The artist," as James Baldwin (1962) writes, "cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides" (18). Allowing for questions and speculations—rather than truths and convictions—to shape the process of inquiry may be one way to circumvent the epistemological trap of writing knowingly about the unknowable other. Several influential texts in American studies have experimented with this creative challenge in recent years. Tiya Miles's (2005) *Ties That Bind*, for example, is a historical study of 19th century Cherokee life. The project draws

attention to the overlooked relationships between Cherokee slaveholders and their African American slaves, and to the consequential changes in racial hierarchies and alliances within and without Native American communities. In lieu of missing archival records, to contend with institutional archives that systematically left out accounts of Native or black lives, Miles constructs a speculative narrative that revolves around one particular African slave. Imagining the daily life of Doll, the black woman who was the slave and wife of a wealthy Cherokee man Miles writes:

> The ebb and flow of Doll's days began with nursing her newborn child, preparing the hearth, and starting a fire with wood that she herself had collected. In the early morning Doll would have cooked large pots of food for the other slaves and for Shoe Boots to eat during the day—soaking corn and pounding it into meal for bread, boiling corn in lye and water and washing it clean to make skinned corn, roasting pork or deer meat, boiling greens. She also would have worked in her kitchen garden, tending the vegetables that sustained her small household. When she found time in the morning or afternoon, Doll would have spun thread and woven fabric, dying it with Indian mulberry, copperas, and indigo to create brilliant shades of red, green, and blue. And in the cool of the evening, Doll would have baked pan bread in the coals of the fire with corn or bean meal, serving it to her family, the other slaves, and any of Shoe Boots's visiting relatives. (64)

In the face of severe lack of sources and the limited perspective of traditional historiography, Miles (2005) turns to alternative writing practices such as comparative textual analysis, the use of informed inferences, and even fiction. Defying the silencing apparatuses of recorded history, she uses fiction in order to "bridge the gaps in our evidence and allow us access to the marrow of human feeling" (60). Rather than a purely factual, scientific "objectivity," she demonstrates, it is the creative imagination that makes room for silenced voices to come forth and speak of unaccounted-for suffering and forgotten injustices.

Similarly, Saidiya Hartman's (2007) *Lose Your Mother* recounts the author's travels in Ghana while interweaving historical analysis and fictionalized narratives. The project is a uniquely personal attempt to contend with the numerous missing pieces, erasures, and silenced voices in archival records of the transatlantic slave trade, and to better understand slavery not as a thing of the past but as a living, dynamic force that still animates race relations in the U.S. and the collective identity of African Americans. Researching and writing in a foreign African country, Hartman positions herself as a visitor in a place where she clearly does not belong, utilizing this positioning to bring to the surface the question of belonging in the U.S. as well. Obruni, a word used by Ghanaians to refer to a white person, a foreigner, becomes an ironic facet of the critical inquiry. "*Obruni,*" Hartman writes, "forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace. . . . I was born in another country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana. . . . Secretly I wanted to belong somewhere or, at least, I wanted a convenient explanation of why I felt like a stranger" (4). Movement, migration, flux, and mobility create a thematic momentum for the work, and the experience of being an outsider both at home and abroad brings into focus the ongoing search for home and belonging that is, Hartman argues, a significant part of African American identity.

Lose Your Mother is an example of a text that foregrounds uncertainly, searching, and not knowing. Rather than providing conclusive answers, Hartman poses questions and speculations, resisting the urge to subscribe to one definitive narrative while also refusing to confine her work to one mode of writing (academic, autobiographical, or fictional). This fluid approach prioritizes the individual and the particular, making room for multiple perspectives and possibilities to illuminate the darkness of an unfathomable history. Darkness itself

becomes a literary motif in the text, used to emphasize the unknown, the unmastered, and the unpredictable. Walking in Accra during an unexpected blackout, Hartman describes her experience thus: "Once you left Osu Road, the neighborhood was immersed in shadow and the streets were pitch-black. It was the kind of velvety black that was rare ever to see in cities, because artificial light robbed the sky of this jetty density. Walking the streets after eight p.m., I navigated with a flashlight. I wasn't afraid that I would be robbed or assaulted, as I would have been in New York or Oakland" (2007, 175). "My flashlight," Hartman admits, recognizing her own limitations as an American scholar, "was a defense not against dark, dark Africa but against my own compromised sight, my own thickheadedness. I had been in Ghana nearly half a year and I barely understood the world around me" (175).

