

Agencies of Abjection: Jean Genet and Subaltern Socialities

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the concept of *agential abjection* through Jean Genet's involvement with and writings about the struggles of disenfranchised and pathologized peoples. Following Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler has argued that modern subjectivity requires the production of a domain of abjected beings denied subjecthood and forced to live "unlivable" lives. "Agencies of Abjection" brings these feminist theories of abjection to bear on multiple coordinates of social difference by exploring forms of abjection linked to sexuality, criminality, colonialism, and racialization. Situating Genet within an archive that includes the writings of former inmates of penal colonies, Francophone intellectuals, and Black Panther Party members, I analyze both the historical forces that produce abjection and the collective forms of agency that emerge from subaltern social forms. I find that the abjected are often able to elaborate impure, perverse, and contingent forms of agency from within the very institutions and discourses that would deny them subjecthood.

"Agencies of Abjection" carefully situates Genet's writing within the discursive fields in which it intervenes, including that of the memoirs and testimonies of former inmates of the boys' penal colonies, of Francophone decolonizing poets and intellectuals, and of Black Panther prison writings. This method illuminates subaltern genealogies of thought on the problems of abjection, subjection, and subaltern agency so central to Genet's writing. By charting the twists and turns between Genet's writing and that of other subaltern writers of abjection, "Agencies of Abjection" reads Genet as a thinker continually involved in a process of exchange, intervention, borrowing, and revision

concerning the specific histories and experiences of social abjection.

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Introduction.

Nigel Williams – *Imagine that we were to meet the writer Jean Genet himself. Would we be meeting the real Genet?*

Jean Genet – *Is there a fake going around? Is there a fake Genet out there? Am I the real one? You're asking if I'm the real one. So where's the fake?*

N.W. – *Yes, I understand.*

J.G. – *Perhaps after all, I am an imposter who has never written a book. Perhaps I'm a fake Genet, as you say.*¹

In the above extract from a televised 1985 BBC interview, Nigel Williams distinguishes between "the writer Jean Genet," whom viewers presumably know through his work, and "the real Genet," whom the interview's function is to reveal to the viewing public. Genet's disingenuous question, "[i]s there a fake going around?" both pokes fun at and refuses Williams's desire to discover his extra-literary truth. In his falsely conciliatory response, "[p]erhaps I'm a fake Genet, as you say," Genet thoroughly violates the interview contract: for BBC to interview a Genet imposter rather than the "true Genet" would be both scandalous and absurd, delivering viewers a simulacra in the place of the authentic.

Genet's evident pleasure in upsetting the interview contract by pretending to impersonate himself recalls a series of moments in his literary works: in his 1943 novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*), when police barging into an apartment are disconcerted to discover a mannequin rather than a corpse; in his 1956 play, *The*

¹ "Nigel Williams – Imaginons que nous rencontrions l'écrivain Jean Genet lui-même. Est-ce que c'est le vrai Genet que nous rencontrons ? Jean Genet – Est-ce qu'il y a un faux qui circule ? Est-ce qu'il y a un faux Genet à travers le monde ? Est-ce que je suis le vrai ? Vous me demandez si je suis le vrai. Où est le faux alors ? N.W. – Oui, je comprends. J.G. – Peut-être après tout suis-je un imposteur qui n'a jamais écrit de livre. Peut-être suis-je un faux Genet, comme vous dites," Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 302.

Balcony (Le Balcon), when the brothel client dressed as the Bishop worries aloud that a sinner's sins might be invented rather than real; and in his 1958 play *The Blacks (Les Nègres)*, when it is revealed that the coffin at center stage allegedly holding the corpse of the woman whom "the blacks" are on trial for having murdered might actually be empty.² In each of these examples, the imposture of a false crime in the place of a real one perturbs a scene of judgment, parodying both the Catholic and the modern judicial conceptions of a guilty conscience that can be made to confess itself and can thereby be rendered legible to power. If both the crime and the confession are simulacra, then how can power pretend to know and to discipline the guilty conscience? Genet's resistance to the scene of the interview through the invocation of imposture should flag to us that he saw the interview as yet another scene of crime, interrogation, and judgment. Indeed, later in the interview, Genet accuses Williams of behaving like a cop, complaining, "you continue to interrogate me exactly as the thief that I was thirty years ago was interrogated by policemen, by a squad of policemen."³

In this BBC interview, conducted in 1985, one year before Genet's death, Williams had no intention to put Genet on trial for his past crimes. Rather, his "interrogation" was driven by a desire to know and to understand the biographical motivations, the personal development, and the philosophical world-view that could lend Genet's scandalously heteroclitic *oeuvre* coherence within the arc of a life narrative. Genet, however, had good reason to be suspicious of such a knowledge practice. If he

² Publication dates refer to the first published French edition of Genet's works, and not to the English translation.

³ "vous continuez à m'interroger exactement comme le voleur que j'étais il y a trente ans était

learned, early on, to associate such attempts to sound his deep truth with juridical trials and psychiatric examinations which would determine whether he would go free, be institutionalized in a mental asylum, or go to prison, he would later find that his very validity as an author depended on more redemptive interpretations of his biography.

It is no accident that the first volume of Genet's *Oeuvres complètes* consists not of Genet's own work, but of Jean-Paul Sartre's monumental existentialist biography of him, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (*Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*), published in 1952, when Genet was in his early forties and was understood to still have a productive literary career ahead of him.⁴ For a controversial young writer like Genet, decried by his opponents as a homosexual pornographer and a common criminal, to become generally accepted as an *author* required his premature canonization by the legitimating genres of the biography and the complete works. The fact that Genet's complete works opens with Sartre's biography of him is suggestive of the way in which Genet's palatability as an author depended on Sartre's ability to assimilate all that remained dubious about Genet by constructing a coherent life narrative with the redeeming search for existential freedom through writing as its edifying theme. *Saint Genet* undertakes, through nearly 700 pages, a rigorous, synthetic dialectical explanation of Genet's life and work according to Sartre's central concern with existential freedom. Its length is explained by the challenge of using Genet for this project: as a foster child, thief, prisoner, and a "passive" homosexual, Genet's situation, according to Sartre, was consistently one of

interrogé par des policiers, par une escouade de policiers," Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 305.

⁴ See Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).

constraint and inauthenticity (primary dependence on the other) rather than of virile existential freedom. By arguing that, through his writing, Genet was able to resolve his contradictions and to attain existential freedom, Sartre both redeems Genet of his ignominious past and resuscitates that past as the emblem of what Genet has overcome.

Genet was quite cognizant of his utility for Sartre. As he perceptively observed, "I am the illustration of one of his theories of freedom."⁵ Genet crankily and contradictorily claimed that he never read *Saint Genet*, that he nearly burned the manuscript, that he found it incredibly boring, and that it plunged him into a deep depression and a six-year writer's block.⁶ In one interview, he tellingly reports reacting with "[a] sort of disgust – because I saw myself naked and stripped by someone other than myself. In all of my books, I strip myself, and at the same time, I disguise myself [*je me travestis*] with words, with choices, with enchantment [*la féerie*]. I arrange things so as to not come out too damaged."⁷ Genet's expression of his dislike of being "stripped" and subject to someone else's representation of him is indicative of his awareness of the disciplinary effects of exposure and interpretation. His description of his own writing as a sheltering form of drag, on the other hand, is suggestive of its knowing manipulation of literary conventions of self-representation "so as to not come out too damaged."

⁵ "Je suis l'illustration d'une de ses théories de la liberté," Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 21.

⁶ The myth that Saint Genet plunged Genet into a six-year period of literary sterility has another permutation in the myth that he wrote no significant pieces of prose fiction between the 1949 publication of *Journal d'un voleur* and the 1986 posthumous publication of *Un captif amoureux*, or that Genet quit writing to become an activist after his 1961 play *Les Paravents*, dramatically "returning" to writing with *Un captif*. Genet himself was often the source of these myths.

⁷ "Une espèce de dégoût – parce que je me suis vu nu et dénudé par quelqu'un d'autre que moi. Dans tous mes livres, je me mets nu et en même temps je me travestis par des mots, des choix, des attitudes, par la féerie. Je m'arrange pour ne pas être trop endommagé," Genet, *L'Ennemi*

Genet's use of the confessional voice in his novels to stylize his biography and to blur the border between fact and fiction, like his practice of forging his own manuscripts to make extra cash, registers his resistance to the fetishization, particularly in the case of subaltern writing, of the authentic, the original, and the autobiographical. Genet's ambivalence about *Saint Genet* –which begins the unfortunate trend, in Genet criticism, of reading Genet's early novels as if they were autobiographic, then using them to either exonerate or condemn their author – might, then, reflect his discountenance at finding himself caught, analyzed, and judged through the very works that seek to confound such attempts at biographical understanding.

Such an awareness of the stakes of self-representation, I would argue, was first developed in Genet's encounters with disciplinary institutions. In 1943, Genet was arrested for stealing a rare edition of Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. Having already undergone numerous convictions for theft, Genet was eligible for a life conviction if the sentence pronounced was in excess of three months. Cocteau famously appeared at the trial, where his letter comparing Genet to Arthur Rimbaud was read aloud. It is likely, however, that Genet's psychiatric evaluation was as significant for the outcome of the trial as Cocteau's support. This examination was critical, for to be pronounced sane could have meant full responsibility and a life conviction, but to be pronounced insane could have resulted in institutionalization in an asylum for the criminally insane. From their study of Dr. Henri Claude's transcription of Genet's psychiatric evaluation, Stewart and McGregor argue that Genet was able to win the doctor's sympathy by portraying

himself in line with two Romantic literary myths, that of the pre- rather than amoral "noble savage" and that of vagabond poet in search of "absolute freedom."⁸ Anyone moderately familiar with Genet's novels is aware that their analyses of disciplinarity and their perverse forms of morality go far beyond these comparatively anodyne Romantic ideals. Genet's performance of an easily digestible and already canonized form of literary non-conformity, however, was based on an accurate assessment of its audience. Recognizing in Genet both the merits and the faults of a great artist, Dr. Claude pronounced Genet morally blind, but not insane, attenuating his responsibility for his crime. As a result, Genet was sentenced to exactly three months in prison, one day shy of what would have meant a life conviction. No mere literary game, Genet's ability to clothe himself in myth allowed him to counter disciplinary institutions' pretensions to know, understand, and judge his deep truth.

Genet's liberation from prison, however, was contingent on his transfer to another institution: that of the French literary canon. In 1948, Cocteau and Sartre successfully petitioned François Mitterand to grant Genet a presidential pardon. The letter with which they open the petition inscribes Genet in a tradition of great French poet-criminals such as François Villon and Paul Verlaine. Ultimately however, Cocteau and Sartre argue that "[a]ll of Jean Genet's work tears him away from a past of glaring misdeeds," and beg Mitterand "to save a man whose entire life will now be devoted only to work."⁹ Genet's inclusion in a national canon of great literary criminals renders his

⁸ Harry E. Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor, "Jean Genet's Psychiatric Examination in 1943," *The French Review* 62, no. 5 (April 1989): 798.

⁹ Quoted in Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 335.

criminality newly legible as a sign of his genius. At the same time, his literary work is presented as an assurance that he will never again commit a crime, redeeming him for both French society and France's national literary culture. Genet's 1948 presidential pardon establishes his paradoxical position as, in Scott Durham's words, "an officially sanctioned representative of marginality within French literature."¹⁰ It also inaugurates what will become the prevalent reading of Genet within literary criticism:

On the one hand, his criminal case history will be invoked as the emblem of the authenticity of his work, and the marginal experience that it represents. On the other, literature will appear not only as what recuperates that experience as an object of aesthetic value, but also as what redeems the criminal himself, transforming him into a productive citizen of the republic of letters.¹¹

In the cases of both Genet's 1943 trial and his 1948 presidential pardon, literature was invoked as Genet's new institution, saving him from life imprisonment and assuring his lawful future as a man of letters. The literality of Genet's institutional transfer from prison to literature is strikingly rendered by Genet's use of his publishing house, Gallimard, both as his official place of residence and as his "bank," to which he would regularly turn for cash advances in lieu of a bank proper.¹²

From the 1943 clandestine circulation, with no mention of a publisher, of his first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, as literary pornography among a coterie of homosexual men,¹³ to the 1964 United States Supreme Court ruling of his short film, *A Song of Love*

¹⁰ Scott Durham, "Editor's Preface: In the Language of the Enemy," *Genet: In the Language of the Enemy*. Spec. Issue of *Yale French Studies*, no. 91 (1997): 1.

¹¹ Durham, "Editor's Preface," 1.

¹² Tax officials finally forced Genet to open a bank account in 1980. See White, *Genet*, 602.

¹³ As Edmund White has documented, the first copies of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* were printed by Paul Morihien and Robert Denoël in 1943 and sold to a list of wealthy homosexuals. The publisher was not listed, rather, the books were said to be printed "at the expense of a friend," the

(*Un chant d'amour*) (1950), as obscene, to the riots protesting the 1966 Paris opening of his anticolonial play, *The Screens* (*Les Paravents*), not to mention his later support of The Black Panther Party, the German terrorist Red Army Faction, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Genet's career would be punctuated with scandal. In Genet criticism, Genet's aura of controversy has manifested itself in the way in which his texts have lent themselves to radically dissimilar readings by contemporary critics standing at opposite poles of volatile political issues. With regards to his political sympathies, Genet has been celebrated by critics as illustrious as Edward Said and Felix Guattari as a champion of the oppressed of all nations¹⁴ and denounced, in works by Eric Marty and Ivan Jablonka, as an Anti-Semitic fascist sympathizer.¹⁵ In the debate on gay relationality, Didier Eribon has read Genet as following a trajectory from shame and solitude to gay pride and community,¹⁶ while Leo Bersani has argued that his depictions

formula for erotic books, and Monaco was falsely given as the place of publication. *Notre-Dame* would not be widely distributed until Marc Barbezat's publication of it in 1948. Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 232.

¹⁴ See Edward Said, "On Jean Genet's Late Works," in *Imperialism and Theater: Essays on World Theater, Drama and Performance*. Ed. J. Ellen Gainor (London: Routledge, 1995); Jérôme Neutres, *Genet sur les routes du Sud* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); and Felix Guattari, "Genet retrouvé," *Jean Genet et la Palestine*, Spec. issue of *Revue d'études palestiniennes* (Spring 1997): 49-64.

¹⁵ See Eric Marty, *Bref séjour à Jérusalem* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); and *Jean Genet, post-scriptum* (Paris: Verdier, 2006); and Ivan Jablonka, *Les vérités inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004). Marty and Jablonka's willingness to investigate the thorny issue of Genet's antisemitism, going against the current French Left celebratory consensus on Genet, is commendable. Marty's reading, however, is flawed by his will to fit Genet's antisemitism into a rigorous metaphysical system, in which Genet's homosexuality, and his support of the Black Panther Party and the Palestinian Liberation Organization all appear overdetermined. Marty's lack of reflection on what it might mean to unequivocally equate the latter with antisemitism, fascism, and an authoritarian love of raw power is intensely disappointing. Jablonka's reading suffers from the same structuralist conceits, but from the perspective of sociological rather than metaphysical determinism.

¹⁶ See Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un thème de Jean Genet* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

of anal sex mythically symbolize "the antirelationality inherent in all homoness."¹⁷ One peculiarity of Genet's work might be the way in which, in its ambiguous political orientation and its density of signification, it flashes with seductive overinterpretability, even as it refuses to be captured by any single critical, political, or ethical position. This, according to Scott Durham, is the "permanent scandal" of Genet's work, whose paradoxical attraction derives "from its irreducible heterogeneity and extraterritoriality, from its continual betrayal of our desires to domesticate or contain it within the limits of any given generic, discursive, or institutional space."¹⁸ If, according to his biographer, Edmund White, Genet's reflex was to throw policing inquiries off his tracks by fudging the most insignificant facts about his life, perhaps his literary style too, is meant to elude disciplinary and falsely synthetic readings.

To an interviewer who asked him why he chose to write in classical high literary French rather than in argot, Genet responded,

what I had to say to the enemy had to be said in his language, not in the foreign language of argot. Only a Céline could do that. It took a doctor of the poor, Bardamu, to dare to write in argot. [...] The convict that I was couldn't do that. I had to address myself, in his language precisely, to the torturer.¹⁹

Genet's response captures his paradoxical position with regards to French literature. On the one hand, he portrays himself as a sort of canonized enemy of the state, figuring his position as that of the convict speaking back to his torturers. On the other hand, he

¹⁷ Leo Bersani, "The Gay Outlaw," *Diacritics* 24, no. 2/3 (Autumn 1994): 10.

¹⁸ Durham, "Editor's Preface," 5.

¹⁹ "ce que j'avais à dire à l'ennemi, il fallait le dire dans sa langue, pas dans la langue étrangère qu'aurait été l'argot. Seul un Céline pouvait le faire. Il fallait un docteur, médecin des pauvres, Bardamu, pour oser écrire l'argot. [...] Le détenu que j'étais ne pouvait faire cela. Il fallait que je m'adresse, dans sa langue justement, au tortionnaire," Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 229. Genet

astutely observes that precisely because he is an ex-convict, he cannot engage in the sort of modernist linguistic experimentation and explosion of the French language through slang as someone like Céline, a bourgeois doctor by profession. As an enemy of France speaking from within one of its most exemplary institutions, the French literary canon, in its most treasured patrimony, classical French, Genet's relation to French literature might be likened to his relation, as a prisoner, to the institution of the prison. Neither institution permits complete freedom, authentic self-expression, or radical exteriority. Rather, intimately formed by these institutions, Genet would nevertheless labor to manipulate and to corrupt their disciplinary technologies, to expose their contradictions, and to negotiate a delicate balance between compliance and resistance. Genet might be understood as an expert, by necessity, of working within disciplinary institutions while attempting to evade the saturating effects of their subjection. This accounts for his elusiveness as an author and a thinker: failing either to be entirely complicit with disciplinary norms or to successfully resist them, Genet is subjectified by the very institutions that he struggles to corrupt.

My use of the terms *subjectivation* borrows from work by Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Judith Butler on the process by which a being is made an agential subject in and through power.²⁰ This process is double-edged and ambivalent, for in becoming a subject *of* power, one is also subject *to* power, one's very agency predicated on one's

conflates Bardamu, the protagonist of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, with Céline himself.

²⁰ See especially Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186; and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

subjectivation by a range of disciplinary technologies. In this understanding, one can never be fully free of the conditions of one's constitution as a subject. While some have critiqued such theories of subjectivation for destroying the possibility of individual agency, both Butler and Foucault have at times sought to emphasize the range of ways in which, at the point of its rearticulation in a subject, disciplinary power might spawn unintended consequences. Locating agency not in the sovereign subject's accomplishment of an intended aim, but rather, in her or his production of a consequence *unintended* by power, Butler proposes a definition of agency, inspired by Foucault, that does away with the need for a fully intentional, sovereign subject: "agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs."²¹ As a product of institutional life (much of Genet's early writing was carried out in prison) whose subject is, precisely, institutional life, Genet's writing might have much to tell us about the unexpected modes of agency produced in and through institutional power.

As a writer, however, Genet is concerned not only with institutions and their unintended consequences, but, more centrally, with the *subjectivities* of those whose lives are devalued and whose very humanity is put into question by institutionalized processes of social abjection. Julia Kristeva has defined the *abject* – from the Latin *abjicere*, to cast away – as that which toes the line between life and death, self and not-

²¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 15.

self, threatening the subject with dissolution.²² As neither subject nor object, but that which terrifyingly and sickeningly undoes the distinction between the two, shit and corpses are two classic examples of the abject. Judith Butler has taken up Kristeva's psychoanalytically inspired insights to argue that both subjectivity and sociality are constituted by the production of an abject zone *within* sociality, inhabited by beings denied recognition as subjects and forced to live "unlivable" lives.²³ While Butler's emphasis on the social forces that produce abjection is certainly salutary, it does make it difficult to imagine the abject not only as subjectivity's constitutive outside, but also as psychically complex agential beings in their own right. Though the abject might be *figured* and *fantasized* as threats to subjectivity itself, they nevertheless *persist*, as Butler herself has noted in her more recent work, in living, in feeling, in constituting their own socialities, and in circulating alternative modes of recognition.²⁴ Genet's writerly concern with the psychic and affective lives, the agencies, and the socialities of abjection constitutes a valuable theorization of abjection *from the position of the abject*.

One might argue, however, that the term "abjection," with its connotation of radical social exclusion, is better understood as belonging to an older regime of force eclipsed by modern disciplinary power, whose aim is not to exclude, kill, and abject, but to reform, discipline, and render newly productive. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault

²² See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1980).

²³ Identifying psychoanalytic abjection as that which threatens the subject with dissolution, Butler proposes "that certain abject zones within sociality also deliver this threat, constituting zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution ('I would rather die than do or be that!')" Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 243, note 2.

²⁴ See in particular Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

chronicles the significant shift between the premodern social exclusion of the mad, who, in the fifteenth century, were literally sent to sea on what was referred to as the "ship of fools," and the seventeenth century "Great Confinement" of the mad in institutions for a hodgepodge of social outcasts.²⁵ *Discipline and Punish* continues to trace this genealogy, showing how this shift from expulsion to confinement was followed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the development of differentiated disciplinary institutions whose aim was neither merely to exclude nor to confine, but to train, to reform, and to subjectivate.²⁶ As examples of a modern *productive* rather than repressive mode of power, psychiatry, penology, and criminology are arguably about classifying, producing, and managing social deviance, not about abjecting deviants.

I would argue, however, that social abjection has not been eclipsed by disciplinary power; rather, it functions in concert with disciplinary power, but on a distinct analytic plane. Foucault himself has often taken pains to qualify his claims about the emergence of new technologies of power by emphasizing that they do not so much supercede older technologies as incorporate or rechannel them.²⁷ If, as Foucault has argued, disciplinary power works paradigmatically through control of the precise series of motions to be accomplished within a grid of abstract space and time, abjection might be said to work primarily on the social imaginary. Whereas disciplinary power

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965).

²⁶ Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*.

²⁷ For instance, Foucault argues that rather than replacing the older regime of alliance, the emerging technology of sexuality latched onto it through the interchange of the family. See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 142-147.

ideally produces normalized workers, students, and inmates, abjection flickers at the edges of these normalized subjects, menacing them with the threats of disintegration and inhumanity if they should stray from disciplinary norms. Discipline and abjection often work in tandem: the abjection of certain criminal, deviant, and racialized beings has made them available for dangerous and abusive experiments in psychiatry, penology, science, and education that would have been unthinkable if carried out on "normal" subjects. Furthermore, as I argue in some of the following chapters, the shadow of abjection helps incite those on the bottom of social hierarchies of class, imperial geography, race, and sexuality to willingly espouse disciplinary and normalizing practices so as not to be confused with the "truly" abject. Both for those whose lives are spent attempting to defuse the abjection associated with a social category to which they belong and for those who cannot escape abjection's shadow, disciplinary power reinforces rather than superseding the powers of abjection.

This dissertation will read Genet in his engagement with forms of social abjection linked to sexuality, criminality, colonialism, and racialization. While "abjection" has been a major theme in Genet criticism ever since the publication of Sartre's *Saint Genet*, this dissertation departs from most studies of abjection in Genet's writing by focusing on the historical forces that produce distinct forms of social abjection, and the sometimes treacherous bridges between them.²⁸ Though Genet most often explores the psychic and

²⁸ For less historically and institutionally grounded readings of abjection in Genet, see Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le mal: Emily Bronte, Baudelaire, Michelet, Blake, Sade, Proust, Kafka, Genet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957); Eribon, *Morale du minoritaire*; and David Houston Jones, *The Body Abject: Self and Text in Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000).

affective lives of those who live under the shadow of abjection, his interest in the ambivalent attachment of the oppressed to the very institutions, discourses, and social values responsible for subordinating them also makes him a thinker of forms of subjectivation. Genet's analyses of abjection are always, at the same time, theories of subjectivation that open into the alternative modes of agency elaborated by those participating in subaltern socialities. The continual articulation of these questions in Genet's writing is exemplified by a long meditation on imprisonment from his 1946 novel, *Miracle of the Rose* (*Miracle de la rose*). In this passage, the imprisoned narrator first evokes the replication of the disciplinary spaces of the prison within his body: "the prison is in me, composed of the cells of my tissues."²⁹ It is not only his body, however, but also, and perhaps especially, the "secret domain" of his innermost soul that is revealed to be the product of disciplinary technologies. The narrator writes, "I do not live a single moment on earth that I do not live, at the same time, in *my secret domain*, which is probably similar to that inhabited by the convicts who are being punished, walking round and round, their heads bent or their eyes staring straight ahead."³⁰ Anticipating Foucault's famous aphorism from *Discipline and Punish* that "[t]he soul is the effect and instrument of political anatomy; *the soul is the prison of the body*," the narrator reflects on how his innermost soul, to which he retreats from the rigors of prison life, itself evokes the space in which punished prisoners walk silently in a circle,

²⁹ "la prison est en moi-même, composée des cellules de mes tissus," Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 43.