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* Hartman (2019) continues to develop what she herself terms "critical fabulation," a style of writing intended to "jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (11). Situating her storytelling in New York and Philadelphia at the turn of the 20th century, Hartman works with photographs from that time period, imagining the most intimate everyday affairs of young black women as they migrated from the South to make independent lives for themselves in the cities of the North. The scenes of daily movements and encounters about the big city, the struggles for survival in a promised land of few opportunities, set the foundations for what would later become the black ghettoes of the large Northern metropolitan areas. But while these ghettos and their residents are condemned and criminalized by the authorities, Hartman's fictionalized close narration creates a counter-perspective that appreciates the

unconventional lifestyles of urban black women at the end of the 19th century as daring, innovative, and full of agency.

Facing scant archival materials and large gaps in existing records, Hartman (2019) reconstructs the lives of so-called promiscuous, unlawful, errant women utilizing creative, lyrical speculation:

> There are no visible signs on doors barring her entrance, just the brutal rebuff of "we don't serve niggers." If she feels brave, she will shout an insult or curse as she retreats from the shop under the hateful gaze of clerk and customers. She can sit anywhere she wants on streetcars and in theaters, even if people inch away as if she were contagious when she chooses to sit next to them, and she can go the vaudeville show or the nickelodeon on the same day as white folks, although it is more fun and she breathes easier when it is just colored people and she knows she will not be insulted. Despite the liberties of the city, there is no better life here than in Virginia, no brighter future to grow into, no opportunities for colored girls besides the broom and the mop, or spread-eagle in really hard times. (8)

Through the tapestry of their imagined lives, the young women in the book are resurrected not as passive, subservient beings, but as animated and vibrant agents of change, forming a vital precursor to the radical movements that were to follow later in the 20th century. The radicality of these women, however, manifests not in their heroic speeches or their charismatic ability to mobilize masses, but on the contrary: in their daily routines, in their individual choices, and their very bodies.

These bodies in motion, bodies in action, stand in contradiction to the conventional methods of academic representation that in their detachment, adherence to facts, and tone of mastery tend to fix their object of study in a static, inert state. The close descriptions of a dynamic physical existence are told in a voice that resists authority; a voice of an artist who, as Baldwin proposes, is more interested in exposing questions than in providing answers. "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot

know?" (2008, 3), asks Hartman. "How does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?" (3). The narratives in *Wayward Lives* do that by insisting on writing from within the circle suggested by the study, and resisting institutionally-sanctioned procedures such as fact-checking, critical analyses, or "objective" evaluations. For example:

> Most days, the assault of the city eclipses its promise: When the water in the building has stopped running, when even in her best dress she cannot help but wonder if she smells like the outhouse or if it is obvious that her bloomers are tattered, when she is so hungry that the aroma of bean soup wafting from the settlement kitchen makes her mouth water, she takes to the streets, as if in search of the real city and not this poor imitation. The old black ladies perched in their windows shouted: "Girl, where you headed?" Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come; if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and hope of it, the beauty and the promise. (2019, 10)

Such passages are quite reminiscent, in fact, of Baldwin's 1960 novel *Another County*, which, set in the same urban environment about half a century later, depicts an already established black ghetto in Harlem, but one that has become attractive to a white crowd of artists, free-thinkers, and reformers. Narrating the experience of one of the central characters in the novel as he watches white fans entering a Times Square jazz club where he used to perform regularly before his career and life got derailed by drugs and alcohol, Baldwin writes:

> It made him remember days and nights, days and nights, when he had been inside, on the stand or in the crowd, sharp beloved, making it with any chick he wanted, making it to parties and getting high and getting drunk and fooling around with the musicians, who were his friends, who respected him. Then, going home to his own pad, locking the door and taking off his shoes, maybe making himself a drink, maybe listening to

some records, stretching out on the bed, maybe calling up some girl. And changing his underwear and his socks and his shirt, shaving, and taking a shower, and making it to Harlem to the barber shop, then seeing his mother and his father and teasing his sister, Ida, and eating: spareribs or porkchops or chicken or greens or cornbread or yams or biscuits. For a moment he thought he would faint with hunger and he moved to a walk of the building and leaned there. His forehead was freezing with sweat. He thought: This is got to stop, Rufus. This shit is got to stop. Then, in weariness and recklessness, seeing no one on the streets and hoping no one would come through the doors, leaning with one hand against the wall he sent his urine splashing against the stone-cold pavement, watching the faint steam rise. (5-6)