³⁰ "je ne vis pas un seul moment sur terre qu'en même temps je ne le vive dans *mon domaine secreete* pareil probablement à celui qu'habitent les punis qui tournent, la tête baissée ou les yeux fixés devant soi, à la salle de discipline," Genet, *Miracle*, 45, my emphasis.

and is perhaps even a product of it.³¹ Thoroughly subjectivated by the technologies of the prison, the narrator is, nevertheless, abject. The form of social death to which he is consigned results simultaneously from his exclusion from the daily routines, interactions, and liberties of free citizenry and his easy integration into the social forms of the prison, where he is reunited with old friends and enemies:

with them, I discover such precise ties, rapports of interest, of friendship, or of hatred, that, sensing that I am so close to participating in this world, I am horrified to know that I am excluded from the other, from yours, just as I was conquering the qualities thanks to which one might live there. *I am thus dead.*³²

Abjection, here, is more than a state of dehumanized social death; for the abject's exclusion from the social body is completed by his or her integration into a subaltern sociality. In Genet's writing, the social death of abjection is matched by the spectral life-in-death of subaltern socialities, sites both of painful exclusion and of the elaboration of alternative modes of agency.

Genet's cultural context, unlike that of the majority of mostly middle to upper-class French authors, is as much that of a series of disciplinary institutions and subaltern socialities as it is that of the French literary tradition. One way to write a Genet monograph would be to chronicle Genet's friendship and rivalry with French intellectuals like Sartre and Cocteau and to trace the continuities of his writing with that of other great twentieth-century French authors, many of them also homosexual, such as

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 30, my emphasis.

³² "avec eux, je me découvre de si exacts liens, rapports qui sont d'intérêt d'amitié ou de haine, que, me sentant de si près participer à ce monde, j'ai l'horreur de me savoir exclu de l'autre, le vôtre, au moment même que je conquérais les qualités grâce auxquelles on peut y vivre. *Je suis donc mort,*" Genet, *Miracle*, 44, my emphasis.

Proust, Celine, and Gide, as well as with certain "forefathers," such as Rimbaud and Villon, while highlighting Genet's significant subcultural *difference*. In keeping with Durham's account of Genet's paradoxical status as the internalized outsider within French literature, such a monograph would make reference to Genet's marginality in order to authenticate his writing of deviance while locating his "true" context firmly within the French canon. Genet's difference – and the difference of the homosexual and criminal subcultures to which it metonymically refers – would become legible only as a *difference from* the writings of other canonized French authors and as a *gesture towards* an authenticating outside.

This dissertation proceeds differently, bringing the outside in by taking seriously the specificity of Genet's institutional, discursive, and subcultural contexts. Its method is that of a *deep recontextualization*, resituating Genet's writing within some of the discursive fields in which it intervenes, including that of the memoirs and testimonies of former inmates of the boy's penal colonies, of Francophone decolonizing poets and intellectuals, and of Black Panther prison writings and political analyses. Reading Genet in these novel discursive contexts illuminates subaltern genealogies of thought on precisely the problems of abjection, subjection, and subaltern agency so central to Genet's writing. For it was not only Genet, but entire social categories of people – including criminals, sexual deviants, the colonized, and the racialized – that are forced to live in abjection, to struggle with its painful psychic life, and to produce, for their survival, alternative social and cultural forms. By following the twists and turns

between Genet's writing and that of other subaltern writers of abjection, this dissertation reads Genet not as a representative of Marginality within the French canon, but as a thinker continually involved, along with other subaltern writers, in a process of exchange, intervention, borrowing, and revision concerning the multiform specifics of the experience of social abjection.

A central tenant of this dissertation is that theoretical insights are necessarily transformed by sustained engagement with subaltern social forms. Much contemporary critical theory is centrally concerned with *domination*, analyzing the series of institutions, technologies, and discourses that form docile, productive, normative subjects. Within such theories, the production of abnormal, abject, or deviant subjects is figured either as an essential cog in the functioning of power or as power's hopeful, though unpredictable, side-effect. Studying subaltern socialities, on the other hand, requires not only theorizing processes of abjection and subjectivation, but also conceptualizing the forms of *resubjection* and *alternative agency* that the abject must innovate in order to *survive* abjection. In the following pages, I will briefly touch on this dissertation's primary theoretical interventions, noting in each case how critical theories are transformed by their recontextualization within subaltern socialities.

Foucault is one theorist whose work has moved from a focus on the technologies of domination to a concern with the means of *resubjection* through which, by laboring on the conditions of their subjection, subjects might subjectify themselves differently. In his late Collège de France lectures and in the second and third volumes of his *History of*

Sexuality, Foucault identifies *ascesis*, which he defines as "a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self on the self, a progressive transformation of the self on the self for which one is oneself responsible in a long labor," as one historically specific practice of resubjectivation.³³ Foucault's late work has been critiqued for its alleged adherence to a liberal model of autonomy and free choice, its presumption that it is possible to remake ourselves exactly as we wish, and its dismissal of the saturating effects of discipline, normalization, and sedimented historicity that his early work so influentially analyzed. I find it more enabling, however, to read the recursive structure of Foucault's definition of *ascesis* – in which a self turns on itself to work on itself, elaborate itself, and transform itself – as an implicit acknowledgement that of the internal limitations of projects of self-transformation. *Ascesis* is a form of *labor* precisely because it must systematically transform the entrenched dispositions, the sedimented attitudes, and the reiterated habits that constitute "the self." Moreover, if "the self" that does the transforming shares the same disciplinary history of "the self" that is transformed, then *ascesis* must be seen as a *doubly* constrained work on the conditions of one's subjectivation. *Ascesis* is most productively understood not as limitless freedom, but as an inquiry into the types of labor, or what Foucault calls the "technologies of the self" through which one can work on the conditions of one's subjectivation to subjectify oneself differently.

³³ "un travail de soi sur soi, une élaboration de soi sur soi, une transformation progressive de soi sur soi dont on est soi-même responsable dans un long labeur qui est celui de l'ascèse," Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001), 17. See also Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); and Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi*, ed. Gros (Paris: Gallimard,

While Foucault's historical subject of ascesis is the freeborn Greek man – an elite sliver of a very unequal social order – in the second section of Chapter 2, I recontextualize practices of ascesis within the criminal and queer subcultures of Genet's novels, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943) and *The Thief's Journal* (*Journal d'un voleur*) (1949). In these novels, the most abjected of social subjects are depicted as paradoxically *forced* to engage in ascesis, refiguring the conditions of their subjectivation to produce renewed possibilities for agency. Following the peregrinations of the central character of Genet's first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, the country boy turned Parisian camp queen, Culafroy/Divine, I begin to enumerate the multiple forms of the ascesis of the abject, which are improvised in traumatic moments of debasement, elaborated in the long boredoms of imprisonment, and collectively innovated through the queer cultural genre of camp. I argue, furthermore, that as a queer hero(ine) hailing from before the era of gay liberation, Culafroy/Divine can help us understand ascesis as a transformative motor powering queer genders and cultural forms prior to a post-Stonewall politics of gay pride and identity.

In the 1981 interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life" ("L'amitié comme mode de vie"), Foucault seizes on male friendship, sexual or not, as a site overlooked by modern power and, therefore, as potentially productive of uncontainable intensities, uninstitutionalized inventiveness, and movements of resistance. Notably, Foucault evokes the absolute lack of a blueprint or cultural discourse for a friendship between an older and a younger man:

1984).

Two men of a notably different age, what code will they have to communicate? They are face to face without arms, without conventional words, with nothing to reassure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent from A to Z a still formless relation, which is friendship.³⁴

This dissertation is, in part, inspired by Foucault's attentiveness to alternative socialities as potential sites for the invention of something unintended by power. I must disagree, however, with Foucault's production of modern male friendship as outside of both discourse and institutionality. Whereas Foucault contends that contemporary male friendship has left hardly a trace in writing, I uncover, in Chapter 1, a vast popular discourse, elaborated through boy's pulp fiction genres in France, on friendship between an older and a younger boy. Through a study of the memoirs and testimonies of former inmates of the boy's penal colonies, I trace a convergence between this popular discourse on male friendship and the institutional aims of boy's penal colonies and organizations such as the Boy Scouts, which sought to build, from male friendships, attachments to hierarchy and authority. I also focus on the mirroring, in these testimonies and memoirs, of "noble" male friendship and ignoble pederasty. In French, "la pédérastie," though it is often informally used to signify male homosexuality in general, refers properly to a form of male homosexuality involving a differential of age, power, and experience, in which, paradigmatically, the elder partner is the more dominant and more "masculine" sexual penetrator. The first part of Chapter 2, which focuses on

³⁴ Deux hommes d'âge notablement différent, que code auront-ils pour communiquer? Ils sont l'un en face de l'autre sans arme, sans mots convenus, sans rien qui les rassure sur le sens du mouvement qui les porte l'un vers l'autre. Ils ont à inventer de A à Z une relation encore sans forme, et qui est l'amitié," Michel Foucault, "L'amitié comme mode de vie" in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 983.

Genet's memoir-novel of his youth at the boy's penal colony of Mettray, *Miracle of the Rose*, identifies "pederastic education" as an overarching discourse comprising both a normative version of homophobic male friendship between an older and a younger boy and a sexual method of schooling masculinities. I theorize male friendship in the boys' penal colonies as a perversion of institutional aims productive of masculine trajectories other than that of heterofamilial normalization.

The pederastic subcultures of the boy's penal colonies – which produced patriarchal "heads of households," heterosexual but nonfamilial pimps, tough pederastic tops who successfully "graduated" from their erstwhile status as bottoms, and despised fairies ("*les lopes*") considered pederastic bottoms for life – throw a wrench into theorizations of binary gender. The first section of Chapter 2 both engages and expands on Butler's account of melancholy gender to read Genet's memoir-novel on his youth at Mettray, *Miracle of the Rose*, as a theorization of alternative modes of gender formation within the boy's penal colonies. In "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," Butler reads rigid heterosexual gender identifications as the product of a radical foreclosure of same-sex love and loss.³⁵ Rewriting Freud's theory of melancholia, she proposes that the disavowed and unmourned loss of same-sex love is melancholically incorporated and "acted-out" to become the basis of gender performativity. Butler's focus on the dominant production of rigid binary gender identifications, however, threatens to obscure the alternative modes of gender formation elaborated in subaltern sites. In the context of the

³⁵ See Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-150.

pederastic subcultures of the boy's penal colonies, in which same-sex love, far from being prohibited, is a requisite *enticement to virility* for pederasts and for heterosexuals alike, I argue that gender formation has a different relation to loss, memory, and temporality. I turn to Derrida's concept of *spectrality* to describe the alternative masculinity of the pederastic top in *Miracle*, who remains haunted and fissured by his memories of adolescent bottoming.³⁶ However, whereas for Derrida, spectrality constitutes a supremely *ethical* attitude to the past, Genet shows infinite *spectral mourning* to be the ambivalent product of the lack of a publicly recognized way to mourn the pederastic subcultures of the boy's penal colonies.³⁷

Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," has been extremely generative for contemporary thinkers seeking to describe the psychic, ethical, and political valences of various forms of loss.³⁸ In Chapter 3, I rethink the Francophone Négritude poetic movement as part of an anti-colonial genealogy of critical thought on a structure of feeling that I identify as racial melancholia.³⁹ Both colonized and African diasporic writers have described the damaging effects of colonialism's racial hierarchies on the

³⁶ I develop my account of spectral mourning from Derrida's writing on spectrality in Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

³⁷ This interest in the uneven availability of public forms of mourning is indebted to Butler's work in "Melancholy Gender".

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 247-267.

³⁹ See Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2003); David L. Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," *Feminisms at a Millennium*. Spec. issue of *Signs* 25, no. 4, (Summer 2000): 1275-1281; David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

psyches of the racialized, depicting the guilty, self-berating, and inadequate colonized psyche as racially divided against itself. Drawing from recent work by Ranjana Khanna, David Eng and Shinhee Han, and José Muñoz, I argue that such writings can productively be read as subaltern theorizations of racial melancholia. In sharp contrast to Freud's theorization of melancholia as personal pathology and of melancholic performance as involuntary and unconscious, these writers think racial melancholia as an historical product of colonial domination. Racial melancholia might therefore appear not as a permanent psychic pathology, but as a contingent state open to a range of transformative melancholic performances including, for Aimé Césaire, Négritude poetic expression, and, for Franz Fanon, revolutionary violence. Genet's 1958 play, *The Blacks*, contributes to this anticolonial genealogy by interrogating the potential political *futures* of what Freud has termed the "work" of melancholia. I argue that, in mobilizing the reality-effect produced by the presence of the embodied blackness of the cast acting out affect-dense race scripts before mostly white spectators, *The Blacks* toes the line between performance and performativity, seeking to provoke a transformation in the melancholic structures of feeling of decolonization era Paris.

Each of the above descriptions in some way betrays this project's pervasive interest in *affect*, not as a set of "natural" or "universal" feelings, but rather, as a series of historically and institutionally structured ways of emotionally apprehending the social world. Specifically, this dissertation probes the ways in which the colonial domination, U.S. anti-black racism, and both institutional and subcultural methods for schooling the

sentiments in the French boys' penal colonies produce subjects animated by specific "structures of feeling." My use of Raymond Williams's term "structures of feeling" seeks to evoke two particularly productive dimensions of Williams's understanding of affect.⁴⁰ It is motivated, first, by the sense, embedded in the term, that affect is not naturally occurring, but rather, significantly *structured* by historical, social, and cultural forces. As I show in Chapter 3, anticolonial intellectuals have long understood affect both as a product of history, and as a key site of political contestation and transformation. In Chapter 4, I both explore and critique how *Prisoner of Love (Un captif amoureux)* (1986), Genet's memoir of his period of political activism, understands the Black Panther Party's continuing legacy as that of the transformation of black American structures of feeling. Secondly, my use of the term seeks to revive Williams's understanding of structures of feeling as signals of *emergent* social and political changes. Williams writes, "structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available."⁴¹ As social experiences in solution, structures of feeling are more likely to express themselves in changing cultural practices than in fully systematized theories or hegemonic institutional forms. They demand that we rethink literature, performance, and other cultural practices as *affective archives* mapping cultural, social, and political transformations. The fact that something was once *emergent*, however, does not mean that historical circumstances actually allowed it to

⁴⁰ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.

⁴¹ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133-4.

emerge. I therefore read affective archives for what Ann Stoler has termed their "*arrested futures*" – those potentialities that once seemed imminent, but that, due to historical circumstances, bore no fruit.⁴² To become historians of *possibility* rather than only of actuality, we must restore the arrested futures of particular structures of feeling as tangible aspects of a history that might yet be reanimated with future possibility. Chapter 3 employs *The Blacks* to venture such a restoration of the arrested queer and feminist futures of the Négritude movement. Chapter 4's excavation of the buried history of the Black Panther Party also functions as a documentation of the some of the Party's arrested futures.

For all its theoretical, political, and historical interventions, this remains a dissertation in *literature* that reflects a preoccupation, honed in my literary training, with textuality, discursivity, and practices of reading. Each chapter differently enacts what I like to think of as a *queer reading practice*, one attentive to sites of active exclusion within a given discourse, to things mentioned but dismissed or denigrated, to persons denied membership in a collectivity or a putative majority, and to that which must be left behind for developmental and redemptive narratives to move forward. I call this reading practice "queer" firstly because, in many of my readings, it is precisely queer forms of gender and sexuality that are most likely to suffer such processes of discursive exclusion. In addition, I play on "queer"'s connotation of oddball, offbeat, and irregular to inspire a reading practice whose curiosity and attention is provoked precisely by the

⁴² Ann Stoler spoke of her concept of "arrested futures" in her graduate seminar, "The Logos and Pathos of Empire," at the Cornell School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY,

odd details and seemingly offhand asides that do not seem to "fit" within certain narratives, and that might therefore be indicative of a given text's particular politics of exclusion, abjection, and/or alternative possibility. Such a reading practice requires an attentiveness to the literary qualities of texts, including narrative form and genre as well as texture, detail, and particularity. I use the venerable method of literary close reading to attend to textual detail, to analyze the affective qualities of texts, and to identify disruptions of a particular narrative form and unexplained eruptions of difference. I employ more structural analyses to trace regularities across discrete texts and to induce the internal requirements and the constitutive exclusions of specific genres and discursive fields.

In Chapter 1, I employ such reading practices to reconstitute the discursive requirements, for the stigmatized former inmate, of giving a "truthful" narrative of the boy's penal colonies. Through readings of testimonies and memoirs of former inmates of the boy's penal colonies, I analyze the soldering of "truth" to the establishment of a normative masculinity, identifying what I term the "coming-to-virility" narrative as a typical way for such authors to establish both legitimacy and normative masculinity, even as I trace the queer exclusions constitutive of this narrative form. I read Genet's *Miracle of the Rose*, in Chapter 2, as both a mournful elaboration of the queer exclusions that these narratives operate, and as an alternative theorization of the *multiple* forms of masculinity schooled within the boy's penal colonies. *Miracle's* self-conscious staging of the gradual contamination of a "truthful" virile narrative of childhood by what it poses

as the "feminine" powers of fantasy, idealization, and enchantment both reflects critically on the gendered truth-values of narrative form and content, and creates a fictional space for the elaboration of things unsayable within a "truthful" discourse.

In my own reading, I strive to not commit the violences and the exclusions of interpretations that aspire to exhaustiveness, systematicity, and the ideal of linear development. I opened this introduction by chronicling the prevalence of such interpretations in Genet criticism, as well as some of Genet's reactions to their disciplining ambitions. Though my dissertation inevitably leaves out many dimensions of Genet's work that merit close and serious study, it does so as part of an ethical refusal of the temptations of exhaustiveness. Working against both depth and development models of identity, it seeks to follow a few of the moments of backtracking, the interruptions, the arrested futures, and the hauntings that must be left behind so that redemption narratives may march triumphantly forward. I put this method into practice in my very different readings of melancholia in Chapters 2 and 3. Against the idea that *either* melancholia *or* mourning is inherently the more ethical response to loss, I move from, in Chapter 2, sympathetically tracing the alternative masculinities produced by spectral mourning, as opposed to gender melancholia, in the boy's penal colonies, to, in Chapter 3, assenting to the political desire, expressed in *The Blacks*, to employ the "work" of melancholic performance to gradually "kill off" melancholic attachments to whiteness. For the project of deep recontextualization requires acknowledging that a reading that proves ethical or politically efficacious in one context may no longer do so in another. Whereas, in the contemporary context of what Paul Gilroy has referred to as

"postcolonial melancholia" – the persistence of the psychic life of colonial racism after the end of colonialism proper⁴³ – Chapter 3 seeks to revalue Négritude's conviction of the importance of transforming the psychic and affective lives of racism, Chapter 4 abruptly reverses this tactic, attempting to counter Genet's focus on the Panthers' cultural and affective politics of the image in *Prisoner of Love* by excavating the buried histories of Panther practices "on the ground." Disturbed by the comfortable way in which the Black Panther Party is rendered consumable within a certain racist imaginary precisely through the image of resistant, militant, virile blackness that it used to mobilize and to inspire black communities, I chose to both deemphasize and to recontextualize the Panthers' politics of racial affect.

Chapter 4 perhaps most fully practices non-linearity by employing a series of temporal movements. Chapter 4:

- Reverses the argument of Chapter 3 within a new political context, insisting on concrete aspects of Panther politics too easily obscured by their dazzling politics of the image.
- Refuses the teleological critical narrative in which anything untoward about race in Genet's early work is redeemed by his late anticolonial and anti-racist activist commitments by underlining the persistence of racial fantasy in his late memoir of his political activism, *Prisoner of Love*.
- Traces the deep recontextualization that Genet enacts when he carries the Panthers' political analyses of incarceration into a French imperial context, uncovering

⁴³ See Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Mettray's role in the what Ann Stoler has termed the "carceral archipelago of Empire"⁴⁴ in his unpublished film script, "The Language of the Wall" ("Le Langage de a muraille") (1981-2).

- Argues that Genet's critical return to his beloved penal colony of Mettray in "The Language of the Wall" partakes of the ethical project of genealogy. By researching Mettray's role in the projects of empire building, social control, and economic exploitation in the Mettray archives in Tours, Genet thoroughly revises his understanding of the institution that he considered both his metaphorical birthplace and the site of his founding myth.
- Holds that *both* Genet's racially problematic explorations of the Panthers "dazzling images" in *Prisoner of Love and* his excavation of the "buried histories" of their radical analyses of imprisonment in "The Language of the Wall" must be considered contradictory and partial legacies of his activism with the Black Panther Party.

The chapters that follow explore agencies of abjection through Genet's writings on subaltern socialities. They certainly do not exhaust the field of possible readings of that might emerge from studying other moments in Genet's life and writing. Rather, they employ the method of deep recontextualization to illuminate various nodes of connection between Genet's writing and subaltern forms of cultural expression. In so doing, they gesture towards the range of unsystematizable agencies of abjection that are improvised in situations of extreme psychic duress, eked out of hostile institutional and

⁴⁴ See Ann Laura Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 105-140.

discursive conditions, and emergent in the structures of feeling of subaltern cultural and the political movements.

Chapter 1. *Jeux de Vérité, Jeux de Virilité*: Truth and Masculinity in Narratives of the Boys' Penal Colonies

*Jean Genet has never been to Mettray. They must have told him about Mettray, which he romanticized [qu'il a romancé] to his liking to satisfy his homosexual fantasies.*¹

In the letter to the editor that concludes Raoul Léger's 1997 memoir of his childhood at the boys' penal colony of Mettray, *Memoirs of an Inmate 1922-1927* Léger indignantly points out various factual errors in Jean Genet's 1946 memoir-novel of Mettray, *Miracle of the Rose* (*Miracle de la rose*), before concluding, in the passage cited above, that *Miracle* is no memoir; it is a homo's wet dream. Tellingly, Léger's criticism of *Miracle* slips from correcting a series of factual inaccuracies that have nothing to do with homosexuality to accusing *Miracle* of being, in itself, a product of homosexual fantasy. Is Léger documentation of *Miracle*'s inaccuracies, then, a mere cover for his attack on the true object of his rage, *Miracle*'s lyrical first-person account of Mettray's homosexual subculture? Or is the significance of the slippage precisely that *there is no slippage*, and that, under a certain discursive regime, speaking positively in the first-person of a homosexual carceral subculture is itself clear proof of untruth?

This chapter seeks to reconstitute the "truth games" by which former inmates of the boys' penal colonies in France were able to accede to the position of subjects of a

¹ "Jean Genet n'a jamais été à Mettray, on a dû lui raconter Mettray qu'il a romancé comme il aurait voulu que ça se passe, pour satisfaire ses fantasmes d'homosexuel," Raoul Léger, *Souvenirs d'un colon 1922-1927: Punir pour Éduquer? Suivis de contributions historiques*. Ed. Jacques Bourquin (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1997), 108.

"true" discourse.² In 1945, after two decades of scandals, inmate uprisings, and aggressive press campaigns, the "correction houses" (*maisons de correction*) for minors, widely judged to be as exploitative and punitive as French penal colonies for supposedly unreformable adult criminals, were definitively abolished.³ This event, along with the journalistically-magnified scandals that led up to it, opened a discursive space in which stigmatized former inmates were called upon to publicly speak the truth, not, for once, about their own criminal desires, but rather, about the institutions that had abused, exploited, and corrupted them. I argue, however, that for former inmates defined as *objects* of scientific, criminological, and medical knowledge to accede to the position of *subjects* of a true discourse, they had to play a discursive "truth game" in which masculinity, what I term "pederastic friendship," and discursive authority were firmly interlocked.

To better analyze how the narrative conventions of different genres impacted narrative strategies of legitimation, I have organized this study according to genre. I begin with the testimonies that the journalist Alexis Danan solicited and published, in book form, as *The Torture Houses (Maisons de supplices)* in 1936. I then turn to the "Testimony of pupil 6.199" ("Témoignage du pupille 6.199") (1970) and to Léger's *Memoirs of an Inmate 1922-1927 (Souvenirs d'un colon 1922-1927)*, (1997), both published as

² For Foucault's explanation of "truth games" see the "Foucault" entry in "Dictionnaire des philosophes," written by Foucault under the alias Maurice Florence. Michel Foucault, "Foucault" in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1450-1455.

³ Though "maisons de correction" and "maisons de redressement" were the official name given to these correctional institutions, I will refer to them in this dissertation as children's or boys' penal colonies, as do many of former inmate authors. I do this both to emphasize the harsh conditions of the colonies, and to manifest the link, which I will explore further in Chapter 4, between the

“evidence” within historical studies of the children’s penal colonies. I close with readings of two independently published memoirs, Auguste Le Breton's *The High Walls (Les Hauts Murs)* (1954) and Vincent Lapie's *Saint-Florent-Life (Saint-Florent-la-Vie)* (1946). My analyses of these three genres are prefaced by a section on Louis Roubaud's sensationalistic press exposé of the children's penal colonies, published in book form in 1925 as *Children of Cain (Les Enfants de Caïn)*. Roubaud's exposé, which figures inmate cultures as perverse and perverting through evocative tales of violence, madness, and pederasty,⁴ informs us of the sensationalized "knowledge" of the children's penal colonies that French readers of the time could be expected to have. *Children of Cain* also participates in the dissemination of the trope of inmate perversity, against which later inmate authors will later be compelled to position themselves.

I open this chapter with an account of the institutional history of the boys' penal colony of Mettray that foregrounds the paradoxically close connection between normalizing institutional aims and "abnormal" inmate cultures. At the time of its founding in 1840, Mettray was acclaimed for its innovative attempt to educate the affects of its wayward youth through the creation of family-like all-male institutional hierarchies. I argue that both the colony’s "pederastic friendships" between an older and a younger boy and its pederastic sexual subcultures may be understood as products of the institutional initiative to get inmates affectively "hooked," through what Dr. Ferrus

children's penal colonies and colonialism proper.

⁴ Given both the sexualization of inmate hierarchies at the colonies and the hierarchization of sexual relationships, I refer to same-sex sexuality at the colonies as "pederasty" – a male sexual relationship which implies a differential in power, social status, and age – rather than "homosexuality." This distinction is particularly clear in English, since in French, "pédérastie" is

theorized as "*l'accrochage affectif*," on male hierarchies.⁵ Whereas, in "Friendship as a Way of Life," Michel Foucault looks to modern male friendship as a site undercoded by discourse and resistant to institutions, I argue that adolescent pederastic friendship was in fact a normative theme in pulp boys' novels, and that it was intentionally produced and harnessed by institutions such as the boys' penal colonies and the Boy Scouts. I read *The High Walls* and *Saint-Florent-Life* as novelistic memoirs in which the encounter of popular norms of adolescent male friendship with the pederastic subcultures of the penal colonies lays bare the foundation of normative male friendship, during this historical period, on the impossible eradication of the potential of pederasty.

This chapter sets the stage for the rest of this dissertation by exploring the foundational themes of the institutional production of affect, the formation of pederastic subcultures, and the relation of "truth" to sexuality. It opens into Chapter 2's reading of the intervention that Genet's novel, *Miracle of the Rose*, performs within discourses on the boys' penal colonies. Its introduction of Mettray's institutional history will become differently important in Chapter 4, which investigates Genet's return to the topic of Mettray after his period of activism with the Black Panther Party.

1.1 The Queer Effects of Normalization: Thinking Inmate Cultures

The agricultural colony of Mettray was once considered an exemplary response to the destabilizing effects of increasing urbanization on the French social order.

Mettray's social mission was to transform the bands of vagabond runaway or

regularly used to refer to run-of-the-mill homosexuality.

abandoned minors that roamed French cities at the beginning of the nineteenth-century – the city-born detritus of the demand for a mobile and disposable urban workforce – into stable, healthy, productive farmers.⁶ Due to the criminalization of vagabondage, these minors, many of whom resorted to petty thefts for survival, were, in principle, already delinquents. In the courts, however, frequent acquittals "for lack of discernment" ("pour manque de discernement") produced a category of not-quite-criminals with an ambiguous legal and institutional status. For lack of a better option, these minors were regularly held in adult prisons, where, according to reformers, they were exposed to the corrupting mores of criminal cultures. The agricultural colony of Mettray, which opened officially in 1840, sought both to rescue these minors from the pernicious influence of adult prisons and to reform them through agricultural labor and religious instruction. The official purpose of the founders of Mettray was

[t]o exert a benevolent tutelage over children acquitted as having acted without discernment, [...]; to procure for these children, put in a state of provisory liberty and taken into an agricultural colony, a moral and religious education, as well as a basic elementary education; to have them learn a trade; to habituate them to agricultural work, and to then place them in the countryside, with artisans or farmers.⁷

⁵ Quoted in Henri Gaillac, *Les maisons de correction 1830-1945* (Editions Cujas, 1991), 83.

⁶ For more information on Mettray's role in the changing social context of nineteenth-century France, see Jean-Michel Dubois, "Etude sur la colonie agricole de Mettray: Mettray, Bagne de gosses ou oeuvre charitable éclairée?" thesis, 1985, Jean Genet Archive, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine.

⁷ "D'exercer une tutelle bienveillante sur les enfants acquittés comme ayant agi sans discernement, [...] ; de procurer à ces enfants mis en état de liberté provisoire et recueillis dans une colonie agricole, l'éducation morale et religieuse, ainsi que l'instruction primaire élémentaire; de leur faire apprendre un métier; de les accoutumer aux travaux de l'agriculture et de les placer ensuite à la campagne, chez des artisans ou des agriculteurs," Quoted in Albert Dichy and Pascal Fouché, *Jean Genet. Essai de chronologie: 1910-1944* (Paris: Bibliothèque de littérature française contemporaine, 1988), 113.

Naturally, this mission statement makes no mention of the fact that Mettray was also a private enterprise that profited from the forced labor of its inmates.⁸ Officially, Mettray posed itself, point for point, as an antidote to the moral degeneration of the cities: by tying vagabond urban youth to the land, submitting them to a rigorously regulated schedule of work, prayer, and schooling, and inculcating them with the traditional values of religion, Mettray sought to return them to a healthy normalcy indissolubly associated with the putatively endangered values of France's agricultural heartland.⁹

The cornerstone of Mettray's regenerative project was its education of the affects through an institutionally produced equivalent of "family" life. Since one of the primary evils attributed to city life and, in particular, to the urban working class, was the disintegration of the traditional family and of the values associated with it, the reconstitution of the family was one of Mettray's guiding principles. Organizationally, the colony was divided into "families," that is, groups of about forty to fifty boys living in the same pavilion under the patriarchal authority of a "head of the household" and his second, as well as two "elder brothers," the latter chosen from amongst the inmates. According to Mettray's principle founder, Frédéric-Auguste Demetz, the purpose of this organization was to "*produce familial sentiments* founded on the obedience to paternal

⁸ Dubois argues that the unstated motivation of the founders of Mettray was to create a profitable private enterprise, citing two letters that sustain this thesis. See Dubois, "Etude sur la colonie," 10.

⁹ For more on Mettray's agricultural, religious, and familial ideologies, see Henri Gaillac, *Les maisons de correction 1830-1945* (Editions Cujas, 1991); and Jacques Bourquin, "La Mettray des origines," in *Souvenirs d'un colon 1922-1927: Punir pour Éduquer? Suivis de contributions historiques*. Ed. Jacques Bourquin, L'Harmattan. (Paris, 1997). See also the excellent summaries of Mettray's ideologies and institutional history in Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); and Dichy and Fouché, *Jean Genet*.

authority, role models [*le bon exemple*], the sense of honor, the emulation of what is right, household habits, and the sense of property."¹⁰ Demetz conceived of Mettray's familial organization as a means of educating the affects, producing sentimental attachments to authority, positive emulation, honor, home, and property in the absence of a "normal" family life. In 1850, Dr. Ferrus theorized Mettray's innovative principle of what he termed "affective hooking" ("l'accrochage affectif"): "[m]ost of the young inmates being orphans who, not having known the family, scorning its comforts, and, in a manner of speaking, not believing in them, the founders of this colony have tried, first of all, to create affections in them."¹¹ For this medical expert, the education of the affects is Mettray's first priority, surpassing intellectual and even religious education:

"[i]ntellectual education is weak; religious education is secondary. What they work to develop are the sentiments of virtue, love of family, the affections, or to use [the Viennese doctor] Gall's word, affectuosity."¹² If doctors and psychiatrists were so enthused by the idea of Mettray, it was because they saw it as disciplining, training, and stimulating not only inmates' bodies and minds, but also their affects. Mettray's experiments with affective normalization occurred at a historical moment, documented

¹⁰ "*produire des sentiments familiaux* fondés sur l'obéissance à une autorité paternelle, le bon exemple, le sens de l'honneur, l'émulation au bien, l'habitude de la maison, le sens de la propriété," quoted in Léger, "Souvenirs d'un colon", 119, my emphasis.

¹¹ "La plupart des jeunes détenus étant des enfants trouvés qui, n'ayant pas connu la famille, en méprisaient les douceurs et pour ainsi dire n'y croyaient pas, les fondateurs de cette colonie ont essayé tout d'abord de leur créer des affections," quoted in Gaillac, *Les Maisons de correction*, 83, my emphasis.

¹² "L'enseignement intellectuel y est faible; l'enseignement religieux secondaire. Ce qu'on s'applique à développer, ce sont les sentiments du juste, l'amour de la famille, les affections, ou, pour me servir d'un mot [du docteur viennois] Gall, l'affectuosité," Gaillac, *Les Maisons de correction*, 84).

in Foucault's Collège de France course *The Abnormals (Les Anormaux)*, during which affective abnormality, particularly with regards to familial sentiment, was being pathologized as the major sign of an abnormal personality.¹³ Indeed, the benevolent discourses of its founders and admirers belie Mettray's ambitious attempt to extend institutional control into every aspect of its pupils' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, justifying Foucault's nomination of Mettray as the epitome of the carceral system and as "the disciplinary form at its most intense, the model in which all the coercive technologies of behavior," including the family, the army, the workshop, the school, the court, the cell, the cloister, and the prison, are concentrated.¹⁴

If these disciplinary technologies were originally joined in the service of returning "irregular" youth to normalcy, by the time of Genet's incarceration in Mettray in 1926, normalization was a virtue that few would ascribe to Mettray. Considered a model institution during the nineteenth century and emulated in Europe and its colonies,¹⁵ Mettray began its decline after the death of its founder, Demetz, in 1873. In the twentieth century, a series of financial crises as well as the 1910 suicide of a boy confided to Mettray's *Maison Paternelle*¹⁶ accelerated Mettray's deterioration. By the

¹³ See Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux: cours au Collège de France (1974-1975)* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

¹⁴ "la forme disciplinaire à l'état le plus intense, le modèle où se concentrent toutes les technologies coercitives du comportement," Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 343.

¹⁵ For more on the emulation of the Mettray model in the Netherlands, England, Belgium, and France, as well as the colonial holdings of these nations see Ann Laura Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009), 105-140.

¹⁶ Wealthy parents could intern their children at the *Maison Paternelle* upon the payment of a certain sum of money. The closure of the *Maison Paternelle* after the 1910 suicide was thus both a stain on Mettray's reputation and a blow to a major source of its funding.

twenties and thirties, referred to by one historian as the institution's "dark years" ("les années noires"), Mettray's facilities were in disrepair, its inmates were poorly nourished, and its qualified "monitors" had been replaced by prison guardians and ex-soldiers, among whom illiteracy, violence, and alcoholism ran rampant.¹⁷ As a similar lack of funding and loss of the rehabilitative initiative seems to have affected all the children's penal colonies in France, the time was ripe for a series of sensationalistic journalistic campaigns which purported to unmask both the hidden abuses and the systemic dysfunction of the children's penal colonies. Alexis Danan's polemic series of articles in *Paris Soir* during the 1930s was so devastating that Mettray was forced to close its doors in 1939, a good six years before the official abolition of the other children's penal colonies.

While the primary focus of the press campaigns of the twenties and thirties was the exposure of abuses of institutional power, the corrupting effects of carceral "*mœurs*" were not neglected. We should recall that the French word "*mœurs*" has a series of connotations which are absent from its English equivalent, "mores." If the most neutral definition listed in the *Trésor de la langue française* is simply "[t]he ensemble of ways of living that are habitual to a human group or to an individual. Synonym customs," the first definition given is the more loaded, "[e]nsemble of behaviors proper to a human group or an individual *considered in relation to a collective morality*." In practice, this "collective morality" is most often a sexual morality (a vice squad in French is a "*police*

¹⁷ Eric Pierre, "Mettray dans les années 1920: Une période noire," in *Souvenirs d'un colon 1922-1927: Punir pour Éduquer? Suivis de contributions historiques*. Ed. Jacques Bourquin (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1997), 139.

des mœurs"). The *Trésor* thus specifies, "[i]n partic. A sexual behavior in compliance or not with social norms," and lists another possible meaning as simply "[h]omosexuality."¹⁸ Writings on the colonies regularly employ this slippage between the two meanings of *mœurs*, on the one hand, as morally questionable customs and behaviors and, on the other, as homosexuality. In many writings on the colonies, homosexuality functions simultaneously as the most extreme and shocking example of the corrupt *mœurs* of the children's penal colonies and as a synecdoche that stands in for all other imaginable depravities. The usage of *mœurs* as a polite way of saying homosexuality, as in, "[q]uite singular *mœurs* that the outside world cannot suspect exist in these houses, either between pupils or even between pupils and guards," thus threatens to lend its sexual connotation to all references to the suspect customs of the colonies.¹⁹

This is particularly true in the case of *caïdisme*, the practice of serving and obeying a respected and powerful leader, or *caïd*, in return for his protection. In writings on the boys' penal colonies, the hierarchies, rivalries, and resistances to hierarchy that result from *caïdisme* are regularly singled out as motivations for inmate violence. References to *caïdisme*, however, are just as sexually suggestive as references to

¹⁸ "Ensemble des façons de vivre habituelles à un groupe humain ou à un individu. Synon. coutumes,"; "Ensemble de comportements propres à un groupe humain ou à un individu et considérés dans leurs rapports avec une morale collective"; "En partic. Comportement sexuel conforme ou non aux normes sociales"; "Homosexualité," *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé (version simplifiée)*. <http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/fast.exe?mot=moeurs>. "moeurs." (Accessed May 12, 2007).

¹⁹ "Il existe dans ces maisons des mœurs tout à fait spéciales, que le monde extérieur ne peut soupçonner, soit entre pupilles, soit même entre pupilles et surveillants," Alexis Danan, *Maisons de Supplices* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1936), 96.

moeurs. As a word that, in its original sense, refers to a North African tribal leader, *caïd* evokes, in French references to penal mores, an orientalized figure of both illegitimate authority and perverse sexual power. Within the context of this highly sexualized discourse on the children's penal colonies, an inmate's proposition to a newcomer – "Who are you going with? I'll introduce you to a *caïd* tomorrow. You have to take a *caïd*, or else you'll be unhappy" – gestures towards the well-known figure of the pederastic *caïd*.²⁰ While many authors explicitly link pederasty and *caïdisme*, the frequent play on the *implicit* sexual connotations of both *moeurs* and *caïdisme* points to the existence of a commonplace that can be instantly grasped without too much explanation – that of boys' carceral cultures that intimately intertwine violent hierarchies with forms of sexual domination and submission.

References to *moeurs* or *caïdisme* in discourses on the boys' penal colonies usually imply that, in contradiction to their mission of normalization, the colonies actually *corrupt* youth by exposing them to morally depraved carceral cultures. This logic, which assumes a shocking contradiction between institutional aims and inmate subcultures, obscures what might actually constitute a tight connection between the two. As we have seen, it was an institutional initiative to structure inmates' relationships with guards and with one another along the model of the hierarchic and authoritarian patriarchal family and to invest these hierarchies with affect so as to produce a love for and a willing submission to authority. Such an institutional initiative would have stimulated, in

²⁰ "Avec qui te mets-tu? Je te présenterai demain un caïd. Il faut que tu prennes un caïd, sans ça tu seras malheureux," Marius Larique, "Mettray - Eysses, Ligne directe I," *Détective*, no. 443 (April 22, 1937): 12-16.

inmates, affective attachments to male hierarchy. Inmate social structures such as *caïdisme*, especially in its sexual form, might therefore be seen not as a sort of regression, under duress, to savage feudal or oriental hierarchies, but rather, as subcultural rearticulations of institutionally produced attachments to hierarchy. The relationship between inmate and institutional hierarchies was, nevertheless, a vexed one, since the allegiances of *caïdisme* could come into conflict with institutionally prescribed hierarchies. In the colonies' perpetual war on both pederasty and *caïdisme*, repressive tactics were matched by attempts to strategically utilize rather than eradicating inmate hierarchies. As many memoir writers explain, guardians would regularly promote the *caïd* and otherwise ask him to make use of his power over the other boys in return for special privileges. By some accounts, even the punks ("girons"), the despised sexual bottoms, were given special treatment by guardians when they were known to have a powerful protector, in spite of harsh punishments theoretically meted out for an "offense to mores" ("attentat aux moeurs").²¹

As rearticulations of institutional technologies of normalization, inmate relationalities might be seen as attempts to construct solidarities, modes of alliance, and affective bonds out of the hierarchic relational life of an authoritarian all-male institution.²² This is not to deny that inmate hierarchies were often built on coercion and violence, but only to emphasize that they were also the occasion for solidarities,

²¹ For descriptions of how guards grant some punks special privileges, see Jean-Guy Le Dano, *La Mouscaille* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973); and Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946). Jean-Guy Le Dano's *La Mouscaille* and Jean Genet's *Miracle de la rose* each discuss guardian's privileging of *girons*.

²² The nuns who worked in Mettray's hospital, and who had no place in Mettray's "families,"

friendships, and strong affective bonds. For the children and adolescents in such abusive institutions, cut off from or never having known their families, to find a friend, a protector, a lover, or a beloved, in short, a bit of affection and solidarity would have been a significant event, one whose importance for inmates in such conditions should not be belittled. In a 1981 interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life" ("De l'amitié comme mode de vie"), Michel Foucault emphasizes the creative potential of male friendship as a challenge to institutionalized forms of modern power. If for Foucault, homosexuality is thoroughly penetrated and regulated by modern medical power, male friendship appears promising because of its apparent lack of a defined social or a discursive location. Closing with the reference to the monosexual armies and prison camps of the World Wars, Foucault speculates on the intense, yet unrecorded affects between men that must have existed there:

Aside from a few remarks on camaraderie, the fraternity of the soul, and a few very fragmentary observations, what do we know of the affective tornados, the storms of the heart that might have existed at those moments? One can wonder how, in these absurd, grotesque wars, these infernal massacres, people held on in spite of everything. By an affective tissue, no doubt. I don't mean that it was because they were in love with each other that they continued fighting. But honor, courage, not losing face, sacrifice, coming out of the trenches with one's friend [*le copain*], in front of one's friend [*le copain*], this implied a very intense affective trace.²³

were the only women at Mettray.

²³ "En dehors de quelques propos sur la camaraderie, la fraternité d'âme, de quelques témoignages très parcellaires, que sait-on de ces tornades affectives, des tempêtes de cœur qu'il y a pu y avoir dans ces moments-là ? Et on peut se demander ce qui a fait que, dans ces guerres absurdes, grotesques, ces massacres infernaux, les gens ont malgré tout tenu. Par un tissu affectif, sans doute. Je ne veux pas dire que c'était parce qu'ils étaient amoureux les uns des autres qu'ils continuaient à se battre. Mais l'honneur, le courage, ne pas perdre la face, le sacrifice, sortir de la tranchée avec le copain, devant le copain, cela impliquait une trace affective très intense," Michel Foucault, "L'amitié comme mode de vie," in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 986.

The boys' penal colonies, which forced boys to form bonds of solidarity and protection under comparable conditions of duress, might have produced similarly intense "storms of the heart" between inmates. Displacing the context of male friendship from noble wartime aggression to the much maligned inmate cultures of the penal colonies, however, raises a number of questions. In the context of the penal colonies, for instance, male friendships certainly cannot be idealized as an inventive domain outside of institutional power. Moreover, Foucault's exclusion of sex from his discussion of friendship does not function in the colonies, where, as we shall see, the presence or absence of sex was a significant factor in defining the social position of a given friendship. Finally, rather than being evocatively undercoded within discourse, the theme of male friendship and its affects, moral codes, and role within a boy's development is of paramount importance in memoirs of the boys' penal colonies.

1.2 "Truth Games," or the Limits of What a Given Subject Can Purport to Know

For former inmates to write about the boys' penal colonies in which they were incarcerated, they had to maneuver against the collusion of criminological, medical, and penal discourses in disqualifying delinquents from holding a "true" discourse. The fact that the writings of certain former inmates were published at all indicates that these men successfully played a "truth game," overcoming their pasts as objects for knowledge to become subjects of a "true" discourse. Foucault's notion of "truth games" (*jeux de vérité*) clarifies both the stakes of former inmates' writing and the exclusionary rules that

constitute the very notion of discursive "truth." According to Foucault, it is the reciprocal link between the "mode of subjectivation" – which determines "what position [a subject] must occupy in the real or in the imaginary to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge" – and the "mode of objectivation" – the conditions under which "something can become an object for a certain type of knowledge" – which engender "'truth games': that is, not the discovery of truth, but the rules according to which what a subject can say about certain things partakes of the question of truth and falsehood."²⁴ Former inmates of the penal colonies were, by definition, human objects for the knowledge and expertise of psychologists, penal theorists, and criminologists considered, by default, untrustworthy and incapable of acceding to the position of a subject of knowledge. To attempt to hold a truthful discourse precisely in the capacity of former inmates therefore required them to strategically negotiate operative "truth games" through a series of legitimizing and subjectifying moves.

One of my aims in the readings that follow will therefore be to induce the "truth games" that former inmates of a boys' penal colony must play in order to become the subject of a "true" discourse. This task is complicated by the fact that authors are often simultaneously negotiating not only the truth games constructed by "expert" discourses (the discourse of liberal reform, medical-psychiatric distinctions between the normal and the abnormal, etc.), but also those informed by the conventions of different genres of

²⁴ "mode de subjectivation"; "quelle position [un sujet] doit occuper dans le réel ou dans l'imaginaire, pour devenir sujet légitime de tel ou tel type de connaissance"; "mode d'objectivation"; "quelque chose peut devenir un objet pour une connaissance possible"; "les 'jeux de vérité': c'est-à-dire non pas la découverte des choses vraies, mais les règles selon lesquelles, à propos de certaines choses, ce qu'un sujet peut dire relève de la question du vrai et du faux,"

writing. In fact, I have found that the possibilities of what may be stated in a text describing an author's experience in a boys' penal colony vary more according to genre than to time period. I have therefore divided my readings of former inmates' autobiographical writings into three genres: the press campaigns, the historical documents, and the memoirs. Each of these genres presumes a certain set of conventions about what is considered a true, a representative, or an appropriate discourse, conventions which, I would argue, become particularly rigid when the writer is already partially discredited by his status as a delinquent, his usually low social origin, and his very presence in an institution which, as everybody knew, encouraged the most reprehensible *moeurs*. Whatever his means of negotiating these multiple discursive contexts, however, it is clear that for a former inmate to aspire to hold a meaningful discourse on the penal colonies, *he must first establish his normalcy*, often by contrast with other, abnormal, perverse, and "truly" criminal residents of the colonies. Given the assimilation of the perverse *moeurs* and illegitimate hierarchies of the penal colonies with homosexuality, it is not surprising that, in most cases, the trustworthiness of a narrative and the ordinariness of its narrator is established through an (often violent) warding-off of homosexuality. The queer complexities of inmate cultures fall by the wayside as *jeux de vérité* are played out through *jeux de virilité* and gender is both the form and the content of genre.