Although Baldwin's work is labeled "fiction" and Hartman's "academic," the similarities highlight the arbitrary nature of these categorical distinctions. Both depict tumultuous times in American cultural history, both offer critical commentary regarding the lives of young black people in urban enclaves, both point to the social and political contexts of the criminalizing and pathologizing of these lives. Calling into question the arbitrariness of the strict divisions between "literature" and "research," authors like Hartman and Miles propose, in effect, alternate modes of knowledge productions, ones that do not rely solely on fact-based data collection, calculated observations, systematic evaluations, or objective conclusions. Instead, critical fabulation, by its very nature, admits to and arises from uncertainty, from being unable to fully comprehend, know, or master the object of study. The unique voice of fiction, therefore, is the subjective voice of inquiry, which prefers the questions to the answers, the mystery of the unknown to the evidential proof of the known.

In the world of higher education, the critical fabulation could offer an opening onto new epistemologies, ones that are not so limited by rigid methods, strict procedures of knowledge production, and predictable patterns. As Denise Ferreira da Silva points out, the critical tools available to scholars are themselves products of the same social and scientific developments of the 20th century that, despite pursuits of justice, equality, or diversity, have articulated differences along lines of unbridgeable cultural divides. This has been

acknowledged and tackled in American studies, and experimentations with enhanced self-reflexivity, non-conformity, and pedagogies of dissent are ongoing. The thought patterns and modes of knowledge production that are available to scholars can be limited, as they "rehearse the modern text's scientific imaging of The World as an ordered whole composed of separate parts relating through the mediation of constant units of measurement and/or a limiting violent force" (Ferreira da Silva 2016, 57-58). A complete rethinking of global social structures is required, then, if the goal is to avoid repeating the violence that American studies and other ethical-political departments, organizations, movements, and programs set out to remedy. This, Ferreira da Silva argues, "requires that we release thinking from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination's capacity to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions, which Kant (1724-1804) postulated are inferior to what is produced by the formal tools of the Understanding" (58). Letting go of the need to understand, to fully grasp, to order or reorder the world, would necessarily lead to new ways of conceptualizing and experiencing the world, and these new perspectives might in turn begin to dissolve the persistent power of cultural differences to produce fixed, separate, irreconcilable identities. Breaking through the formal walls of Kantian Understanding, practicing an intentional loosening of the grip of certainty, and calling forth imagination may rearticulate the fundamental elements of existence as an oscillating complexity in chaos and movement rather than a logically-arranged system of classifications and exchanges.

Although the conventional lines between formal academic discourse and creative fiction writing tend to keep the two neatly separated, these seemingly opposing approaches may not be as contradictory as they appear at first. As Miles, Hartman, and Abu-Lughod show, utilizing the personal, the particular, and that which does not fit into an identifiable

mold is a powerful subjective declaration of uncertainty, and as such it allows otherness to retain its vitality while the self (of the author as well as the reader) unravels in not knowing, not mastering, and not possessing. Instead of attempting to provide answers, the language of storytelling is the language of inquiry; an embracing of ambiguity that honors the mystery of the other and invites both subject and object to participate in a sort of dance of discovery.

Considering the accelerated evolution of advanced technology and the pervasive influence of mass media, considering that methodical, formulaic, standardized, detached procedures now govern so many aspects of knowledge production, this dance of discovery may possibly be one of the last vestiges of proactive human agency. As of now, even the most sophisticated AI systems cannot yet invent fictional narratives, do not possess an elaborate, inquisitive imagination. Despite centuries of scientific advances that rely on factual, assessable evidence, the exploratory disposition of human imagination is in fact what drives all progress and is still the main advantage the we have over the machines that surround us. Deliberately engaging with uncertainty not only destabilizes the political, social, and institutional orders that generate definitive categories of identity and alterity, but invites the self to pose ethical questions about its own positioning and conduct. A speculative focus on the individual and the particular as those things that cannot be contained in fixed categories and predictable patterns highlights the other as a mystery, impossible to pin down and fully comprehend. In turn, this unknowable alterity holds the potential to reveal to the self its own fundamental nature as unfixed, insubstantial, and indefinable.