The readings that follow are speculative and queer rather than constative and historical. In them, I focus not on whether a given narrator may be considered truthful

and representative, but rather, on the gendered and generic truth games that allow him to be seen as legitimate in a specific way. The strategies through which certain authors describe carceral and pederastic *moeurs* without abandoning all legitimacy receive particular scrutiny, as do authors' formulations of the relation between pederasty and heterosexuality, or pederasty and non-sexual friendship. In addition, I attempt to tease out of these texts glimpses of the affective complexity of both sexual and non-sexual friendships within the colonies. To these ends, rather than focusing on the solidity of what is said, I sometimes speculate on what is not being said – on the stories, affects, and subject positions whose exclusion from discourse constitutes the very condition of this discourse.

1.3 Children of Cain: *The Prehistory of Testimony*

While the first full-scale entry into discourse of inmates' voices does not occur until the Alexis Danan's press campaigns of the 1930s, I would like to begin my story in the summer of 1925, when Louis Roubaud, a journalist for *Le Quotidien*, went on a grand tour of the correction houses of Eysses, Aniane, Belle-Île, Clermont and Doullens, publishing a series of brief and evocative articles along the way. Roubaud's articles, which he almost immediately published in book form as *Children of Cain (Les Enfants de Caïn)*, represents the first full-scale exposé to overtly criticize the children's penal colonies. As such, it served as a model (or in Danan's case, a counter-model) for the journalists that follow. Roubaud's report, nevertheless, belongs to the prehistory of the texts I will be studying. While many of Roubaud's articles are allegedly based on his

conversations with incarcerated minors, whom he sometimes refers to as his "friends," he rarely allows these prisoners to describe their experiences in the first person.

Moreover, while Roubaud himself *does* narrate his adult impression of the colonies in the first person, he fails to divulge his own adolescent incarceration in Mettray's *Maison Paternelle*.²⁵ The lack of first-person testimony in *Children of Cain*, however, is precisely what has prompted me to include it in this study, for it permits Roubaud to tell somber, lurid, and sweet stories of prison *moeurs* that few former prisoners would claim as their own, but that nevertheless animate the reading public's abiding fascination with the colonies.

While *Children of Cain* does articulate certain critiques concerning the exploitation of inmates' labor, the irrational and sadistic excess of disciplinary measures, and above all, the contagious effects of mixing the mentally ill, "true" criminals, and honest children whose only crime was to be abandoned by their parents and caretakers, these critiques had few concrete effects. They led to the "paper reforms" of 1927, which appear to have been little more than face-saving changes in institutional vocabulary.²⁶

Roubaud's ultimate conclusion, that the colonies should be closed for good and true

²⁵ Mettray's *Maison Paternelle* housed and disciplined wayward children from wealthy families. These children had a peculiar extra-legal status, as they were incarcerated on parental demand rather than in obedience to a court verdict. While this house was situated in the same square as the other boys' dorms, the boys in the *Maison Paternelle* were kept almost constantly confined such that their future reputations need never be endangered by being recognized by another (presumably lower-class) inmate at Mettray. Roubaud was thus both within the system of the children's penal colonies and significantly set apart from it. He himself would not go public concerning his incarceration at the *Maison Paternelle* until some time after the publication of *Children of Cain*.

²⁶ "Maisons de redressement" became "maisons d'éducation surveillée," and "surveillants" became "moniteurs," "maîtres," and "premier maîtres."

schools opened in their stead, could not be effected by his articles alone. For, in both structure and style, Roubaud's articles subordinate the synthesizing project of critique to the fascinating particularities of sensational and evocatively laconic individual tales. Roubaud's tardy conclusions, most of which are enclosed within his final article, "Children of the Penal Colony" ("Les Enfants du Bagne"), do little to contain the by turn lurid and plaintive tales of violence, madness, and pederasty that precede them. His interest in the sensational and the inexplicable, and his focus on the detail that slips outside of the organizing framework of critique belatedly proposed allow Roubaud to invoke politically ambiguous narratives that Danan would exclude and compromising subject positions that few former inmates would publicly assume.

In his lurid tales of inmate violence and madness, Roubaud depicts the strangeness and perversity of the world of the penal colonies without offering either clear-cut condemnations or propositions for reform. Whereas testimony and memoir-writers emphasize the systemic violence of guardians towards inmates or the culturally sanctioned fights by which inmates protect their honor and their position within inmate hierarchies, Roubaud is more interested in horrifyingly unmotivated acts of inmate violence. One boy who loses his mark for good conduct vengefully plunges a hot iron into a teacher's stomach, another butchers his overly critical instructor from behind with a sharp object, and yet another, for no apparent reason, rips opens his friend's belly with a saw. In such brief and gory *faits divers*, violent penetrations of male bodies are presented, unanalyzed, for their pure sensationalism. Erupting for the most paltry of reasons or for no reason at all, such violent penetrations appear to be a fatality endemic

to colony life. More mysterious still are Roubaud's tales of what might either be interpreted as the pathological madness of certain inmates or as symptoms of the psychic traumas of confinement in the colonies. In Eysses, a model prisoner who has earned the right to work outside of the colony asks politely to be put into solitary confinement. Another boy suddenly begins running as fast as he can. Caught by the guards, he denies that he wanted to escape, stating only that the others frighten him. These two stories are unlike any that will be told in the memoirs and testimonies that follow, in which the comparatively heroic acts of self-mutilation, which allow overworked and underfed inmates to rest, eat superior food, and be cared for by the kind nurses at the hospital, and suicide, which provides an immediate escape from the colonies, are used to dramatically illustrate the hardships of colony life. While self-mutilation and suicide can be seen as extreme, but logical responses to an unbearable situation, a desire to remain in solitary confinement and an unexplained fear of others hint at more complex and ambiguous forms of psychic trauma which might linger long after the colonies' closure. It is such haunted, traumatized, and pathologically violent subjects, judged incapable of giving testimony, who are the true ghosts of the discourse on the boys' penal colonies. Evoked briefly by Roubaud to provoke a few shivers, they never narrate their own stories, and are absent even from the memoirs and testimonies of other former inmates. Nevertheless, they float in the background, contributing to the public image of the madness and perversity of carceral life against which former inmate authors must struggle to define their normalcy and legitimacy.

In his penchant for the sensational, Roubaud would hardly shy away from what

was widely seen as the most shocking and fascinating perversion of prison life: homosexuality is well represented in his sections on the boys' colonies, and is virtually the sole topic of his sections on the girls' colonies. The most lengthy section on male homosexuality is entitled "The 'Punk'" ("Le 'Giron'"), and endeavors to tell the tragic story of a punk: in prison slang, the usually younger and weaker sexual bottom within a pederastic couple. A bastard abandoned by his parents, who, unlike those of most of the boys in the colonies, were people of quality, Raoul is "a pretty, delicate boy," signs of his social status which, in the rough world of the colonies, also mark him as a potential bottom.²⁷ On his first day at Mettray, in a passage reminiscent of Sartre's account of how Genet became a thief, "he heard someone whisper behind him: 'Look... a 'punk.'" Behold his destiny."²⁸ Abruptly, we learn that Raoul had to be transferred to the colony of Belle-Île. Since Belle-Île, unlike Mettray, housed prisoners in individual cells, popularly referred to as "chicken cages" ("des cages aux poules"), rather than in collective dormitories, it is implied that the intention of Raoul's transfer was to restrict his nocturnal sexual contact with the other boys. Raoul's move to Belle-Île, however, does not have the desired result. One night, the boy in the cell above Raoul's saws through the metal grate separating them, leaps into Raoul's cell, and rapes him. After this incident, Raoul, definitively marked as a punk, is continually forced to sexually service the boys of the colony.

²⁷ "un garçon joli et délicat," Louis Roubaud, *Les Enfants de Caïn* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1925), 124.

²⁸ "il a entendu dire à voix basse derrière lui: 'Tiens... un 'giron'. Voilà son destin," Roubaud, *Enfants de Caïn*, 125. In Sartre's account, caught stealing as a child, Genet was told, "[Y]ou are a thief," a declaration that he would strive to make his destiny. "Tu est un voleur," Jean Paul

At this climactic moment, Roubaud's third-person narrative tears open to reveal the scene of narration. The inmate Coutanzeau, to whom we have already been introduced as Roubaud's "friend" ("ami"), and whose story appears in an earlier section, breaks into the tale with a description of his reputation for hating injustice and for knowing how to use his fists. Coutanzeau goes on to explain how Raoul sought him out and propositioned him, asking, "[d]o you want me to be your wife, just for you?" and how he chose to save Raoul from his tormentors: "I let on that we were together. And they left him alone."²⁹ Coutanzeau at this point pauses to assure his interlocutor of his heterosexuality, "[a]s for me, Mr. Roubaud, that's not the case. You can consult my record of punishments, that's never the reason."³⁰ It is significant that the moment at which the third-person narrative is ripped apart to expose the scene of narration is precisely that of the revelation of the hitherto hidden narrator's character. As an inmate-informant who is granted the privilege of speaking in the first-person about his relationship with a punk, Coutanzeau's first care is to establish his narrative legitimacy by portraying himself as just, virile, and heterosexual. Roubaud's choice to cite from what was presumably a lengthy conversation with Coutanzeau at precisely this moment is also strategic, as it certifies that his information comes from a reputable (i.e. normatively masculine and heterosexual) source. The most well-developed articulation of an individual punk's story in Roubaud's text is therefore placed under the sign of a

Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 26.

²⁹ "Veux-tu que je sois ta femme à toi tout seul?" "J'ai fait croire aux autres qu'on était ensemble. Et ils l'ont laissé tranquille," Roubaud, *Enfants de Caïn*, 133.

³⁰ "Moi, M. Roubaud, ce n'est pas mon cas, vous pouvez consulter mes punitions, il n'y a jamais ce motif," Roubaud, *Enfants de Caïn*, 133.

heterosexual narrative prerogative. Indeed, if Coutanzeau had not existed, Roubaud would have had to invent him. Filtered through Coutanzeau's narrative persona and Roubaud's imaginative writing style, Raoul's story is, in fact, doubly silenced.

Equally silenced, yet distinguishable at the margins of Roubaud's account is what appears to be an elaborate pederastic culture replete with respected couples (which Raoul and Coutanzeau mimic) and love letters (which make a brief appearance in another punk's story). While the existence of couples and love letters suggests that there is something more to carceral pederasty than coercion and violence, it is not given to us to see what this may be. By contrast, Roubaud's discussion of the girls' colonies ("Écoles de Préservation") of Dollens and Clermont emphasizes the affective and relational dimensions of female same-sex sexuality. The sentimental themes of passionate devotions, crises of jealousy, and broken hearts return again and again, while power struggles and references to sex are left in the background. What's more, whereas in the section on the boys' colonies, the existence of love letters is only mentioned in passing, Roubaud quotes extensively from girls' love letters to one another, even going so far as to include the complete signed letters as part of the back matter of his book! Roubaud's renditions of pederasty as sex and violence and female same-sex sexuality as sentimental devotion are thus at least partially constructed from a differential politics of emphasis and citation that functions to shore up dominant gender norms. Moreover, in a pattern that we will see repeated in the memoirs, the affective and relational dimension that is evacuated from pederastic sex reappears elsewhere: in the sentimental exaltation of non-sexual friendship. While pederasts are carefully excluded from citation, Roubaud

quotes an entire poem of sentimental friendship written by a prisoner to his liberated friend. The poem ends plaintively, with the metaphor of shared pain fusing prisoners into a single body, implicitly ripped apart when one of them is freed:

The friend who in this den quite often shares
our pains, our sorrows, and our other torments
ends up becoming a piece of ourselves.
Remember your friends who remain there, moved,
for they may never see you again.³¹

1.4 Danan's Press Campaign: A Speaking-Subject Position for the Former Inmate

No sentimental poetry or love letters are to be found in Alexis Danan's later *Paris Soir* press campaign. Criticizing Roubaud as a "desolate artist" who sees the misery of the colonies as a "spectacle" rather than as an "expression of error and injustice," Danan sets out to correct his predecessor's faults, stripping away the odd tales that so captivated Roubaud to leave only the most unambiguous denunciations of the error and injustice of the colonies.³² Danan's polemical first-page articles with large font headlines created enough of a scandal to lead to the abolition of the colonies in 1945. His true innovation, however, was his decision to publish, in the book, *The Torture Houses (Maisons de supplices)* (1936), a collection of letters from former inmates of the penal colonies. These letters, in which former inmates take up the pen to accuse their former jailers, add up to a powerful collective denunciation of the colonies. Over and over, we

³¹ "L'ami qui dans cet antre partage bien souvent / Nos peines, nos chagrins et nos autres tourments / Finit par devenir un tronçon de nous-mêmes. / Songe à tes amis qui sont là tout émus / Car ils ne te verront peut-être jamais plus," Roubaud, *Enfants de Caïn*, 56.

³² "artiste désolé"; "spectacle"; "expression d'erreur et d'injustice," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 285.

read about the same abuses: beatings, overwork and undernourishment, exposure to the elements, and sadistic and sometimes fatal punishments. Moreover, unlike Roubaud, Danan does his utmost to assure that these letters will do more than cause a stir and then be forgotten. In his introduction, he explicitly inscribes them within the context of juridical testimony:

I open today this dossier that does not belong to me, that has in a way been entrusted to me to contribute to the debates of the Commission of Investigations. There are about fifty letters. Mark my words: I possess the originals, and many more, with the signatures, the social status, and the addresses of their authors.³³

Former inmates' original, signed letters represent neither Danan's private property nor a series of titillating tales, but rather a file of juridical evidence awaiting the opening of an official investigation.

Clearly, as juridical evidence, these letters leave no room for affective or political ambiguity. Compared to *Children of Cain*, there are few descriptions of inmate violence, and those that are given concern bullying and fighting, not murder. On the other hand, there is a preponderance of accounts of violent and sadistic guards, who, in some cases, are accused of literally beating or otherwise disciplining inmates to death. The inexplicable and mentally imbalanced behaviors that so fascinated Roubaud also disappear, replaced by the extreme, but rational acts of suicide and of self-mutilation.

Likewise, the individual pederastic storyline becomes too compromising to recount, as it presupposes either the narrator's intimacy with an individual pederast or his own

³³ "J'ouvre aujourd'hui ce dossier qui n'est pas à moi, qu'on m'avait confié, en quelque façon, pour le verser aux débats de la Commission d'enquête. Ce sont environ cinquante lettres. J'en possède les originaux, on l'entend bien, avec un grand nombre d'autres, et qui sont signés, et qui portent la qualité sociale et l'adresse de leurs auteurs," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 13-14.

involvement in pederasty, both of which would cast doubt on the trustworthiness of his testimony. Instead, narrators make vague references to the corrupting effects of pederastic *moeurs* and blanket denunciations of the use of coercion to extract sexual favors. A letter signed, "[a] former inmate of Mettray, currently at the penal colony, Liberated 1/4 identification number 16738. Renault, Henri," which gives a particularly detailed account of Mettray's pederastic *moeurs*, is nevertheless typical both in its disapproving tone and in its portrayal of pederasts as an anonymous collectivity within which there are no individual names or narratives.³⁴ Renault begins hardily:

Let us discuss the sexual relations that exist in that milieu. Some are sent there by the tribunals for that, because they made a profession of it on the outside. But many others arrive at Mettray knowing nothing of this shameful vice. Unfortunately for them, they lose no time in being initiated. Households [*des ménages*] form. The heads of the family are familiar with these shameful things, but they don't say anything, because some of them take advantage of it, or else, they have to catch the culprits in the act.³⁵

He goes on to describe the rivalries produced by pederasty – "[w]hat fights, what brawls take place for those unfortunates, almost always because a stronger boy covets his comrade's boyfriend [*l'ami de son camarade*]" – and he even takes it upon himself to explain why boys give in to this "vice": "[m]ost fall because of cowardliness or interest, to avoid blows or misery [*la misère*], and to feel that they are under the protection of

³⁴ "Un ancien colon de Mettray, actuellement au bagné, Libéré 4/1 matricule 16738. Renault, Henri," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 147.

³⁵ "Parlons des relations sexuelles qui existent dans ce milieu. Quelques-uns sont envoyés par les tribunaux pour ces choses, parce qu'il en faisaient un métier dehors. Mais beaucoup d'autres, arrivant à Mettray, ne connaissent rien de ce honteux vice. Malheureusement pour eux, ils ne tardent pas à être initiés. Il se forme des ménages. Les chefs de famille connaissent ces choses honteuses, mais ils ne disent rien, car certains en profitent, ou alors, il faut qu'ils prennent les coupables sur le fait," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 145

someone stronger than them."³⁶ In its generality, its comprehensiveness, and its learned tone, Renault's account of pederasty is indistinguishable from that of a criminologist or a penal theorist. It is as if in order for an inmate to speak about carceral pederasty, he must first take on the tone and the perspective of an expert, that is, a knowledgeable observer with no personal relation to his object of study.

Danan's undeniably powerful use of first-person testimony raises a new question: under what conditions can the account of someone already delegitimized as a delinquent constitute a valid testimony? In his introduction, Danan himself voices the potential objection that these letters are untrustworthy because their authors are criminals and "abnormals" ("des anormaux"):

I repeat that I do not and never have put complete faith in my correspondents. I myself ask that a serious, that is, multifaceted investigation helps me make up my mind about the worth of their grave remarks. Secondly, it is false that all the pupils of the correction houses are abnormals, and it is false in particular of the pupils of the House of Frasn-le-Château, who are often Public Welfare orphans, pushed by tortures and privations to leave a farm where they took worse care of the children than of the livestock.³⁷

Danan's first strategy is to bypass the question of truth entirely: he is not claiming that the testimonies are true, but only that their accusations are sufficiently serious as to

³⁶ "Que de bagarres, que de rixes se passent pour ces malheureux, presque toujours du fait d'un plus fort que l'autre qui convoite l'ami de son camarade"; "La plupart tombent par veulerie, ou par intérêt, pour éviter les coups, la misère, et pour se sentir sous la défense d'un plus fort que soi," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 146.

³⁷ "Je répète que je n'accorde pas, que je n'ai jamais accordé un crédit complet à mes correspondants. Je demande moi-même qu'une enquête sérieuse, c'est-à-dire contradictoire, me fixe sur la valeur de leurs graves propos. Ensuite, il est faux que tous les pupilles des maisons de redressement soient des anormaux, et c'est faux en particulier des pupilles de la Maison de Frasn-le-Château, qui sont, souvent, des orphelins de l'Assistance publique, réduits par les sévices et les privations à quitter une ferme où l'on avait d'eux moins de soin que du bétail," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 15.

warrant a full investigation. His second point is typical of liberal reformist discourses on the children's penal colonies in that it admits of the existence of a class of abnormal and potentially dangerous inmates while distinguishing it from a separate class composed of innocent orphans and victims of bad parenting. Acquiescing to the imaginary objection that abnormals and delinquents are incapable of giving a true testimony, Danan instead shifts readers' attention to a category of normal, innocent, and trustworthy orphans.

Reformists' production of the new figure of the innocent child, whose only crime was to be orphaned, abandoned, or to have irresponsible lower-class parents, gave inmates a powerful subject position from which they might move from bank of accused to that of the accuser. However, it also contained a hidden stipulation: to pass for both innocent and normal, they must give no indication of being traumatized or mentally imbalanced, of having found pleasure in a criminal act, or of having participated in homosexual sex. In particular, they must take pains to distance themselves from the abnormal *moeurs* of the colonies. Hence, whether Renault's knowledge about homosexuality came from personal experience or from interactions with pederastic friends, in order to discuss pederasty in his testimony, he must take a position of radical exteriority, posing as an omniscient observer. It is striking that among so many letters that attest to pederasty's prevalence in the colonies, not a single author admits to having participated in pederastic sex, willingly or not. On the contrary, wherever possible, former inmates in the position of doing so legitimize their testimonies with reference to their wives, children, and social status. One author draws a particularly felicitous link

between reproduction within wedlock and the ability to tell the truth: "I am a married man, an employee within an Administration; daddy of an eight-year-old little girl, I swear on her head that what I write you is quite true."³⁸

But if no narratives complicit with carceral abnormalities appear in *The Torture Houses*, how exactly does this exclusion operate? Danan's statement that he possessed many letters aside from those published suggests that he chose what he considered to be the most forceful and the most veridical testimonies for publication. Moreover, if former inmates wrote Danan at all, it was because they had read his newspaper articles and wanted to contribute to his project. Former inmates who had experienced abuses similar to those that Danan described in his articles were the most likely to become letter writers, and they may even have imitated Danan's factual and accusatory style. One author's preface to an excursion onto new narrative territory clearly demonstrates the extent to which letter writers were familiar with Danan's topoi: "I won't mention the many small dramas that exist in most of the correction houses that, anyhow, you have noted, such as: little households [*des petits ménages*] of inmates, mistreatment, etc., etc..."³⁹ Perhaps most importantly, nothing prevented an "abnormal" from giving testimony, as long as he either remained silent about his own questionable behaviors or attributed them to others. Leaving out the parts of the story that involve breaking the law, committing sexual acts with another boy, and benefiting from hierarchal structures

³⁸ "Je suis marié, employé dans une Administration ; papa d'une fillette de onze ans, je vous jure sur sa tête que ce que je vous écris est bien vrai," Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 66.

³⁹ "Je passerai sous silence maints petits événements qui existent dans la plupart des maisons de correction et que vous avez d'ailleurs signalés, tels que: petits ménages entre colons, mauvais traitements, etc., etc..." Danan, *Maisons de Supplices*, 53.

of power and privilege would have been second nature for any former inmate even moderately aware of social conventions of legitimacy. While Danan's campaign may have accomplished the salutary task of opening a discursive subject position from which former inmates might speak, this subject position was, in truth, exceedingly narrow and constrained.

1.4 Historians and the Ideally "Ordinary" Witness

The closure of the last of the children's penal colonies in 1945 transformed the conditions under which first-person testimonies about the colonies could be published and read. No longer were former inmates' testimonies weapons of war, forged for an ongoing battle and hurled against existing institutions. They belonged henceforth to the realm of history and memory. Their medium of choice accordingly shifted from the newspaper to the historical study or the independently published memoir.

In spite of their removal from the political fray, former inmates giving historical evidence had no more discursive liberty than those giving juridical evidence. The fact that Henri Gaillac and Jacques Bourquin, two historians who published testimonies of former inmates of the boys' penal colonies, defend the truth-value of these testimonies in remarkably similar terms despite the time span of nearly three decades that separates them suggests that testimonies published as a part of historical studies are caught up in a truth game just as rigorous as the one so carefully set up by Danan. Like Danan, historians sought out witnesses whom they considered particularly well suited to holding a true discourse on the conditions of the colonies; nevertheless, the rules of who

could best speak the truth, what kind of discourse they should hold, and what constituted the truth-value of these discourses had subtly shifted. During the time of the press campaigns, truth was produced by the force of mass condemnation. As Danan intuited, while doubt could always be cast on a singular account, authorities would be forced to take notice when confronted with a mass of testimonies from different institutions and different generations, each telling of the same abuses. *The Torture Houses*, therefore, holds individual narratives to a bare-bones brevity, trusting in the crushing force of sheer accumulation. Gaillac and Bourquin, on the other hand, seek out the singular, and the singularly typical witness who can be called upon to represent a collective truth. This means that the criteria of who qualifies as *both* a trustworthy *and* a representative witness becomes quite exacting. Gaillac and Bourquin look systematically to biographical details such as the witness's social position and his personal character to establish the truth-value of his testimony. In return, these carefully hand-picked witnesses are permitted to write more fully developed narratives. Rather than tales of extreme suffering and abuse, historians sought overall documentary detail combined with enough development of the narrator's character to give his story that "ring" of authenticity. In this context, the more dramatic stories of extreme misery and heinous and repetitive abuse that Danan favored were likely to meet with skepticism. One of the goals of historical studies was to set the historical record straight by finding a witness calm and lucid enough to correct the supposed exaggerations and extravagances of scandal-mongering press reports and romanesque memoirs. As we shall see, this imperative reproduced its own assumptions about what constituted a normal and

representative witness, assumptions that gel surprisingly well with the conventions of popular narratives of boyhood.

1.4.1 Henri Gaillac and the "Testimony of Pupil 6.199"

The most thorough theorization of what constitutes an historically accurate testimony occurs in Henri Gaillac's authoritative *The Correction Houses: 1830-1945 (Les maisons de correction: 1830-1945)*. First published in 1970, Gaillac's weighty text represents the first serious archival study of the children's penal colonies, and remains their most comprehensive institutional history. Tucked into this monumental work is the brief "Testimony of Pupil 6.199" ("Témoignage du pupille 6.199"), framed by a pre- and post-face in which Gaillac explains in detail the rationale for his selection of this witness. In his preface, Gaillac sets pupil 6.199's testimony against the press campaigns and the penal administration's reports, neither of which, he claims, can give an "exact view" of the correction houses.⁴⁰ He also mentions two memoirs, Auguste Le Breton's *The High Walls*, which he refers to as a novel, and Vincent Lapie's *Saint-Florent-Life*⁴¹, which he describes as a narration "in a fictionalized form" ("sous une forme romancée") before introducing his chosen witness:

We have chosen to call to witness a former pupil [...] who, now sixty years old, having found success in a fecund professional and personal life, speaks without hatred or shame of a past in which he was the victim of a society poorly adapted to difficult social situations. Better than a professional writer, he can describe what he has lived.⁴²

⁴⁰ "une vue exacte," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 269.

⁴¹ Gaillac mistakenly attributes the authorship of *Saint-Florent-la-Vie* to the journalist Henri Joubrel.

⁴² Nous avons choisi d'en appeler au témoignage d'un ancien pupille [...], qui, âgé maintenant de soixante ans, ayant réussi une vie professionnelle et personnelle féconde, parle sans haine et sans

This short introduction, designed to justify Gaillac's choice of his witness, is packed with claims about what constitutes an historically accurate testimony. First and foremost, the legitimacy of pupil 6.199's testimony is established by its opposition to more novelesque accounts. Not just any fiction will do, however. While Gaillac could have opposed pupil 6.199's testimony to the certain fully fictional films about the colonies,⁴³ he instead chooses to emphasize the novelistic side of two texts which could arguably be considered memoirs.⁴⁴ Rather than staging a simple opposition between novel and testimony, Gaillac strategically deploys genre as a weapon in a struggle over historical truth. Gaillac's claim that, "[b]etter than a professional writer, he can describe what he has lived," suggests that the operative distinction is less between two distinct genres than that between the rhetorical savvy of professional writers and the naïve artlessness of a non-writer. Pupil 6.199 "can describe what he has lived" not because he is a skilled writer, but precisely because he is not one. Instead, we learn, pupil 6.199 is a successful member of society who has transcended his difficult childhood in order to achieve both personal and professional productivity, here associated with a quasi-biological fecundity. Finally, rather than a true delinquent, pupil 6.199 was the "victim of a society

honte d'un passé où il fut la victime d'une société inadaptée aux situations sociales difficiles. Mieux qu'un écrivain de métier, il peut décrire ce qu'il a vécu," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 269.

⁴³ Fictional films about the children's penal colonies include Emile Chautard's *Bagnes d'Enfants* (1914), Georges Gauthier's *Gosses de misère* (1933), Raymond Bernard's *Le Coupable* (1936), Léonide Moguy's *Prison sans barreaux* (1938), Léo Joannon's *Le Carrefour des Enfants Perdus* (1943), Robert Bresson's *Les Anges du péché* (1943), and Jean Dréville's *La Cage aux Rossignols* (1945). The popularity of the children's penal colonies as a subject for films in the early twentieth century is indicative of this subject's popular appeal.

⁴⁴ The fact that Gaillac does not even mention Genet's *Miracle de la rose* suggests that he did not consider this text to be a competitor for his truth claims.

poorly adapted to difficult social situations." It is as a successful, fecund citizen who, during his childhood, was an innocent victim of society, that pupil 6.199, in spite of his dehumanizing moniker, is capable of speaking the truth. Provided, that is, that he narrate it in an affect-free style "without hatred or shame." While hatred and shame might constitute legitimate emotions for someone who, for no fault of his own, was forced to spend his youth in a penal colony, Gaillac seems to judge that such emotions skew a text's accuracy. Gaillac grants the greatest credibility to a narrative that corresponds to a certain ideal of what constitutes good historical writing: a non-literary, non-rhetorical, objective, and affect-free presentation of the facts.

In fact, the testimony that follows is a short and relatively unemotional, yet detailed description of pupil 6.199's stay in the colony of Saint-Hilaire from 1923 to 1930. Pupil 6.199 calmly and clearly describes the colony's daily routines, its *moeurs*, and its (sometimes excessive) means of discipline. If shame and hatred are banned from the narrative, pride appears twice in reference to *caïdisme*. Pupil 6.199 begins with his authoritative explanation, "[h]ere, a man positions himself and wins respect according to his vices, and he is classed by his attitude. For, either you are a man, or you are the creature of the strongest," before making a proud declaration, "I was classed as a man, and I have upheld that honor. I fought several times, and, in spite of my uniform and my shaved head, I was a good looking boy."⁴⁵ Once again, social hierarchies within the penal colonies are understood to also be sexual hierarchies. As a good looking boy,

⁴⁵ "Ici, un homme se situe et se fait respecter en raison de ses vices, et il est classé selon son attitude. Car, ou vous êtes un homme, ou vous êtes la créature du plus fort"; "Je fus classé comme un homme et j'ai soutenu cet honneur. Je me suis battu plusieurs fois, et, malgré la livrée

pupil 6.199's struggle to defend his sexual honor is synonymous with his struggle to be classed as a man. His success at both of these tasks becomes the occasion for a show of manly pride. This virile display is repeated further down, during pupil 6.199's description of the consequence of his daring attack on a guard, "thanks to my act, I was anointed 'caïd.' I was proud of it."⁴⁶ Pupil 6.199's boasting itself is less striking than the fact that the virile pride seems to be the exception to the rule that emotions throw off a testimony's credibility. Virile pride might be the one emotion that has the opposite effect, legitimizing a testimony by demonstrating the witness's normative masculinity.

In his brief postface to the testimony, Gaillac underlines a novel legitimizing element – the alleged ordinariness of pupil 6.199's experience:

Pupil 6.199 was not a rebel. His story is that of all the youths of the establishment, and he made out as well, or at least, as least poorly as possible. No spectacular escapes, no rapes, no grave injuries, no dispatches to a correctional colony. A "piece of cake" next to August Le Breton's narrative.⁴⁷

What is astonishing here is the assimilation of the fact the pupil 6.199 was not a rebel, did not escape, and was not raped, seriously hurt or sent to a tougher colony to the affirmation that "[h]is story is that of all the youths of the establishment." Gaillac's characterization of pupil 6.199's experience as typical because uneventful contradicts the testimony itself, in which pupil 6.199 describes witnessing cruel and sadistic punishments, escapes, and inmates nearly beaten to death by guards, and in which he

et les cheveux rasés, j'étais beau garçon," Gaillac, *Maisons de Supplices*, 272.

⁴⁶ "d'après mon acte, j'étais sacré 'caïd'. J'en étais fier," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 278.

⁴⁷ "Le pupille 6.199 n'était pas un révolté. Son histoire est celle de tous les jeunes de l'établissement et il s'en est sorti au mieux ou du moins au moins mal possible. Pas de fugue spectaculaire, pas de viol, pas de blessure grave, pas d'envoi en colonie correctionnelle. Du 'gâteau' à côté du récit d'August Le Breton," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 278.

commits the extraordinary act (which occurs nowhere in Le Breton's memoir) of attacking a guard, thereby acceding to the privileged position of *caïd*. Moreover, Gaillac's astonishing affirmation that "he made out as well, or at least, as least poorly as possible," betrays that he himself considered the supposed uneventfulness of pupil 6.199's experience to be extraordinary rather than typical. The following statement might help us comprehend this conundrum: "[b]ecause this witness was not a true delinquent or social misfit, and because his experience seems almost commonplace, his narrative is that much more eloquent concerning the true ambiance of reeducation from 1920 to 1930."⁴⁸ Pupil 6.199's story is considered trustworthy, normal, and representative because it reassuringly resembles the commonplace normative experience of non-incarcerated boys. In his quest for a typical experience, Gaillac superimposes a dominant vision of normalcy upon a carceral culture in which the norm might, in fact, have been entirely different. Was it really the experience of the majority of inmates in the colonies to hold the privileged position of *caïd*, to go on to a life of personal and professional "success," and to speak of their incarceration without negative affect? Such questions are entirely bypassed by Gaillac, for whom the unquestionable given of dominant masculine normalcy is the guarantee of truth and of representativeness.

1.4.2 Raoul Léger's *Memoirs of an Inmate*

In 1997, nearly thirty years after Gaillac's publication of the "Testimony of Pupil 9.166," Jacques Bourquin, one of France's leading contemporary historians of

⁴⁸ "Parce que ce témoin n'était pas un véritable délinquant, inadapté social, et parce que son expérience apparaît comme presque banale, son récit n'en est que plus éloquent sur l'ambiance

reformatory institutions for minors, organized the publication of an historical study of Mettray with the memoir of former Mettray inmate Raoul Léger as its centerpiece. Bourquin's decision to publish a new memoir from Mettray at this time is significant, as 1997, almost sixty years after the Mettray's closure, represents a sort of limit date for finding lucid and living former inmates. In his introduction, Bourquin presents his project as a corrective to the exclusion of children's penal colonies like Mettray from historical memory: "[a]pproximately ten thousand children were placed at Mettray between 1840 and 1937. They were excluded from the world. Today, they seem excluded from memory."⁴⁹ To fill this deficit in historical memory, Bourquin launches a call for testimonies from former Mettray inmates on the radio.

At this point in his introduction, however, a shift in number takes place. While both the inmates excluded from memory (*ils*) and the testimonies solicited (*témoignages*) are plural, the witness that Bourquin chooses is singular, if not extraordinary.

Bourquin's introduction to Léger's *Memoirs of an Inmate (Souvenirs d'un colon)* underlines many of the same legitimizing character traits as Gaillac's introduction to the "Testimony of Inmate 6.199." As Bourquin explains, "Mr. Léger does not offer us the image of a bitter or rebellious character. He was rebellious against his condition of an abandoned and bruised child. He remained rebellious against injustice, but he is at the same time a man who, after a particularly rough youth, was able to achieve social and affective

réelle de la rééducation de 1920 à 1930," Gaillac, *Maisons de correction*, 279.

⁴⁹ "Environ dix-mille enfants ont été placés à Mettray entre 1840 et 1937. Ils étaient exclus du monde, ils semblent aujourd'hui exclus de la mémoire," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 7.

success."⁵⁰ To ensure that readers attend to the historical value of Léger's memoir, Bourquin carefully explains that any whiffs of anger or indignation within it are purely situational and do not constitute fundamental character traits. For, once again, it is good character, manifested by social integration and by successful professional and personal (that is, family) life, that guarantees Léger's ability to tell a true story. Translated into the jargon of the nineties, Léger "was able to find his place in a society that had rejected him since he was nine years old. He is not of the breed of victims, and his gaze on his childhood merits interest."⁵¹ The perspective of a "victim" – that is, someone who did not go on to lead a normatively successful professional and family life and who looks back on his childhood imprisonment with more than passing indignation – would presumably be devoid of interest.⁵²

Again, a testimony's legitimacy is soldered to the normalcy of its author, even when this normalcy can only be considered an extraordinary, and indeed, a rather abnormal achievement. Upon reading Léger's narrative, we learn that, in addition to leading a successful adult life, Léger had an extraordinary career as one of Mettray's star pupils: he is regularly cited as a conscientious worker; he is the colony's bugler; he competes on Mettray's prestigious gymnastics team; and he becomes the pet of the head

⁵⁰ "Monsieur Léger ne nous offre pas l'image d'un personnage aigri ou révolté. Il fut rebelle à sa condition d'enfant abandonné et meurtri. Il est resté rebelle à l'injustice, mais c'est en même temps un homme qui, après une jeunesse particulièrement rude, a su réussir sa vie socialement et affectivement," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 8.

⁵¹ "il a su faire sa place dans une société qui l'avait rejeté dès l'âge de neuf ans. Il n'est pas de la race des victimes et le regard qu'il porte sur son enfance mérite l'intérêt" Léger, *Souvenirs*, 8.

⁵² It is interesting to note this shift between Gaillac and Bourquin's political worlds. Whereas, for Gaillac, it is legitimizing to state that pupil 6.199 was a victim of social circumstance rather than a true delinquent, by the nineties, the discourse of victimization, with its implication that social

guard, Guépin. He even turns down a position as an "elder brother," an unheard of act which demonstrates his refusal to take advantage of Mettray's exploitative hierarchies. Léger's attempt to hang himself, which occurs at the height of his glory, and which Léger himself cannot explain even in retrospect, is this all the more disturbing, registering an unnarrativizable current of trauma even in this most successful of Mettray narratives. Tellingly, Bourquin's introduction passes over Léger's suicide attempt and all that it might imply about the sheer psychic stress of even the most successful stay at Mettray in favor of a series of guarantees of Léger's normalcy and good character.

Included in the publication is a vituperative letter to Bourquin, cited in this chapter's epigraph, that consists almost entirely of Léger's corrections of the inaccuracies he finds in Genet's *Miracle of the Rose*. Incensed by Genet's lyrical accounts of pederastic relations at the colony, Léger references a passage in which Genet describes his "marriage" with Divers at the colony's chapel to denounce *Miracle* as "pulp fiction for homosexuals!" sputtering, "[y]ou'd think that Mettray was a boarding school for young ladies!"⁵³ In spite of Léger's double condemnation of Genet as both a pulp fiction writer and a sentimentalizing, fantasizing homosexual, Léger's narrative is both the most novelesque and the most sentimental that we have studied thus far. As Bourquin points out in his introduction, Mettray figures in Léger's narrative not only as an abusive institution, but also as the site of an adolescence "in which hatred and friendship are

determinations come before individual choices, has acquired a negative connotation.

⁵³ "du roman feuilleton pour homosexuels! A croire que Mettray était un pensionnat pour jeunes filles!" Léger, *Souvenirs*, 108.

mixed," permitting the telling of a more personal and sentimental story.⁵⁴ This is in part because Léger's *Memoirs* belong as much to the genre of memoir as to that of testimony. If Léger is manifestly concerned with documentary detail and factual accuracy, he is also engaged in the project of recording his memories of adolescence at Mettray, and, in particular, in describing how certain experiences at Mettray affected and transformed him. Léger's memoir puts a great deal of emphasis on his character (the reason, after all, why he was selected to author this memoir) and its development, leading him to adopt a narrative style heavily influenced by popular literary genres.

The narrative arc of Léger's *Memoirs* is astonishingly close to that of Auguste Le Breton's semi-fictional 1954 memoir, *The High Walls*, which I will describe later in this chapter. Like Le Breton, Léger tells the tale of a young and naïve, but sympathetic *cloche* (in carceral slang, an expression for a low-ranked boy) who is forced, by his older friends, to prove himself by undergoing a rite of passage, and who, even after he is accepted among the *marles* (slang for tough, high-ranked boys) refuses to use his status to bully or take advantage of other boys. It is, in other words, an ideal tale in which all the contradictions of Mettray are resolved, rendering it possible to win a position at the top of Mettray's exploitative masculine hierarchies without oneself exploiting these hierarchies. This paradigm, which I will henceforth refer to as the *coming-to-virility narrative*, is most interesting in its specifics, where its normative concern with acceding to virility grinds against the initial feminized dependency of the young, weak, and inexperienced protagonist. This clash, and the underlying question of whether the

⁵⁴ "où se mêlait haine et amitié," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 8.

protagonist's dependency is merely a result of his youth or whether he is destined to forever remain a disgraceful *cloche*, is the major source of narrative tension and movement. Both Léger's *Memoirs* and Le Breton's *The High Walls* might be read as veritable guides to the protocols of adolescent masculinity and male friendship. They respond to a series of pressing questions: What are the signs that a boy, in spite of his youthful weakness, is going to mature into a "true" man? To what extent is it acceptable for him to bow before bullies and to lean on older friends, and at what point does such behavior become disgraceful? What are the virile performances that best remedy this disgrace? What relations may a fully virile boy entertain with other boys? Etc...

Indeed, if pederasty describes a homosexual relationship built on an inequality of age, power, and masculinity, Léger's *Memoirs*, like Le Breton's *The High Walls*, is intimately concerned with what we might call *pederastic friendship*: the protocols of friendship between an older and a younger, a stronger and a weaker, a more virile and a less virile boy. In this respect, Léger's narrative is hardly extraordinary. Contrary to Foucault's suggestion, in "Friendship as a Way of Life," that contemporary male friendship constitutes an evocatively undercoded zone of experience, I suspect that we might find, in a range of popular fiction genres including boy's adventure novels, boy's coming-of-age stories, and popular novels featuring sympathetic bands of petty hooligans, a rich archive of information on the protocols of pederastic friendship.

The narrator Raoul's story begins before his internment in Mettray, when his mother dies and his father abandons him to Public Welfare at the age of seven. Before being sent to Mettray, Raoul is transferred between different Public Welfare locales,

enjoys a brief, but pleasant stint at a mild reform school, and is placed with a family that exploits him for his labor. Raoul is sent to Mettray in 1922 when he is caught during his escape from the exploitative farm family with money he alleges to have “found” on the road. Small and wiry from years of malnutrition and hardly a fighter, Raoul is naturally classed as a *cloche* at Mettray. He gets by initially by avoiding fights, doing the older boys' chores, and accepting the help of more experienced friends. Foremost among these is Roger, a tough, slang-talking boy who arrives at Mettray crowned by the prestige of having lived in the crime-ridden *faubourgs* of Paris. Roger becomes Raoul's mentor, teaching him essential survival skills such as how to fight and how to soften his wooden shoes so they do not hurt his feet. One fateful day, however, Roger and Debride, Raoul's other friends, decide that it is time for Raoul to choose between their friendship and his habit of submitting to the other boys. As Roger puts it, “[i]f you do the dishes for Passavant, I'll give you a beating myself.”⁵⁵ Accordingly, that night, after refusing to do Passavant's dishes, Raoul puts his new fighting skills to use, quickly trouncing the stronger boy. Debride and Roger then complete the right of passage by initiating Raoul into the codes of a normative honorable masculinity. The ethics of this masculinity are refusing to submit to others – “you shouldn't let anyone get the better of you. It's nothing to take a beating during a fight, but it's lousy to chicken out” – and choosing not to dominate others – “[d]oing the dishes is no dishonor.’ ‘I do them too, when it's my turn,’ said Debride, ‘even though there are *cloches* who'd love to do them

⁵⁵ “Si tu fais la vaisselle à la place de Passavant, c'est moi qui te flanquerais une trempe,” Léger, *Souvenirs*, 70.

for us."⁵⁶ Raoul's virile schooling completed, Roger declares him a man – "Well done, bloke, you're a man!" – and Raoul assumes his new position as a "little *marle*" with Roger and Debride, "two *marle* guys that everyone respects."⁵⁷ The masculinity into which Roger and Debride initiate Raoul is a normative one, which distances itself from Mettray's masculine hierarchies of domination and dependence by refusing to be submit to others, to needlessly dominate others, and to take a punk.

While, unlike other memoirs, Léger's *Memoirs* does not discuss pederasty directly, the threat or insult of pederasty haunts Roger and Raoul's pederastic friendship, playing a major role in the fights that serve to allocate masculinity. Raoul and Roger's pederastic friendship is, in fact, born under the shadow of pederasty: the first time that Roger talks to Raoul and some other boys, the "elder brother" Jégouzo insults Roger with the question, "[a]re you picking out a punk?" implying that Raoul might be a potential bottom for Roger.⁵⁸ While Roger's virile response of trouncing Jégouzo is meant to stifle any doubts, the pederastic differential apparent in Roger's friendship with Raoul, a mere *cloche*, keeps Jégouzo's compromising accusation alive. This explains the logic of Roger's proposition to Raoul: either Raoul fights, in which case he proves himself a "man" and may continue to be Roger's friend, or Roger gives Raoul a beating, publicly repudiating his compromising friendship. Fortunately, Raoul chooses

⁵⁶ "tu ne dois pas te laisser dominer par personne. Prendre une trempe dans une bagarre, c'est rien, mais se dégonfler, c'est moche"; "– Faire la vaisselle c'est pas un déshonneur, – A mon tour, je la fais moi aussi, dit Debride, pourtant il y a des cloches qui se feraient un plaisir de la faire à notre place," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 70.

⁵⁷ "A la bonne heure, mec, t'es un homme!" "petit marle"; "deux mecs marles que tous respectent," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 74, 75.

⁵⁸ "Tu te choisis un giron?" Léger, *Souvenirs*, 63.

the first course, and his friendship with Roger is cleansed of any stain.

Most importantly, however, Raoul's virile performance (which he must repeat when another inmate winks at him and insults his masculinity, calling him a "girl," a "bitch," and a "cocksucker") frees him to express the intensity of his feelings for Roger.⁵⁹ The sentimental language used to describe Raoul's feelings for Roger during their joint escape attempt stands out in an otherwise unornamented and slangy narrative style. When Roger invites Raoul to escape with him, Raoul's enthusiasm takes the most romantic of expressions: "I'd go to the ends of the earth with him."⁶⁰ Thanks to Roger's savoir faire, the escape attempt goes as planned. However, when Roger finds a bicycle, Raoul, who never learned to ride a bike, realizes what a burden he is to his friend. In spite of his ardent desire to go to the ends of the earth with Roger, Raoul nobly chooses to sacrifice his own happiness to better his friend's chances. The time has come to bid Roger farewell: "the decisive moment arrived. We fell into one another's arms, 'Let's give each other a brotherly kiss [*la bise fraternelle*],' he told me."⁶¹ Going to the ends of the earth with one's friend, sacrificing oneself for him, falling into his arms, giving him a brotherly kiss – strikingly, Léger chooses to represent the ardor and the exaltation of virile friendship in the colonies through the most romanesque and romantic of clichés. Such sentimental language, it turns out, is by no means the exception in memoirs about the boys' penal colonies. However, here as elsewhere, the thrills of virile friendship can only be expressed in a narrative which, at other points, violently exorcizes the possibility

⁵⁹ "fillette," " salope," and an "enc.." for "enculé," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 98.

⁶⁰ "Avec lui, j'irais au bout du monde," Léger, *Souvenirs*, 83.

⁶¹ "le moment décisif arrive. Nous tombons dans les bras l'un de l'autre: 'Faisons-nous la bise

of pederasty.

Léger's *Memoirs* were written in 1997, subsequent to the publication of several other memoirs written by former inmates of the children's penal colonies. From his letter to Bourquin, we know that Léger had closely read Genet's *Miracle of the Rose* and Jean-Guy Le Dano's *La Mouscaille*, and that he conceived of his project as, in some sense, a corrective to the putative lies and inaccuracies of these memoir writers. Nevertheless, it is clear from the narrative arc of its coming-to-virility-tale, its emphasis on character development, and its use of romanesque clichés that Léger's narrative is itself permeated by novelistic and fictional conventions. Rather than delegitimizing his narrative, however, Léger's citation of such topoi actually works to garner credibility. For the conventions that Léger invokes are not merely literary; rather, they correspond to deeply rooted cultural beliefs about normative boyhood. In his use of these novelistic conventions to construct a likeable, recognizably "normal" boyish character and to describe his gradual accession to a normative, autonomous virility, Léger is only emphasizing the qualities that, in Bourquin's eyes, made him a trustworthy witness in the first place. In so doing, he reveals the criteria of normalcy and independence that define a trustworthy witness to be intimately tied to cultural codes of masculinity. It is by refusing to submit to the older boys and to be dependent on Roger that Raoul becomes a man, and it is this same ideal of virile independence from the circumstances of one's life that convinces Bourquin of the legitimacy of Léger's testimony. This is a case, then, in which it is precisely the aspects of a narrative that owe the most to certain

fraternelle,' me dit-il" Léger, *Souvenirs*, 85.

gendered novelistic conventions that prove it worthy of being considered historical truth.