Exit Point

At the end of Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris*, after years of dedicated examination, the shapeshifting oceanic plasma remains as much of an enigma as when it was first encountered. What further complicates the studying of the impenetrable planet is the fact that without exception, all the scientists who travel to it experience severe psychological breakdowns, and their work is interrupted by unforeseen surges of intense moral dilemmas accompanied by the most painful of human emotions: grief, guilt, shame, regret, and defeat. Insomnia, disturbing dreams, hallucinations, and terror-inducing visitations from long-dead people who represent deep ethical questions threaten not only the wellbeing of the space station's crew members, but the very foundations of scientific inquiry. Gradually, all logic, reason, order, and objectivity deteriorate and lose their hold. The momentous task of understanding the laws that govern the foreign environment becomes insignificant in the face of the urgent need to resolve the internal conflicts of the tormented individual soul. It is as if while the scientists are conducting their research, examining, measuring, and assessing the planet, the planet in turn is engaged in its own experiments, gathering some of the most disturbing information stored in the astronauts' psyches, and reflecting it back to them in grotesque, nerve-racking ways.

Driven by an obsessive need to learn about, rationalize, classify and categorize, comprehend, and triumphantly control their object of study, the Solaris scholars return from their journeys baffled and perplexed. With their spirits crushed and their identities lost, they face copious amounts of field notes, recorded data, attempted analysis, and endless speculations, yet no deductions, no recognized patterns, no useful knowledge. The alterity of

Solaris is so radical, so profoundly incomprehensible, it can only be evaluated by its refusal to be understood and by the reflection in the mirror it holds up to the inquiring subject.

Like *Solaris*, on one level this project aims to develop a critical perspective on mankind's quest for knowledge, pointing to the limitation of science and the arrogance of human curiosity, which is always pointed outward, ready to explore and conquer faraway galaxies while remaining hopelessly ignorant when it comes to understanding its own makeup. On another level, the dissertation is also a philosophical inquiry into the desire to know, contain, and possess the other, symbolized in the novel by the logic-defying plasma and in my work as a fundamental alterity that is so alien, intimidating, and uncooperative that ultimately all attempts to understand it fail, and its main function becomes to redirect the scrutinizing gaze back to the observing subject. Like the unsolvable mystery of the strange planet, alterity raises in front of the curious subject an unwanted mirror into which the self gazes in bewilderment. Focusing not on distant galaxies in the faraway future but on the here and now of our own contemporary existence, this project endeavored to shed light on postmodern configurations of identity and alterity and examine the dynamics between them in a technology-saturated world characterized by our increasingly mediated lives and the accelerated speeds of the electronic highways. Contemplating the possible questions presented by the other, the study intentionally allows for answers to remain inconclusive. A methodology of organically unfolding inquiry, it suggests, allows for the investigative horizons to remain open, unconstrained by the finality of decisive suppositions.

But where is the subject who must look in the mirror?

On his coast-to-coast journey through America, in the small town of Porterville, CA, Baudrillard ([1987a] 1990a) writes: "Without even a bank, an administrative building, or a

town hall, the town has no coordinates; it is like a plantation. The only sign of life: an American flag, just alongside the dead centre of the town, the hotel." In this run-down hotel, the unkempt manager has a hard time locating the right key to the right room and is not particularly welcoming to the French tourist. The hotel appears to be mostly vacant, "and yet in every room, with its sagging mattress and its dusty mirror, the TV is constantly on" (65). In the rural Californian wasteland, in a nondescript American small town, the screen becomes the most reassuring sign of life, an indication of human presence as well as its gradual disappearance. The blue light flickering through the curtained windows becomes, like the American flag, a suggestive symbol of the very essence of a whole culture. Although this typical image of the 1980s seems archaic now, it holds a lasting significance in its aesthetic prediction of the all-encompassing, all-consuming power of the lit monitor. In its surreal, dream-like, evocative atmosphere, the image encapsulates the logic of simulation in which human life recedes into the emptiness of passivity while more and more action takes place on a screen, in ethereal realms that have a life of their own, whether a human spectator is present or not.

Examining the accelerated technological developments of the last several decades, the fantastical notion of singularity, which used to belong to the imaginary realms of science fiction novels, may not seem as far-fetched as it was once thought to be. Although originally singularity was hypothesized as the point at which the capabilities and performance of artificial intelligence would surpass those of the human mind, over time the term came to more generally refer to the unpredictable changes that advanced technology introduces into our lives, and especially to the merging of human and machine. Overhead satellites, unmanned drones, military simulation apparatuses, sophisticated surveillance mechanisms,