1.5 The Memoir: Close Encounters with Pederasty

Of the seven memoirs I found describing adolescence in one of the boys' penal colonies, I have selected two, Auguste Le Breton's *The High Walls* and Vincent Lapie's *Saint-Florent-Life*, for closer study.⁶² In addition to drawing heavily on the conventions and storylines of popular literature, both texts fudge proper names (giving the narrator a different name than the that of the author and either changing or omitting the names of the penal colonies) and forego the legitimization of an "expert" preface certifying their historical authenticity. Both are therefore situated on the outskirts of the genre of the

⁶² As a memoir which stays close to the conventions of testimony, *Bagne de gosses* does not differ substantially from the testimonies studied thus far. See Alan Kerdauid, *Bagne de gosses (Mettray-Aniane)* (Paris: La pensée universelle, 1978). I have also omitted several fascinating memoirs written around the 1970s, including René Biard, *Bagnards en culottes courtes: Comment se fabrique un repris de justice* (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1968); Henri le Lyonnais, *Ancien détenu cherche emploi* (Paris: Éditions du jour, 1974); Le Dano, *La Mouscaille*; and Claude Charmes, *Le Maximum, Souvenirs recueillis par Jacques Perrier*. Ed. Jacques Perrier (Paris: Stock, 1974). These memoirs all concern individuals who were imprisoned after the closure of Mettray and the limited reforms of 1939. They are therefore set in a slightly different moment in the history of the children's penal colonies than that which concerns us. The major difference, however, is that these memoirs' major political referent is not Danan's liberal reform campaign, but the more radical and thoroughgoing penal critiques and prisoners' movements of the late sixties and early seventies. Both their political orientation and their relation to normativity therefore differ substantially from the texts we are studying. The narrators of these memoirs often participate in inmate cultures, commit crimes as adults, and "graduate" to adult prisons. Political critiques of the penal system are far more far-reaching in these texts, as they are interested not only in the fate of normal boys who never should have been imprisoned in the first place, but also in the way in which the penal system works to produce a whole population of delinquents. While, in some ways, Genet's writing has more in common with these memoirs than with Le Breton's and Lapie's, in the context of this study, it seemed to me that the combined variables of historical moment and political reference radically transformed the truth-games to which these narratives responded. The politicized prison memoirs of the 1970s belong to a different world than those of the 1940s and 1950s.

memoir, where it shades into popular literature. This partial renunciation of "truth" allows both authors to put their protagonists into direct contact with pederasty. Since the author and the protagonist do not bear the same name, a certain doubt is cast on the possibility that the author is recounting *his own* encounters with pederasty. Pederasty, moreover, plays a very specific role in both narratives, functioning both as the paradigmatic figure of scandalous carceral *moeurs* and as the primary motor for plot development. These pop-memoir-novels are able to make pederasty a central element of their narratives because their novelistic style requires a plot line articulating both a problem and its resolution. Pederasty can be incorporated into this structure precisely as a problem, provoking a climactic crisis before being resolved into the normative plot line of the coming-to-virility narrative. Nevertheless, something about pederasty remains unassimilable to these efforts of narrative mastery, returning to haunt the story subsequent to the triumph of normative virility.

1.5.1 *The High Walls*: Exorcizing Pederasty

The High Walls, originally printed in 1954, is the first published work of Auguste Le Breton, who would go on to become one of the stars of the detective novel genre in France, as well as one of the founders of the *Série noire*, the major publisher of French detective and crime literature. Despite its description on the back cover as an "autobiographical narrative resounding with truth," and its general acceptance as a sort of memoir of Le Breton's adolescence at the penal colony of Mettray, *The High Walls* is, first and foremost, a "good story" told by an author who has thoroughly absorbed the

conventions, sources of readerly pleasure, and possibilities of contained transgression available within popular masculine narratives.⁶³ The novelistic dimension of *The High Walls* is accentuated by the fact that the protagonist's story is recounted not by Tréguier himself, but by an omniscient narrator, creating a narrative distance that allows Le Breton to bring Tréguier dangerously close to both complete corruption and humiliating emasculation.

Tréguier's fall is rendered all the more dramatic by the fact that he begins the memoir as the paradigmatic innocent orphan. Losing his parents to World War I, he spends his childhood in an orphanage, until two escape attempts, presented as harmless acts of childish fancy, impel his usually absent guardian⁶⁴ to transfer Tréguier to an unnamed boys' penal colony. Tréguier's exaggerated innocence and naivety upon his arrival establish his difference from the hardened inmates of the colony, setting the stage for a rather heavy narrative irony: initially apprehensive at the cruelty and violence of the other inmates at the colony, Tréguier is himself destined to be transformed into a typical product of the colony who, pushed to his limits, attacks another inmate with a knife. Several months after Tréguier's arrival, we learn that "[o]f the naive young lad, not half bad, that we saw embark from his orphanage one November evening, nothing

⁶³ "récit autobiographique criant de vérité." *Les Hauts Murs* has proved a text of lasting popularity. It has gone through several publications, and, in 2008, was adapted by Christian Faure into a film by the same name.

⁶⁴ The major object of critique in *Les Hauts Murs* is less the system of the children's penal colonies than the hard-heartedness and irresponsibility of lazy parents and guardians who confide their children to the penal colonies rather than caring for them themselves. Tréguier's guardian is therefore portrayed as hard-hearted and absent, while Tréguier's friend, Fil-de-Fer's bourgeois mother is represented as frivolous and irresponsible. Her abandonment of her son leads to his eventual suicide.

was left."⁶⁵ Tréguier's time at the colony had changed him:

Physically, he had grown husky. His gaze had lost the gleam of childhood; he was watchful, mistrustful, inhuman. The scars on his body, those that slashed his shaved head, attested to the blows he had received. His character had become harsh, pitiless. Like all his comrades, he was lost to society.⁶⁶

What experiences could possibly have transformed Tréguier from an innocent orphan to an inhuman, pitiless delinquent, lost to society? While this passage focuses on Tréguier's bodily scars, left by violent blows, the text describes, in addition, two morally transformative revelations, both concerning encounters with pederasty. The first is the moment in which, after another prisoner's brutally direct explanation, Tréguier finally understands that the *caïd*, Molina, is publicly asking him to be his punk. Metaphors of breaking and tearing – "[s]omething broke inside of Tréguier. A veil was torn" – figure both the destruction of Tréguier's innocence and the unveiling of (homo)sexual knowledge.⁶⁷ The second transformative event is a visual revelation credited with Tréguier's loss of religious faith: "[t]he first time that, entering the dormitory by chance, he had surprised, on their knees between two beds, two pupils copulating, he nearly threw up his stew. That vision had upset the religious beliefs instilled in him ever since the orphanage."⁶⁸ These homosexual revelations are presented as responsible for

⁶⁵ "Du jeune gars naïf, guère méchant, qu'on avait vu débarquer par un soir de novembre de son orphelinat, il ne restait rien," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 155.

⁶⁶ "Physiquement, il avait forci. Son regard avait perdu le reflet de l'enfance; il était attentif, méfiant, inhumain. Les cicatrices de son corps, celles qui zébraient son crâne rasé, attestaient les coups reçus. Au moral, il était devenu teigneux, impitoyable. Comme tous ses camarades, il était perdu pour la société," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 156.

⁶⁷ "Quelque chose se brisa en Tréguier. Un voile se déchira," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 80.

⁶⁸ "La première fois où, entrant au hasard dans le dortoir, il avait surpris, à genoux entre deux lits, deux pupilles accouplés, il avait failli dégueuler son rata. Cette vision avait bouleversé les croyances religieuses qu'on lui avait inculquées dans son orphelinat," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*,

Tréguier's fall from innocence and as turning points in his transformation into a hardened delinquent, dramatically illustrating reformist theses about the corrupting effects of pederastic *moeurs*.

The passages cited above, which dramatically establish the narrative of corruption, nevertheless remain unconvincing in light of Tréguier's continuing sympathetic characterization. If the narrative of corruption is exaggerated for dramatic effect at certain key moments, it is nonetheless primarily channeled into the more normative and upbeat coming-to-virility narrative. Insofar as attaining a mature virility might involve losing a certain innocence, acquiring a clear view of moral corruption, and surviving hardships, Tréguier's achievement of virility both counterbalances and redeems his loss of innocence. As in Léger's *Memoirs of an Inmate*, Tréguier's coming-to-virility narrative comprises two major elements: a transformative pederastic friendship and the violent rites of passage through which Tréguier must perform his virile independence from this friendship. Once again, it is the threat of pederasty, which negatively mirrors virile friendship at every stage, which brings these two elements together.

This doubling of virile friendship and pederasty is first established through the parallel between the two *caïds* of the colony, Blondeau and Molina, equals in strength, age, and prestige, but moral opposites. Blondeau, the honorable heterosexual, is a fast friend and a fair leader. Molina, the dangerous pederast, is a figure of illegitimate authority and of disquieting sexuality. While Blondeau is initially ordered to instruct

Tréguier in the militaristic rituals of the colony, Tréguier must soon make his own choice between the two *caïds* and what they each represent. During the evening recreation, Molina quickly identifies the newcomer Tréguier as a potential bottom: "[t]hat kid's a punk. I'll have him, all right!"⁶⁹ After ordering Tréguier to come sit beside him, Molina publicly offers him his protection and promises to come visit him in his bed later that night. Tréguier understands nothing of Molina's propositions until another boy explains, "[i]t's simple. He wants you to be his chick [*sa gonzesse*]!"⁷⁰ At this moment, the ripping of Tréguier's veil of innocence coincides with his shocked indignation: "[h]e leaped to his feet. He was shaking, 'No!' he yelled with all his strength. 'Are you crazy?'"⁷¹ On this cue, Blondeau breaks his long standing truce with Molina to come to Tréguier's defense. Declaring, "[b]ecause the boy said no [...] That's what I wanted to know," Blondeau threatens Molina with a knife, forcing him to back down and preventing what would likely have been a gruesome rape scene.⁷²

Once Tréguier has publicly performed his disgust for pederasty proper, his pederastic friendship with Blondeau – structured by inequalities in strength, age, and social status – can truly blossom. This segment of the narrative, in which Tréguier adores and depends upon his protector while ardently desiring his friendship, eloquently renders the affective intensities of pederastic friendship. In this respect, Tréguier's first gesture of friendship towards Blondeau, after the latter has saved him

⁶⁹ "Il est giron c' môme! J' me l' ferais bien!" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 78.

⁷⁰ "Tout simplement, il veut qu' tu deviennes sa gonzesse, quoi!" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 80.

⁷¹ "Il se releva d'un bond. Il tremblait 'Ah non! hurla-t-il de toutes ses forces. Vous êtes fous?" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 80.

⁷² "Parce que le gars a dit non [...] C'est c' que je voulais savoir," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 82.

from Molina, is quite remarkable. Tréguier remains behind, trying to decide what to do as he watches Blondeau take leave of him for the night. "Tréguier watched him walk away. It was too much for him, he called him back, 'Blondeau!'" He searches around in his luggage. "When his hand closed over a half a bar of chocolate, his heart started beating faster. He broke it in two, and held out one half to Blondeau."⁷³ At first, Blondeau refuses, however, "[t]he newcomer's face must have expressed his feelings, because Blondeau, changing his mind, smiled, 'It's all right. Give it here.'"⁷⁴ Moving breathlessly from Tréguier's initial hesitation to his overwhelming need, from the nervous beating of his heart to his near brush with refusal and disappointment to his narrow victory, won by the sheer eloquence of his expression, Tréguier's offer of half of his piece of chocolate takes on all the momentous gravity of a declaration of love.

However, the carnal revelation of his friend's body, of which Tréguier has already remarked "the massive shoulders [...] where the bulging muscles seemed like they should burst the fabric of the uniform," must await the next morning.⁷⁵ When Tréguier enters the showers at dawn, he sees that

[s]hirtless in spite of the sharp cold, Blondeau was vigorously soaping himself. With each movement of his arms, his bulging muscles rippled. Under the soaping, his burly body began to steam.⁷⁶

⁷³ "Tréguier le regarda s'éloigner. Ce fut plus fort que lui, il le rappela: Blondeau!" "[q]uand sa main se referma sur la demi-plaque de chocolat, son coeur se mit à battre plus vite. Il la rompit en deux, en tendit une moitié à Blondeau," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 87.

⁷⁴ "La physionomie du nouveau devait exprimer ses sentiments, car Blondeau, se ravisant, souri: Ça va, donne," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 88.

⁷⁵ "les massives épaules [...] où les muscles nouveaux semblaient devoir faire éclater le tissu du treillis," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 60.

⁷⁶ "Le torse nu en dépit du froid vif, Blondeau se savonnait vigoureusement. A chaque mouvement de ses bras, des muscles nouveaux roulaient. Sous le savonnage, son corps robuste commençait à fumer," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 99.

The force of Tréguier's gaze on Blondeau's nearly naked body is palpable in this incredibly sensuous description of Blondeau's brawny torso, the play of his muscles as he soaps himself, and the steam rising off of his body. Himself demurely hesitant to undress, Tréguier waits for Blondeau's invitation – "[g]et naked and come on in!" – before joining him in the showers.⁷⁷ All too soon, however, shower time is over, and Tréguier must watch Blondeau leave for his job outside of the colony. Fortunately, sensing how difficult this separation must be for his young friend, Blondeau thinks to offer Tréguier a parting sign of his affection, "[a]s Tréguier, his heart heavy, watched him plunge into the yellowish fog, Blondeau, in a few strides, returned to him, 'Here,' he said, holding out three cigarettes."⁷⁸ By offering Tréguier three cigarettes after having accepted half of his piece of chocolate, Blondeau completes the circuit of gifts, binding the boys together in friendship and, presumably, lightening Tréguier's heavy heart.

Unfortunately, his thrilling and romantic stage of Tréguier and Blondeau's friendship cannot last, for Tréguier's dependence on Blondeau is matched by his shameful submission before the other boys. During his first day at the iron workshop, le Rouquin, a friend of Molina, bullies Tréguier until the latter agrees to repeat after him, "I don't have any guts."⁷⁹ That evening, Blondeau angrily confronts Tréguier about the incident, "[s]eems that Roquin treated you like a fairy [*une lope*]... And that, 'cause you were scared of punches, you repeated whatever he wanted. Isn't that right? And that

⁷⁷ "Fous-toi à poil et vas-y!" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 99.

⁷⁸ "Comme Tréguier, le coeur gros, le regardait s'enfoncer dans la brume jaunâtre, Blondeau, en quelques enjambées, revient sur lui: Prends, dit-il, lui tendant trois cigarettes," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 105.

you even would've got down on your knees if he'd insisted."⁸⁰ In Blondeau's interpretation, Trégieur's virility has been abased; Trégieur has allowed Rouquin to treat him like a fairy and would even have agreed to kneel before him in the posture of oral servicing. Trégieur is overcome by shame and, significantly in a narrative in which affective ties are figured by gifts, returns the knife that Blondeau has just given him, admitting, "I know I don't deserve it."⁸¹ As this gesture proves that Trégieur has understood something about the codes of virile honor that he has broken, Blondeau awkwardly tosses the knife back to him before giving Blondeau one last chance to redeem himself: "Rouquin... We're gonna meet him in the courtyard, and you're gonna charge him."⁸² Pushed to this confrontation by Blondeau, Trégieur fights Rouquin and loses badly. Nevertheless, by manifesting his refusal to be dominated "like a fairy," he has performed his masculine independence, and is henceforth secure in his virile friendship with Blondeau.

Trégieur's coming to virility, however, requires him not only to publicly perform masculine independence while under Blondeau's protection, but also to learn to survive without Blondeau. After Blondeau escapes from the colony, Trégieur is left to his own defences, while Molina, the sole remaining *caïd*, is left free to reign unchecked. It is thus without a guide or protector that Trégieur will be submitted to the most perilous of tests:

⁷⁹ "J'ai rien dans le bide" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 132.

⁸⁰ "Paraît que le Rouquin t'a traité comme une lope... Et que par peur des jetons, t'as répété tout ce qu'il a voulu. C'est pas vrai? Même que tu t' serais foutu à genoux s'il avait insisté," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 136.

⁸¹ "[j]' sais que j' le mérite pas," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 136.

⁸² "Rouquin... Nous allons l' rejoindre dans la cour et tu vas foncer dedans," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 137.

that of the public violation of his corporeal masculine integrity. For Molina, who has never ceased to resent Tréguier for having refused him, Blondeau's departure represents an opportunity to complete the act of physical possession that Tréguier had previously refused him. One day, entering the dorms with a group of intoxicated friends, Molina invites Tréguier to drink with him. Given this memoir's semiotics of ingestible gifts, for Tréguier to accept to drink Molina's rum would imply opening himself towards Molina, something which, given Molina's outstanding sexual interest in Tréguier, would risk distinct sexual consequences. When Tréguier therefore refuses to ingest Molina's rum, closing himself off to penetration once again, Molina, infuriated, decides to take him by force, orally raping him with the rum bottle: "[s]adistically, Molina thrust the bottle in. In spite of himself, Tréguier's lips spread open; the neck smashed his palate in. He was suffocating; his eyes were coming out of their sockets."⁸³ Tréguier is then held down by Molina's friends, who lower his pants, exposing his bottom:

Unexpected, the first blow stung the small of his back, burning him like a hot iron. He closed his eyes, and bit down on his lips, praying, "My God, don't let that [*cette chose-là*] happen ... Help me... I swear that..." A second blow fell. Then they followed one another, whipping his flesh, beating in his brain, which was ready to explode. He yelled, "Jesus Christ, you scumbag! If you exist, you or your father, make us all die!... What are you waiting for, you bastard?"⁸⁴

In spite of all that might be suggested by Tréguier's compromising posture, his

⁸³ "Avec sadisme, Molina enfonçait la bouteille. Les lèvres de Tréguier, malgré elles, s'écartaient; le goulot lui défonçait le palais. Il suffoqua; les yeux lui sortaient des orbites," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 219.

⁸⁴ "Inattendu, le premier coup le cingla au creux des reins, le brûlant comme un fer rouge. Il ferma les yeux, serra les dents sur ses lèvres qui priaient: "Mon Dieu, laissez pas accomplir cette chose-là... Venez à mon secours... J' vous jure que je volerai plus jamais un bout de pain. J' vous jure que..." Un second coup s'abattit. Puis ils se succédèrent, fouaillant sa chair, tapant dans son cerveau prêt à éclater. Il hurla: "Fumier de Jésus-Christ! Si tu existes, toi ou ton père, fais-nous

desperate prayer, then blasphemy, and his intimation that what is happening ("cette chose-là") is both unnamable and unspeakable, Tréguier is not being anally raped, but rather whipped with Molina's belt. Read literally, this scene constitutes a humiliating violation of Tréguier's masculine bodily integrity. However, both structurally, in the context of the pederast Molina's punishment of Tréguier's refusals of penetration, and semantically, in the description of the beating as something that not only stings the surface of Tréguier's skin, but also resounds deep in his flesh and even his brain, this passage functions as a rape scene. Indeed, it is possible that the bottle and belt scenes function as transparent substitutes for oral and anal rapes which, if described as graphically as the scenes above, would have been subject to censorship.⁸⁵ The sexual signification of this scene is acknowledged when the guard enters to discover Tréguier beaten, on all fours, his pants pulled down. Swiftly calculating, Molina explains his aggression as a homophobic act, "I'm the one who hit him, Chief [...] Imagine that the little bastard wanted me to do things to him. Things that... You understand, Chief?"⁸⁶ As a result, Tréguier is put into solitary confinement for two weeks while Molina goes free. Upon his release, Tréguier is prepared to defend himself. The next time Molina bullies him, he swiftly plunges a knife into Molina's stomach, an act which gets him transferred to a stricter colony until the age of twenty-one. This dramatic knife attack

tous crever!... Qu'est-ce que t'attends, salaud?" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 221.

⁸⁵ When Gaillac contrasts the supposed uneventfulness of pupil 6.199's testimony with the high drama of Le Breton's by stating what is absent from pupil 6.199's testimony – "[p]as de fugue spectaculaire, pas de viol, pas de blessure grave, pas d'envoi en colonie correctionnelle. Du "gâteau" à côté du récit d'August Le Breton" – he interprets this passage as a rape scene. Gaillac *Maisons de correction*, 278, my emphasis).

⁸⁶ "C'est moi qui l'ai frappé, Chef [...] Figurez-vous qu' ce petit salaud voulait que j'lui fasse des

functions on two narrative levels. In the context of the loss-of-innocence narrative, it proves Tréguier's utter corruption by the colony and his transformation into a true delinquent. Within the logic of the coming-to-virility narrative, however, it constitutes an act of violent penetration through which Tréguier recuperates his own badly damaged virility.

The High Walls' staging of the encounter of a normative coming-to-virility friendship narrative with a pederastic carceral culture allows it at once to explore the intensities of adolescent pederastic friendship – its romance, its richly significant rituals, and its alluring dependencies – and to demonstrate how such overt manifestations of affection must be purified and tamed for virility to be attained. The threat of pederasty, which shadows pederastic friendship at every turn of the road, is precisely what pushes Tréguier to control his affective excesses and, eventually, to reject his pederastic dependence on Blondeau for the manly autonomy of virile friendship. *The High Walls* thus attempts to neutralize the threat of pederasty by harnessing it in the service of Tréguier's affective education and eventual accession to virility. The increasingly violent and virilizing exorcisms of pederasty that punctuate the narrative serve to cleanse and stabilize Tréguier's friendship with Blondeau, clearing the way for an exaltation of virile friendship:

[Tréguier] had discovered a treasure in this house of nutcases. And what a treasure! Friendship. This was nothing like what tied him to Berland [his friend at the orphanage]. This was deeper and more virile. A real find! Blondeau, him, and Fil-de-Fer were friends. Friends as one can only be in such places. All their resources, their pains, and their joys were shared. Between them reigned a

choses. Enfin des choses.... Vous comprenez, Chef?" Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 222.

fidelity, a loyalty that could withstand anything.⁸⁷

Even this serene panegyric is haunted, however, by the apparition of a disquieting pederastic couple only a few lines down: "Molina, bronzed like an Indian, sweat on his forehead, supervised his ball game. Pressed against him, a little blond newcomer gaped with admiration at the strength of his male."⁸⁸ Repeating Tréguier's awed gaze at Blondeau's impressive physique in the showers, the new boy's abject admiration of Molina's dominance figures the haunting of virile friendship by pederasty at the very moment of its narrative triumph. This inextricable and paranoid doubling of pederastic friendship and pederasty proper demonstrates what Eve Sedgwick has identified as the "important correspondences and similarities between the most sanctioned forms of male homosocial bonding, and the most reprobated expressions of male homosexual sociality."⁸⁹ Rather than being rigorously distinct, virile friendship and pederasty are shown to be disquietingly continuous; separated only by the increasingly violent fits of homosexual panic by which Blondeau and Tréguier distinguish themselves from Molina and his boy. If virile friendship defines itself by its exorcism of its perverse double, pederasty, *The High Walls* suggests that such exorcisms are doomed to continual repetition, as they can never fully cleanse virile friendship of its resemblance to

⁸⁷ "[Tréguier] avait découvert un trésor dans ce lieu de cinglés. Et quel trésor! L'amitié. Cela ne ressemblait pas à ce qui, jadis, le liait à Berland. C'était plus profond, plus viril. Une vraie trouvaille! Blondeau, lui et Fil-de-Fer étaient amis. Amis comme on ne peut l'être qu'en ces endroits. Toutes leurs ressources, leurs peines, leurs joies étaient mises en commun. Entre eux régnaient une fidélité, une loyauté à toute épreuve," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 156.

⁸⁸ "Molina, cuivré comme un Indien, la sueur au front, surveillait sa partie de passe. Tout contre lui, un blondinet nouvellement arrivé, béait d'admiration devant la force de son mâle," Le Breton, *Les Hauts Murs*, 156-7.

⁸⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York:

pederasty. Read as a boy's handbook for achieving normative masculine heterosexuality, *Les Hauts Murs* reveals it, as well as the male friendships that sustain it, to be a haunted and paranoid construction indeed.

1.5.2 *Saint-Florent-Life*: Harnessing Pederastic Affect

Like *Les Hauts Murs*, Vincent Lapie's 1946 *Saint-Florent-Life* (*Saint-Florent-la-Vie*) is a memoir-novel which, in giving its main character, Michel Marchand, a different name than that of the author, loosens its hold on truth and opens a semi-fictional space in which its protagonist (who in this case, is also its narrator) can encounter pederasty. The plot of *Saint-Florent-Life*, however, turns around the moment of reform subsequent to Danan's press campaign but prior to the closure of the colonies. Lapie's combination of this narrative of penal reform with a popular scientific discourse of health, reproduction, and sexual hygiene,⁹⁰ effectively transforms the rules of the stateable, allowing Lapie to go further than any except Genet in portraying his narrator's anti-normative behaviors.

Significantly, *Saint-Florent* entirely bypasses the honest orphan as a figure of originary innocence. Michel, who narrates the first half of the book in a conversational, slangy style before switching to the journal form, is the only son of a single-parent working-class Parisian family. The opening pages of *Saint-Florent* establish Michel's comfort with what appear in criminological, sociological, and medical discourses as the immoralities of working-class families: Michel accepts his mother's alcoholism, her noisy fights with her Italian lover, and his sister's late nights out as ordinary, and by no

Columbia University Press, 1985), 89.

⁹⁰ Lapie's other publications include *La fatigue nerveuse* and *Jeunesse vivante*.

means shameful, aspects of his family life. Michel himself joins a gang of Parisian boys, with which he pulls off several petty thefts before being denounced to the police.

Acquitted, he is nevertheless sentenced to the colony of Saint-Florent,⁹¹ as the court judges that his "family environment" poses a danger to him, while his bourgeois friends are allowed to return to their families.⁹² The text thus exposes the willful irony of a penal system which holds that, because Michel must be protected from corruption by his criminalized working-class family, he will be interned in an even more corrupting penal institution.

Michel's loss of his remaining innocence is dizzyingly swift. He is initially placed in Palacé, an outside farm, where, without the guidance of a friend or mentor, he fails his first test of virility, begging for mercy during a fight with a stronger boy. That night, the same boy, who happens to be the *caïd*, rapes Michel in his bed. During a conversation between Michel and his not-so-virile friend Bénouis the next day, we learn, for the first time, the wisdom, not of the virile boys, but of those on the bottom of carceral hierarchies. As Bénouis advises him, "don't mess around with this *caïd* thing. If he wants to take you as his wife [*sa femme*], let him have his way. Or else, he'll have someone from his gang break your face."⁹³ In spite of Bénouis's advice, after a particularly violent nighttime visit, Michel complains to Monsieur Marcel, the director of Palacé. When this all too solicitous gentleman attempts to molest him,⁹⁴ Michel flees

⁹¹ Saint-Florent is a transparent disguise for the colony of Saint-Hilaire

⁹² "milieu familial," Victor Lapie, *Saint-Florent-la-Vie* (Paris: Vigot Frères, 1946), 14.

⁹³ "plaisante pas avec cette histoire de caïd. S'il veut te prendre comme femme, laisse-toi faire. Sinon il te fera casser la g... par quelqu'un de son gourbi," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 46.

⁹⁴ The rapes and the molestation are suggested rather than explicitly described. Here we see the

Palacé in the hopes that, when caught, he will be sent to the penal colony of Saint-Florent as punishment.

Michel's ploy works, and at Saint-Florent, he is rapidly initiated into the colony's *moeurs* of vulgarity, cursing, smoking, and black market trading. Once again, however, pederasty functions both as the pinnacle of depravity and the synecdoche for carceral *moeurs* as a whole. Michel's assimilation into the alternative norms of prison life is thus figured by his transition from passively acquiescing to pederasty to actively pursuing it. As he explains,

The "lamb" [*le "fadeur"*], is the "wife" [*la "femme"*], the "chick" [*la "gonzesse"*], the little guy who serves you, who you help out, who you protect, but who indulges you [*qui vous a des complaisances*]... from behind. I was initiated at the dormitory at Palacé! I resisted at first... But afterward, I let them have their way [*je me suis laissé faire*]. I even ended up finding it normal.

To the point that I too want to have a "lamb"...⁹⁵

If, in the pederastic friendship narrative, it is the younger friend's adoration of his older friend which impels him to move from a dependent to an independent virility, *Saint-Florent* outlines an alternative path to an alternative virility. As Michel becomes both more "thickset" and more habituated to the norm of pederasty, he naturally transitions from a position of sexual submission to one of protective sexual dominance (rather than heterosexual independence, which can only be classified as "independence" rather than dominance in a homosocial world from which women are absent), and begins to desire

logic of *Les Hauts Murs*, which in narrating acts of violation that do not involve the genitals, can be far more explicit than if a genital rape had taken place.

⁹⁵ "Le 'fadeur', c'est la 'femme', la 'gonzesse', le petit qui rend des services, qu'on aide, qu'on protège, mais qui vous a des complaisances... par derrière. J'ai été initié, moi, au dortoir de Palacé! J'avais résisté au début... Mais après, je me suis laissé faire. J'ai même fini par trouver ça normal. Au point que j'ai envie d'avoir mon 'fadeur', mois aussi..." Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 83.

his friend Bernard, "sweet and gentle like a girl."⁹⁶ In contrast to all previous descriptions of the violent vice of pederasty, when Michel first breaks into Bernard's cell at night, their rapport is surprisingly tender and consensual:

Once I got on Bernard's bed, I no longer wanted at all to do to him what they so often did to me. I contented myself with kissing and caressing him. How happy he seemed!... His hands are hot, his cheeks are soft, I can still feel his eyelashes on my face... He held me close against him... He asked me to stay for a long, long time... He called me Mickey, like my mother and [my sister].⁹⁷

One of Michel's later journal entries indicates that he and Bernard have become nothing less than a happy and in love adolescent couple, taking pleasure in all the extra-sexual rituals of coupledness:

Now, we put our arms around each other, Bernard and I... Sometimes, I even put my fingers on his neck, and touch him up to his ear. Sometimes, I put my arm around his waist. As we separate, we hold onto each other's hands for a long time. Yesterday, we exchanged two notes, burning with our love.⁹⁸

Michel's corruption is fundamentally ambiguous, for to plunge into carceral *moeurs* without the reference of dominant morality is to risk discovering not only pleasure but also tenderness and even love.

If some version of morality remains standing, however, it is precisely in the contrast between Michel's tender love for Bernard and "the animal romps of the others,"

⁹⁶ "costaud"; "gentil et doux comme une fille," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 83.

⁹⁷ "Arrivé sur le lit de Bernard, je n'ai plus eu envie du tout de lui faire ce qu'on m'a fait maintenant si souvent à moi. Je me suis contenté de le caresser et de l'embrasser. Comme il a paru heureux !... Ses mains sont chaudes, ses joues sont douces, je sens encore ses cils sur mon visage... Il m'a serré tout contre lui... Il m'a demandé de rester longtemps, longtemps... Il m'a appelé Michou, comme la mère et comme [ma soeur]," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 84.

⁹⁸ Maintenant nous nous tenons par l'épaule, Bernard et moi... Quelquefois, même, je lui mets les doigts sur le cou, je remonte jusque derrière l'oreille. Quelquefois, je lui prends la taille. En nous séparant, nous nous gardons longtemps la main. Hier, nous avons échangé deux billets, tout brûlants de notre amour (*ibid.* 84).

who, we are told, solicit sex acts in the crudest and most direct terms, trade sexual favors in the kitchen for extra bits of food, fornicate in the chapel, and even commit bestiality.⁹⁹ In fact, the glimpse of a certain purity within pederastic love remains fleeting, for it is precisely into this animality of sex without sentiment that Michel is destined to descend. One night, when Michel goes to caress Bernard in his bed, he finds him with another boy, le Bancal! When the sounds of Michel and le Bancal fighting attract a guard, mad with rage, Michel attacks the guard as well. As a result, Michel is put into solitary confinement... with le Bancal, an odd turn of events which will lead to Michel's absolute corruption:

on the second day; our nerves jumpy with fatigue, we reconciled ourselves, le Bancal and I... By doing together what le Bancal wanted to do to Bernard.

I don't see any harm in it anymore. I was even rather happy to have pardoned my enemy. Are you happy too, le Bancal?

Anyway now, it's all the same to us... We don't give a damn about anything. WE DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT ANYTHING.¹⁰⁰

This passage, the narrative climax of the memoir, marks the lowest point of Michel descent into absolute amorality. For, in having sex with le Bancal, Michel is not only betraying the redeeming tenderness of his relationship with Bernard; he is also stepping entirely outside of Saint-Florent's codes of pederastic relationality. He does not exchange sex for a favor, a gift, or protection, nor does he form a durable pederastic couple; he simply engages in sex for sex's sake with an equal. It is in the context of this

⁹⁹ "les ébats animaux des autres," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 84.

¹⁰⁰ "le deuxième jour, les nerfs affolés de fatigue, nous nous sommes réconcilié tous les deux, le Bancal et moi... En faisant ensemble ce que le Bancal voulait faire à Bernard. Je n'y vois plus le moindre mal. J'étais même plutôt content d'avoir pardonné à mon ennemi. Et toi aussi, le Bancal, tu es content ? D'ailleurs maintenant, tout nous est égal... Nous nous foutons de tout. NOUS NOUS FOUTONS DE TOUT," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 95.

vertiginous abandonment of all norms, those of the dominant culture and those of carceral subcultures alike, that we are to understand the nihilism of Michel's final declaration, "WE DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT ANYTHING," which signals the turning point of the narrative.

Immediately afterwards, change sweeps through Saint-Florent. The colony is abuzz with rumors of a journalistic exposé in *Pays-Soir*¹⁰¹ on the abuses of the children's penal colonies. A few inmates even succeed in speaking to a reporter, and the newspaper article that results from this interview circulates clandestinely throughout the colony. Agitated by the possibility of change, the inmates of Saint-Florent riot. The rebellion is violently repressed, but at the cost of the administration's credibility. As a result, a reformist director arrives with the mission of re-injecting familial affect into the institution. Declaring to the inmates that "[w]e have not always known how to love you," and that he would like to try to replace "the father that you lack," the new director removes the guards' heavy clubs, has the "chicken cages" torn down, entrusts inmates with knives at mealtime, and converts Palacé into an "observation center" directed by Boy Scout leaders.¹⁰²

Michel is transferred to the reformed Palacé farm, where, under the Boy Scout regime of freedom, team play, and campfire mysticism, he achieves a moral regeneration as rapid and absolute as was his initial corruption. Michel's astonishing transformation from amoral pederast into model Boy Scout is possible, in the increasingly pop-scientific

¹⁰¹ This is a thin disguise for Alexis Danan's campaign in *Paris Soir*.

¹⁰² "On n'a pas toujours su vous aimer"; "le père qui vous manque"; "centre d'observation," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 118.

world of this memoir, because his capacity for pederastic affections can easily be rechanneled into Boy Scout hierarchies, themselves modeled on the normative hierarchies of virile friendship. Michel's enthusiastic admiration before the virile beauty of his new scout chief – "[h]ow handsome Chief Georges was, with his golfing trousers and his white collar opened over his jacket!" – functions as movement of what Dr. Gall terms "affective hooking," getting Michel "hooked," as it were, on his affective reeducation.¹⁰³ When Chief Paul, whom Michel finds particularly attractive, invites Michel to come chat in his room, Michel moves from feelings of fear at the possibility of being molested, to shame at suspecting Chief Paul of such an abomination, to enthusiastic admiration before his manly beauty, to the fantasy of either heroically saving or maternally nursing him:

For a moment, I confess, I was afraid of this invitation. I remember so clearly Monsieur Marcel's caresses! But I push this idea away, ashamed. Chief Paul is so handsome with his brown eyes and his tanned face!

I feel more and more affection for him. I'd like for him to have an accident so that I could save him, or an illness, so that I could nurse him.¹⁰⁴

During their talk, however, Chief Paul treats Michel with the respect due to a young friend, and Michel's affection for his new mentor is cemented.

Chief Paul's subsequent lesson on sexual hygiene thus falls on fertile soil. Michel listens with rapt attention as Chief Paul informs the boys that that they are "the

¹⁰³ "Comme Chef Georges était beau, avec ses culottes de golf et son col blanc ouvert sur son blouson!" Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 147.

¹⁰⁴ "Un moment, je l'avoue, j'ai eu peur de cette invitation. Je me rappelle si bien les caresses de Monsieur Marcel ! Mais je repousse cette idée avec honte. Chef Paul est si beau avec ses yeux noirs dans sa figure bronzée ! Je ressens même pour lui de plus en plus d'affection. Je voudrais qui lui arrive un accident pour pouvoir le sauver, ou une maladie pour pouvoir le soigner," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 137.

depositories of a sacred force permitting the transmission of life," a force that can only be wasted at great risk to their own vitality as well as to that of their offspring.¹⁰⁵

Afterwards, Michel goes to speak to him in private about his pederastic relationship with Bernard. As Michel reports, "[h]e didn't reproach my friendship with Bernard," for such tender hierarchies are the very bedrock of scouting, but he asked me to render it more virile."¹⁰⁶ The transition from pederastic couple to couple of virile friends proves remarkably smooth for Michel. Transferred to Saint-Florent, Michel takes the initiative of forming his own Boy Scout troupe. Elected captain, he chooses Bernard as his second, and this new scouting hierarchy effectively replaces that of their prior pederastic relationship. Pederasty appears to have been definitively subsumed by the noble hierarchies of scouting.

At the end of his sentence, however, Michel must return to the immoral urbanity of Paris. When he is propositioned by an older man in a café, Michel's reaction is surprisingly extreme for someone as intimately familiar as he with pederastic *moeurs*. Horrified, Michel flees the café without paying, bursts into tears, and, in retrospect, considers homophobic violence a more appropriate response, "I cried... Above all, I was ashamed of myself. Like I should have broken that old man's face instead of fleeing!"¹⁰⁷ Rather than triumphantly replacing pederasty, Michel's achievement of a normative virility transforms pederasty into a danger capable of provoking panic, tears, shame,

¹⁰⁵ "les dépositaires d'une force sacrée permettant de transmettre la vie," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 143.

¹⁰⁶ "Il ne m'a pas reproché mon amitié avec Bernard," "mais il m'a demandé de la rendre plus virile," Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 144.

¹⁰⁷ "J'ai pleuré... J'avais surtout honte de moi. Comme si je n'aurais pas dû lui casser la figure à ce vieux, au lieu de m'enfuir!" Lapie, *Saint-Florent*, 211.

and violence.

Whereas *The High Walls* builds its narrative on the homophobic opposition between the evil of pederasty and the nobility of virile friendship, *Saint-Florent* suggests that pederasty is best eradicated when the complementarity between pederasty and virile friendship is acknowledged and exploited. For if, in *Saint-Florent*, pederasty is bad for the vitality of the race, it nevertheless carries within it a crucial positive value, that of an affective attachment to male hierarchies, presented as the structural basis not only of scouting, but also of healthy male homosociality. Rather than a simple scare figure called upon to represent the corruption, abuses of power, and immorality of carceral *moeurs*, pederasty is depicted as form of relationality sufficiently complex to encompass coercive domination, sex for sex's sake, and the tender hierarchies of pederastic coupledness. In its latter form, pederastic relationality constitutes a potential target for "affective hooking," allowing Michel's pederastic affections to be "hooked" onto the noble male hierarchies of scouting. However, *Saint-Florent's* detailed and sympathetic depiction of pederastic relationalities do not by any means make it a pro-pederastic text. On the contrary, its stripping bare of pederastic affects and relationalities occurs in the interests of a singularly pederasty eradicating pop-scientific discourse of health. *Saint-Florent* confidently suggests that, when accepted as the foundation of (rather than a menace to) normative male hierarchies, pederastic affects can be fully and unproblematically sublimated, cementing homosocial hierarchies without leaving the slightest remainder. Indeed, *Saint-Florent* is a fascinating cultural text precisely because it offers a glimpse into the thought that was put into the project of regrafting inmate

social and affective structures back onto normative masculine hierarchies.¹⁰⁸ Michel's phobic reaction to an older man's proposition at the end of the memoir, however, demonstrates that constructing a normative heterosexual homosociality from pederastic affects and hierarchies cannot but produce pederasty as its paranoid double. The very complementarity between pederasty and male homosociality that *Saint-Florent* attempts to exploit also ensures a rehabilitated Michel's abiding vulnerability to pederastic hauntings. For, both in its eerie mirroring of male homosociality and in its unwelcome ability to remind Michel of the attractions that drew him to male homosociality in the first place, pederasty threatens the dissolution of the virile, heterosexual masculinity Michel worked so hard to construct.

The High Walls and *Saint-Florent-Life* explore the intersection between deeply-rooted popular cultural narratives of adolescent male friendship and the pederastic *moeurs* of the boys' penal colonies. Contrary to Foucault's suggestion that male friendship constitutes an unexplored territory, and thus, a potential zone of invention for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, these works gesture towards a rich popular cultural discourse on adolescent male friendship in which the problem of sexuality

¹⁰⁸ Léo Joannon's 1943 film, *Le Carrefour des Enfants Perdus*, also concerns the effort to reform boys' penal colonies by putting potentially disruptive prisoner bonds, in particular those of *caïdisme*, in the service of utopically just homosocial hierarchies. In this film, however, the principle of "*accrochage affectif*" is the all-male family rather than pederasty proper. The reformist director is able to step into the role of the benevolent, but authoritarian father and thereby win the loyalty of the rebellious and hardened *caïd* by playing on his protective instincts when his younger brother joins the colony. In so doing, he teaches the *caïd* that the best way to rule over men is not by force, but through the loyalty inspired by love – a moral which might well summarize a whole series of efforts to think how to reform delinquent boys. This film, however, does not touch upon the use of pederasty in institutional reappropriations of inmate hierarchies. See Léo Joannon, *Le Carrefour des Enfants Perdus* (Courbevoie: Hollywood Boulevard Vidéo,

played a pivotal role. At an historical moment in which the still-novel category of the “homosexual” was producing a sharp distinction between sexual and non-sexual forms of male friendship, this cultural discourse sought to work out surefire methods of distinguishing virile friendship from pederasty and of rehabilitating pederastic boys into a healthy homosociality.¹⁰⁹ In making the slippery distinction between pederasty and virile friendship the central thread of their narratives, both *The High Walls* and *Saint-Florent-Life* explore the paranoid and haunted construction of a form of male friendship founded on the impossible eradication of the potential of pederasty.

1.6 Conclusion

As this chapter has argued, former inmates of the boys’ penal colonies earn their right to speak about their incarceration by presenting themselves as “normal,” not in the context of subcultural carceral norms, but rather in relation to dominant norms of adolescent masculinity. As such, their attitudes before carceral *moeurs* in general and pederasty in particular are varied: they describe pederasty from a perspective of disapproving and authoritative distance, they anxiously fight to stave off its corrupting

1943).

¹⁰⁹ Foucault has proposed that medical discourses constituted the homosexual as a distinct type of person toward the end of the nineteenth century. Historians and queer theorists have widely debated this periodization, documenting the coexistence, during this historical period, of competing understandings of male same-sex behavior. What seems clear, however, is that the emergent understanding of the homosexual as a distinct type of being reconfigured the terms of male homosociality, forcing it, for the first time, to rigorously distinguish itself from homosexuality. For Foucault’s periodization, see Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 58-9. For an in-depth discussion of competing understandings of male same-sex sexuality in early twentieth-century New York City, and of the influence of these understandings on male friendship, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

proximity, or they confidently affirm that pederasty has been entirely absorbed into normative male hierarchies. It is in these movements of distancing, of defensive struggle, and of triumphal disavowal, as well as the increasingly frightening hauntings they produce, that we can locate the symptoms of an abjection of carceral *moeurs* in general, and of pederasty in particular. Through such abjections, select carceral subjects are able to narratively produce themselves as normal, proper subjects of a truthful discourse. Chapter 2 will explore how, through the magic of a poetic, excessive, and even miraculous mode of writing, Genet's *Miracle of the Rose* both critically reflects on the constitutive exclusions of the discourse on of penal reform and strives to raise those carceral subcultures that it renders socially unmentionable to the dignity of a true loss.

Chapter 2. Agencies of Abjection

This chapter affronts my central concern with agential abjection through readings of three of Genet's novels: *Miracle of the Rose*, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, and *The Thief's Journal*. The concept of agential abjection is necessarily paradoxical; for social abjection, which defines certain categories of beings as beyond the pale of coherent subjecthood and, therefore, denies them the privileges of privacy, freedom, and autonomous selfhood accorded to proper subjects, definitionally excludes full agency. Modern forms of social abjection have worked precisely by claiming that certain beings are incoherent as subjects, incapable of autonomous, agential action and lacking in the private, reflective interiority that would lend coherence to such actions. This is evident in the case of the two of the forms of abject subjecthood studied in this chapter – the pederastic convict and the camp queen. Convicts are denied the fundamental modern right of personal freedom due to their lack of respect for the normative societal values of autonomous personhood and property rights and their presumed failure to make reflective rational choices (since a liberal social order does not recognize criminality as a form of rationality). The term "pederastic convict" gestures more specifically to the range of convicts who are not rehabilitated to normative values by the prison's disciplinary technologies, but who, instead, find themselves subjectified by carceral subcultures, in which pederastic sexual and relational practices trouble dominant ideals of male autonomy and impenetrability. The queen – by turns a comic, a tragic, and a reviled figure – embodies a different kind of incoherence. Claiming a feminine identity

but possessing a male body, she is seen as fundamentally unable to separate truth from falsehood, being from appearing, and the material from the imaginary. When the queen in question is specifically a "camp queen," she does not assert her feminine gender in an earnest fashion, but instead, performatively challenges the very presuppositions of depth, authenticity, and material reality that anchor gender identity in the first place.¹ Exacerbating incoherence, embracing vulgarity, and laying claim to an inessential, artificial, and imitative femininity, she embodies a version of personhood as abject as it is, for some, captivating and alluring. As improper, incoherent subjects that fail to respect and to embody the values of autonomous, putatively nonimitative gendered personhood, of personal property and propriety, and of rational, reflective interiority, the pederastic convict and the camp queen might also constitute alternative models of subjectivity. This chapter will argue that is precisely through their exercise of alternative forms of subjectivity and of agency that the pederastic convict and the camp queen are able to make a life in abjection.

Such alternative models of agency, however, are only one side of abjection's coin. For the disenfranchised and despised state of abjection can also powerfully animate desires for normative privileges, attachments to dominant values, and a vehement rejection of abjection itself. In fact, for the abjected, the most obvious route to agency

¹ The term used in *Our Lady of the Flowers* is "une folle," which I translate as a "queen." For an idea of queer male genders and socialities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Gilles Barbadette and Michel Carassou, *Paris gay 1925* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1981); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979); and William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Harrington

might be to lay claim to normalcy by refuting phobic portrayals of the abject, demonstrating fitness for normative personhood, and performing disgust for those abject beings that continue to refuse normative values. This is a form of agency that does not seek either to inhabit or to transform abjection, much less to alter the processes of social exclusion that constitute subject and abject. Rather, it works through a desire, successful or not, to leave abjection behind, asking that certain subjects unfairly and mistakenly designated as abject be permitted to exit abjection's field. Chapter 1 analyzed the "truth games" by which abject former inmates acceded to the position of subjects of truth and knowledge through narrative devices that affirmed their normative masculine subjecthood while rejecting suspect pederastic carceral cultures. This chapter, by contrast, is more interested in those forms of agency that emerge *in and through abjection*, that make abjection a site of possibility, that create within it alternative social and cultural forms, and that produce from it critiques of the exclusions, the disavowals, and the hierarchies that sustain normative modes of subject formation. These are agencies that do not leave abjection behind, even if they must struggle to render livable this impossible state.