high-tech medical equipment (such as remote-controlled cardiac pacemakers, artificial lungs, and bionic prosthetics), personal computers, GPS systems, self-driving cars, and of course smart phones: human life all over the planet is surrounded with, monitored by, and often literally depends on central processing units and fiber optic networks that cover every part of the inhabited globe. In recent studies, teams of neuroscientists and machine learning specialists report on the successful initial operation of a "brain-machine interface": a device in which brainwaves coming in through electrodes attached to a person's head are decoded by trained algorithms that then transform the frequencies and patterns into real-time speech (Makin, Moses, and Chang, 2020). In other words, this is a mind-reading device that so far is being used to assist patients with severe speech impediments, brain injuries, or disabilities, but that holds unprecedented potential for widespread applications. The same device is being used with paraplegic patients to convert brainwaves into movements and actions: all on the screen, in virtual form, of course. This is not science fiction; this is a current reality.

In light of these new hyperrealities, new questions emerge. How are various human subjectivities—or the human subject in general—to be understood? What do familiar definitions of identity and alterity mean in this changing world? How does the accentuated visuality of the screen-mediated life alter human perception, and with it the ways in which we approach categorical differences? With aggregated information circulating all around us in growing amounts and accelerated speed, what is the meaning and value of "knowledge"? With the increasing dominance of method—of meticulously calculated programming—how are we to assess processes of knowledge production? And, within these contexts, how are we to theorize power, nation, and empire?

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated these questions, as governments, systems, and institutions find themselves helpless against the continued threat of the microorganism, which is proving to be much more resilient and adaptive than was thought at first. Even after a vaccine has been developed and widely administered, new mutations attack the weak and the susceptible, and the numbers of the infected and the dead are on the rise. Months go by, and as humans we too adapt to the "new normal," a transformed social structure that still requires wearing masks, adhering to careful hygiene precautions, and opting for remote operations whenever possible. Doctor's appointments, business meetings, professional engagements, training sessions, conferences and consultations remain virtual, ensuring the safety of participants and the general population. Social media and various lifestyle, gaming, or dating apps soar to new heights of popularity. On university campuses, many courses continue to be taught online or in hybrid modalities, allowing students to plug in from various remote locations. Those attending in-person classes can still enjoy all the web-enhanced educational features, along with contactless student services and autonomous little robots that deliver food directly to the dorms.

Figure 15. On-Demand Delivery Robots on the Oregon State University Campus. Photograph by Gilad Elbom, September 2021.

The mechanisms of advanced technology, it seems, have dislodged themselves from any particular geographic location, political or economic entity, ideology, or agenda. Self-perpetuating, independent of the American or any other empire, techno-imperialism is expanding on its own volition, fueled by its own separate logic of improvement, which gradually erodes the "real" in favor of celebrating the hyperreal. Rational distinctions, as Baudrillard points out, carry little weight in this process. Visually seductive and perpetually mesmerizing, the screen-mediated life thrives on elements of entertainment that obscure meaning and alter perception. In our digitally enhanced existence, it becomes increasingly harder to discern a phenomenon from its virtual rendition, the origin from the imitation, the

signified from the signifier. "The absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects," Baudrillard writes, "the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum" ([1987a] 1990a, 67). Propelled forward as if by its own evolutionary drive, the techno-empire keeps expanding, engulfing an entire species that is progressively characterized by torpor, by inertia. Humans depend on, submit to, and interact with machines, but with so little agency that, just like in a dream state, we are mostly carried away by endless streams and circuits of simulation while our physical bodies, critical faculties, and independent consciousness are in a state of indefinite suspension.

The loss of the phenomenological world as it is being reconfigured in virtual dimensions, in visual media, in the pixels and algorithms of cyberspace, may not necessarily present a death to be mourned or resisted. It could, on the contrary, be utilized as a generative gateway from which to explore the meaning and implications of the disappearance of the "real" into the simulated, and the disintegration of the subject into its projected reproduction. An example of such an exploratory route, as this project suggests, is the centering of human imagination as a tool of critical inquiry. As one of the remaining human traits that machines, as of yet, cannot simulate, imagination pushes against the predictable, repetitious, formulaic constraints of prescribed method. Countering the increasingly systematized, standardized modes of knowledge production, engaging in open interpretation, speculation, and close narration allows for the particularity of alterity to emerge as a presence that is suggestive rather than ascertained, dynamic rather than fixed, questioning rather than resolved. As such,

open-ended narratives can point to new epistemologies that move away from attempts to know and master the other, enlarging the scope of inquiry to include multiple possibilities not only for certain groups of people, but for the human species as a whole, its place, role, and function on a rapidly transforming planet.

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