The first section, "Spectral Mourning and Carceral Masculinities," focuses on Genet's *Miracle of the Rose* (*Miracle de la rose*) (1946), a first-person, novelistic memoir of Mettray that is either forgotten in historians' accounts of narratives of the penal colonies or labeled mere imaginative fiction. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the "truth games" that structure the discursive field of narratives of the penal colonies powerfully ally the

story of a boy's journey to autonomous heterosexual masculinity with the adult narrator's ability to give a truthful account of the penal colonies. By deliberately rejecting the terms of these masculine truth games, *Miracle* allows for a critical relation to the discourses and rituals of masculine subject formation while opening the way to alternative practices of memory. Rather than displaying his rehabilitated masculine adulthood as assurance of the truth of his narrative, *Miracle's* adult narrator unapologetically presents himself as a pederast wholly given over to a life of criminality and imprisonment. Through the narrator's struggle with the norms of a pederastic education, an alternative relation to his past as a pederastic bottom in the carceral subculture of Mettray emerges. This relation, which, following Derrida, I term *spectral mourning*, neither forgets the past nor presses it into a linear model of development, but rather, allows it to return in the interruptive temporal disjunctions of living memory.²

Many critics have debated the status of gender in Genet's works, reading gender roles within Genet's same-sex couples as, essentially, the same as within heterosexual couples,³ arguing that they ironically reveal the power relations behind heterosexual binary gender,⁴ or, alternatively, finding that Genet's homosexual erotics deconstruct the opposition between masculine and feminine.⁵ Such readings of queer gender as repeating, revealing, or deconstructing the workings of heterosexual gender, however,

² Derrida elaborates his concept of spectrality in Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

³ See Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).

⁴ See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁵ See Elizabeth Stephens, "Disseminating Phallic Masculinity: Seminal Fluidity in Genet's Fiction," *Genet. Spec. ed. of Paragraph*. Ed. Mairéad Hanrahan 27, no. 2 (July 2004): 85-97; and Pascale Gaitet, "The Flower of their Strength" in *Queens and Revolutionaries: New Readings of Jean*

fail to do justice to the specificity of the sexual subcultures that Genet describes.

Rethinking Judith Butler's account of gender formation in "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" in the context of the pederastic relationalities of the boys' penal colonies, I argue that spectral mourning is one of *various* relations to loss that shape *multiple* carceral masculinities.⁶ When the loss in question is that of a traumatic period of incarceration and shameful sexual bottoming in an abusive penal institution, spectral mourning can function as an agency of abjection, refusing to disavow or to "get over" an abject past to open the way to an alternative masculine subjectivity.

Though abjection may characterize certain dehumanized social categories, including that of the madman, the pervert, and the Lombrosian "born criminal," it is important to underline that abjection is *not* an identity that one can inhabit. Whereas in the bourgeois depth model of self all honorable acts are taken to radiate outwards from a virtuous core self, in the process of abjection, a perverse act, such as stealing, queer sex, or treachery, is taken to be the sign of a perverse personality defined *not by its internal coherence*, but rather *by its negation* of everything regarded as good, normal, and virtuous. To be named abject is not to be given a new social identity, but rather to become radically undone, subject to a monstrous and incoherent representation that alarmingly distorts the majority of one's prior experiences and self-understandings. One of the reasons why Genet might be relevant today is that, counter to the contemporary "stigmaphobe" politics of normalcy within the U.S. gay and lesbian movement, he

Genet (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 57-81.

⁶ See Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-150.

depicts characters who refuse to react to the terrifying experience of abjection by rejecting stigma and by affirming the consistency of their internal lives with models of normalcy.⁷ Instead, Genet's characters explore a perverse sensibility that might prove inspiring to today's subalterns, a sensibility that finds in becoming-object a mode of *ascesis*, an exercise of self-transformation to be pursued not in view of achieving a finished state, but rather, as a blind principle of continual self-undoing whose primary effect is to escape the saturating effects of subjection.

Whereas Foucault's later work on *ascesis* and the "aesthetics of existence," focuses on the self-making practices of elite free-born men in Classical Greece, Genet's novels demand that these practices be rethought from the perspective of abjection rather than that of privilege.⁸ The second section, "The *Ascesis* of the Object," argues that in Genet's novels, the most abjected of social subjects are depicted as paradoxically *forced* to engage in the resubjectifying work of *ascesis*, refiguring the conditions of their subjection to produce renewed possibilities for agency. Genet's philosophical *Thief's Journal* (*Journal du voleur*) (1949) and his lighthearted *Our Lady of the Flowers* (*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*) (1948) open up the improvisatory diversity of modes of self-making – and the sometimes pleasurable affects that they produce – within abjection. In its focus on the cultural and gendered stylizations of the pimps and queens of the Parisian underworld, *Our Lady* demonstrates the queer style, sensibility, and humor of camp to be more than

⁷ For an analysis of the "stigmaphobe" politics of normalcy within the U.S. gay and lesbian movement, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Michel Foucault,

just, as Susan Sontag would have it, an aesthetic.⁹ Instead, *Our Lady* enables us to understand camp as an improvisatory strategy for rechanneling the disciplinary powers of shame and stigma into inventive stylizations of abjection in a collective practice of ascesis. Moreover, through the central character of the country boy turned Parisian queen, Culafroy/Divine, *Our Lady* elaborates a transgressive mode of sexual and gendered subjectivity that might constitute a queer alternative to the more recent gay pride model of selfhood. Gay pride counters silence and shame by dictating that gays and lesbians affirm and make public a sexual identity presumed to be coherent and pre-existing. Culafroy/Divine, on the other hand, responds to the vertiginous self-loss and dehumanization of abjection not by affirming a core identity, but rather, by propelling his or herself ever further on the path of self-loss and self-making. In so doing, s/he embodies ascesis as a form of queer subjectivity that requires the continual transgression of one's tendencies, predilections, and apparent "nature." This is not to say that there are no limits to Culafroy/Divine's self-transformations. Pascal Gaitet has convincingly demonstrated that corporeality and the physical world constitute the limits of Culafroy/Divine's agency, and Michael Lucey has brilliantly argued that, in *Our Lady*, even the fluidity of erotic fantasy is sometimes stopped by a socially structured psychic

L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982) (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001).

⁹ In her "Notes on Camp," Sontag writes that "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism," reasons that "[t]o emphasize style is to slight content," and concludes that "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized # SYMBOL 45 \f "Symbol" \s 10# or at least apolitical." Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador USA, 1966), 277. Sontag has been roundly critiqued for her abstraction of camp from its gay subcultural origins. My strategy in this chapter is to refer to Sontag's checklist for its useful enumeration of the characteristics of camp while tying my readings of camp firmly to queer subcultures and underlining how queer uses of camp exceed Sontag's aesthetic formulations.

life.¹⁰ Ascesis can only open the way to novel forms of subjectivity through a labor which, like any, is subject to material limitations, psychic resistances, and the weight of sedimented histories. By depicting ascesis as both an enforced improvisation within the constraints of social abjection and as a perversely queer and sometimes camp sensibility, Genet holds it forth as one of abjection's principle agencies and pleasures.

2.1 Spectral Mourning and Carceral Masculinities

Genet's novel, *Miracle of the Rose*, might be read as a mournful elaboration of the abjections operated by other narratives of the boys' penal colonies. Crying out against the destruction of Mettray and, by extension, of his childhood, *Miracle's* narrator, Jean, sets out on a quest of remembrance that is also an attempt to articulate the silenced pleasures of Mettray – the sweetness of submission, the excitement of virile display, and the intensities of pederastic love. In the seductive voice of Jean's memory, Mettray emerges as a somber paradise whose hardships are compensated by savage boyish passion and ennobled by strict codes of honor. At the same time, Jean's continual return to the narrative present of nostalgia, erotic fantasy, and gender crisis within which these memories are evoked prompts us to read remembrance as something other than an objective representation of the past. Unlike other memoirs and testimonies concerning the boys' colonies, *Miracle* explicitly thematizes memory's transformative effects on the rememberer, exploring both the gendered rewards of forgetting adolescent ambiguities

¹⁰ Pascale Gaitet, "To Sculpt a Stone" in *Queens and Revolutionaries: New Readings of Jean Genet* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 30-56; Michael Lucey, "Genet's *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*: Fantasy and Sexual Identity," *Genet: In the Language of the Enemy* Spec. Issue of *Yale French Studies*, no. 91 (June 1997): 80-102.

and the queer seductions of remembrance. *Miracle* theorizes, from the perspective of Mettray's pederastic subculture, the abjections that inform the coming-to-virility narrative, discussed in the previous chapter, as well as "hard" forms of heterosexual virility. In addition, it explores *spectral mourning*, an alternative relation to memory that constitutes both the gender of the pederastic top within a carceral relationship and a "feminine" form of writing associated with poetry, fantasy, and the marvelous. Spectral mourning, a term I borrow from Derrida, differs from both the "normal" mourning of those whose losses are publicly recognized and supported and from the melancholia that, in *Miracle*, shapes the "hard" virility of those able to disavow a constitutive involvement with pederastic dependencies.¹¹ The mournful pederasts that *Miracle* describes remains porous and open to inhabitation by the affects and the memories of a carceral youth. Whereas Derrida describes spectrality as a supremely ethical relation to the past, however, *Miracle* shows spectral mourning to be less the result of an ethical choice than of a refusal to disavow and an inability to mourn the abject, yet sometimes pleasurable and always formative conditions of adolescence in the boy's penal colonies.

My reading of *Miracle* makes three major contributions to contemporary critical debates on mourning and melancholia. First, it questions the notion that mourning and melancholia are the *only* possible reactions to loss and suggests that the hardships of abjection in particular might demand more diverse and creative engagements with loss. Second, it refuses the position that *either* mourning *or* melancholia is inherently a more ethical attitude towards loss, insisting both on the variable conditions and subject

¹¹ See Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*.

positions that determine ethicality, and on the necessity of *survival* that, for the abject, tends to overshadow the question of ethical choice. Finally, it supplements Judith Butler's account of melancholy gender with a consideration of the multiple nonnormative masculine gender positions available within carceral subcultures and of the various dispositions towards past attachments they require.¹² It argues that the "heterosexual matrix" of same-gender identification and opposite-gender attraction alone cannot account for the multiple masculine positions available within carceral subcultures and common in many locations outside of Northern Europe and North America.

2.1.1 Pederastic Education: The Making of Masculinities

Miracle opens with great fanfare, announcing its adult narrator, Jean's, momentous and triumphal, if slightly tardy, transformation into a real man.¹³ Jean's announcement of his gender transformation doubles as an announcement of *Miracle's* departure from the narrative style of Genet's previous novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*. While the narrative of *Our Lady of the Flowers* is woven from the imprisoned narrator Jean's masturbatory fantasies of handsome and virile criminals, *Miracle* trumpets Jean's ascension to virility, his loss of the capacity to idealize criminals, and his transition,

¹² See Butler, "Melancholy Gender"

¹³ Since both the narrator and the author of *Miracle of the Rose* are named Jean Genet, I distinguish between them by referring to *Miracle's* narrator as "Jean" and to its author as "Genet." Such a distinction, of course, is not meant to be absolute, as "Jean" does sometimes speak as and for "Genet." By distinguishing between the author and the narrator, however, I hope to circumvent the will to truth that compels many of Genet's critics and biographers to collapse the two figures and to respect "Genet's" efforts to mediate his relation to a potentially antagonistic reading public through the intermediary of a carefully developed narrative figure.

heavy with narrative consequences, from a gaze steeped in "the marvelous" to an "exact vision" of his world.¹⁴ The passage in which Jean weaves these mutual transformations together into what amounts to a fascinating theory of gender and narrative is worth quoting at length:

The exact vision that made a man of me, that is, a being living only on the earth, corresponded with the fact that my femininity, or the ambiguity and haziness of my male desires, seemed to have ended. Indeed, if the marvelous [*le merveilleux*], the joy that suspended me from branches of pure air, sprang chiefly from my identification with the handsome thugs who haunted the prison, as soon as I achieved total virility – or, to be more exact, as soon as I became male – the thugs lost their prestige. [...] I no longer desired to resemble the thugs. I felt I had achieved the plenitude of myself. Perhaps I feel it less today, after the adventures I am writing, but I felt strong, without dependence, free, unbound. Prestigious models no longer presented themselves to me.¹⁵

In this passage, femininity, glossed as "the ambiguity and haziness" of Jean's "male desires," manifests itself as an erotic desire for resemblance capable of conferring on its objects, the handsome thugs, a prestige and a seductive power that does not inhere in them. Femininity is thus the source of the marvelous (*le merveilleux*), a feat of idealizing and eroticizing poetic perception which, in *Our Lady*, lends itself to escapist fantasy. Femininity, however, also signals the danger of an absolute dependence on and enthrallment by the prestigious model that one seeks to resemble. By becoming "male,"

¹⁴ Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 36.

¹⁵ "L'exacte vision qui faisait de moi un homme, c'est-à-dire un être vivant uniquement sur terre, correspondait avec ceci que semblait cesser ma féminité ou l'ambiguïté et le flou de mes désirs mâles. En effet, si le merveilleux, cette allégresse qui me suspendait à des rinceaux d'air pur, en prison naissait surtout de ce que je m'identifiais avec les beaux voyous qui la hantent, dès que j'acquis une virilité totale – ou, pour être plus exact, dès que je devins mâle – les voyous perdirent leur prestige. [...] Je ne désirais plus ressembler aux voyous. J'avais le sentiment d'avoir réalisé la plénitude de moi-même. Peut-être moins aujourd'hui, après l'aventure que j'écris, mais je me suis senti fort, sans dépendance, libre, délié. Aucun modèle prestigieux ne se présentait plus à moi," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 36. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

therefore, Jean accedes to a state of autonomy in which he is no longer dominated by the tyrannical prestige of eroticized criminals. We learn a few lines down that Jean has arrived at virility through the active, penetrative masculinity of burglary, whose primary tool is the crowbar, which Jean refers to as a "steel penis."¹⁶ By abandoning the lowly, feminized activities of begging and prostitution for the phallic profession of burglary, Jean has become the gender equal of the virile criminals he previously idolized. As a result, these criminals lose their seductive power over him: "the hoodlums no longer seduced me. They were my peers."¹⁷ Jean's transformation into a virile burglar therefore implies a change of perception, from the feminine "marvelous" of desiring and imitative idealization to the masculine "exact vision" that perceives other criminals as Jean's fallible equals.¹⁸ By becoming "male," Jean leaves behind both his poetic illusions and his imitative dependencies to accede simultaneously to an independent masculinity and to a non-idealizing vision of his world.

But if this is the case, how is Jean to fill the long and empty hours of solitude that make up his incarceration? Jean admits that, having lost his feminine faculty to imagine himself in the place of another, he has also lost his taste for both adventure novels and daydreaming. Luckily, however, virility opens another mental realm to him. After his transformation, Jean writes, "my difficulty in plunging myself into my dreamed stories, fabricated by that saddening game of solitude, was great, [...] but I found a greater well

¹⁶ "verge d'acier," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 37.

¹⁷ "Les voyous ne me séduisirent plus. C'étaient des pairs." Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 36.

¹⁸ Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 36.

being in the true memories of my past life."¹⁹ The memoir we find before us is therefore presented as a gendered text, the product of a mature adult virility that has outgrown fantasizing and dreaming to focus its clear gaze on the true memories of childhood.

In *Saint Genet*, Jean-Paul Sartre supports this reading of the alliance between clear writing and virility in *Miracle*, enthusiastically applauding Genet's writerly maturation from the "onanistic complacency" and the "prelogical forms of thought" of *Our Lady* to the "awakening" and "liberation" that *Miracle* represents.²⁰ This stylistic maturation is, for Sartre, one with Jean's assumption of an active, dominating masculinity: "let us compare the loner of *Our Lady*, frenetic masturbator, laying half crazy, to the muscular little man, active, authoritarian, who never ceases circulating throughout the prison, who, in love, wants to impose himself, to dominate the beloved: we will measure the distance traveled."²¹ Sartre's assumption of an unambiguous linkage between good, clear, modernist writing and an active, dominating, top masculinity both supports *Miracle's* gendered theses on writing and gives an indication of how pervasive they were within the French intellectual world.

As Sartre's reading indicates, Jean's newfound non-erotic and non-fantasizing virility must soon accommodate a novel influence with the arrival of a new love object, the adolescent burglar and former Mettray inmate, Bulkaen. Initially, Jean embraces this

¹⁹ "grande fut la difficulté à me replonger dans mes histoires rêvées, fabriquées par ce jeu désolant de la solitude, mais je trouvai [...] davantage de bien-être dans les souvenirs vrais de mon ancienne vie," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 42.

²⁰ "complaisance onaniste"; "formes prélogiques de la pensée"; "reveil"; "libération," Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 603.

²¹ "que l'on compare le solitaire de *Notre-Dame*, masturbé frénétique, gisant demi-fou, au petit homme nerveux, actif, autoritaire, qui ne cesse de circuler à travers la prison, qui, amoureux, veut

new love not as a contradiction, but as a potential realization of his awakening virility. After all, now that Jean has attained mature criminal adulthood, what could be more virile than for him to top a beautiful adolescent like Bulkaen? As Jean imagines it, "if meeting Bulkaen revives sleeping charms, I will retain the benefit of this walk toward man, for Bulkaen's beauty is, first of all, delicate."²² Since Bulkaen is young, beautiful, and delicate, Jean's pursuit of him need not endanger his newfound masculinity, even if it does awaken the "sleeping charms" of fantasy and idealization. Best of all, Bulkaen provides a ready-made supplement for Jean's other virile project, that of remembering his childhood at Mettray. Rather than sifting through his memories in dry solitude, Jean now has the extraordinary chance, through Bulkaen, of rediscovering the past in the present and of experiencing the present as the past's living continuity. Bulkaen appears to be the realization of Jean's secret desire to, as he puts it, "rediscover in someone other than myself the memory of Mettray, as much perhaps in order to be reunited with Mettray as to continue it in my man's life by loving according to the mores [*les moeurs*] of then."²³ By reliving the pederastic *moeurs* of Mettray, this time as the older and more dominant partner in a pederastic couple, Jean can grasp his newfound virility as the continuation and the accomplishment of his past at Mettray.

Jean and Bulkaen, already united and queered by their common pasts at Mettray,

s'imposer, dominer l'aimé : on mesurera le chemin parcouru," Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 602-3.

²² "si la rencontre de Bulkaen redonne vie à des charmes sommeillants, je garderai le bénéfice de cette marche vers l'homme, car la beauté de Bulkaen est, d'abord, délicate," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 36.

²³ "retrouver en un autre qu'en moi le souvenir de Mettray, autant peut-être pour rejoindre Mettray que pour le continuer dans ma vie d'homme en aimant selon les moeurs d'alors," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 65.

appear prepared, then, to begin a conventional pederastic prison relationship. Bulkaen is beautiful and delicate, and rumor has it that he was a "girl" ("une fille") not only at Mettray, but also on the outside with Rocky, his partner in crime. Jean, on the other hand, has finally attained virility, becoming just the sort of criminal an impressionable youth might admire. Almost immediately, however, Jean's attempts to seduce Bulkaen are plagued by a series of complex gender reversals. While acting the conqueror, Jean feels like a conquered territory, and while affecting impenetrability, his love renders him dangerously permeable. Jean must exert a superhuman self-discipline to keep Bulkaen from abandoning the role of the submissive admirer for the alternate figure of the young tyrant:

I made a final effort to lock myself in behind a door that might have revealed my heart's secret, and risked letting Bulkaen enter in me as he would a conquered country, mounted, in boots and spurs, holding a whip, an insult on his lips, for the sentiment that carries a kid [*un gamin*] to a man who worships him is never tender.²⁴

Affecting the harshest indifference for fear of appearing vulnerable, engaging in obsessive Proustian speculations about Bulkaen's sexuality and his other possible lovers, both male and female, and abruptly ceding to his desires to express, with inappropriate romantic force, his true feelings, Jean's baroque seduction attempts are a far cry from the "clear simplicity of virility."²⁵ Moreover, if, through burglary, Jean discovered a certain manly independence from the criminals he previously idolized, in love, he falls under

²⁴ "Je tentai un dernier effort pour refermer sur moi une porte qui montrerait le secret de mon coeur, et qui risquait de laisser Bulkaen entrer en moi comme en pays conquis, monté, botté, éperonné, cravaché et l'insulte à la bouche, car il n'est jamais tendre le sentiment que porte un gamin à un homme qui l'adore," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 84.

²⁵ "la claire simplicité de la virilité," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 37.

their spell once again, caught in the game of virile imitation. Observing that "transported by his admiration for them, [Bulkaen] ran toward men," Jean begins looking to masculine models to supplement his own faltering virility and thereby attract Bulkaen's admiration.²⁶ Rather than assessing his past with the placid gaze of an accomplished virility, Jean begins to seek virile models for the present in his memories of Mettray. Plunged into a recollection of the glorious day in which his first lover, Villeroy, struck the head guard, Guépin, to avenge an affront to Jean's honor, Jean realizes that, in the present, he needs a similar "shining act" to impress Bulkaen.²⁷ When Jean therefore provokes another inmate, Charlot, so that he can fight him in front of Bulkaen, an astonishing metamorphosis takes place:

When I was about to give out, the memory and the soul of Villeroy guarded me. [...] I borrowed, I stole the beauty of his stances. Taken from who knows where, a lock of blond hair fell almost to my eyes. I was lightning fast. I had to vanquish Charlot because Villeroy would have vanquished him. It is with his gleaming arms and his faults that I fought. The guards pulled me off and carried Charlot away.

The wardens rushed over to pick up Guépin.²⁸

Jean's sudden transformation into Villeroy while fighting Charlot evinces the return of Jean's feminine capacities of imitation at the very moment in which he seeks to prove his virility. Far from a spontaneous expression of his own unique manhood, Jean's

²⁶ "transporté par son admiration pour eux, [Bulkaen] courait vers les hommes," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 240.

²⁷ "un acte d'éclat," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 157.

²⁸ "Aux instants que j'allais flancher, le souvenir et l'âme de Villeroy me gardèrent. [...] J'empruntais, je volais la beauté de ses attitudes. Prise on ne sait où, une mèche de cheveux blonds tombait jusqu'à mes yeux. J'étais d'une vitesse folle. Je devais vaincre Charlot car Villeroy l'eût vaincu, c'est avec ses armes luisantes et ses défauts que je combattais. Les gâfes m'arrachèrent, on emporta Charlot.

Les surveillants accoururent pour relever Guépin," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 159.

spectacular act of virility draws not only from its model, Villeroy, but also from its spectator, Bulkaen. As Jean must eventually admit of Bulkaen, "he was the demon that incited me to greater hardness, to greater courage, to greater love [...] *Bulkaen was my virility*."²⁹ Rather than a feminized love object, Bulkaen is the very source of Jean's virility, a virility exposed as a non-originary imitation and a calculated performance.

By this time, Jean has fallen head-first into his memories. In increasingly poetic language, he evokes Mettray as a veritable paradise of reciprocal love, in which, as Villeroy's punk (*giron*), he was able to indulge in the now forbidden pleasures of femininity:

Our loves of Mettray! The couples of children in which the male was sixteen. I was sixteen, the age of young ladies [*jeunes filles*]. Fifteen is thin and seventeen is too hard. But sixteen has the ring of a delicate femininity. I loved Villeroy who loved me. Since he was a child himself (he was eighteen) he was closer to me than anyone [...] ever was.³⁰

The exalted and poetic tone of this paean to the past suggests that Jean has strayed far from the "exact vision" of virility. As his past opens to reveal pleasures now denied him, Jean increasingly finds in his memories a sweet refuge from his present trials. But if doubts about Bulkaen's love for him oblige Jean "to seek refuge in [his] old loves," to do so is to betray his virility and his new role as a top in favor of more pleasurable memories of bottoming.³¹ Masculine memory increasingly resembles feminine fantasy,

²⁹ "il était le démon qui m'incitait à plus de dureté, à plus d'audace, à plus d'amour: [...] *Bulkaen était ma virilité*," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 311, my emphasis.

³⁰ "Nos amours de Mettray! Les couples d'enfants où le mâle avait seize ans. J'avais seize ans, l'âge des jeunes filles. Quinze ans sont grêles et dix-sept ans trop durs. Mais seize ans a un son d'une délicate féminité. J'aimais Villeroy qui m'aimait. Parce qu'enfant lui-même (il avait dix-huit ans) il était plus près de moi que personne [...] ne le fut jamais," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 154.

³¹ "à chercher refuge dans [ses] vieilles amours," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 139.

providing an escape from the present by opening a door to forbidden pleasures, and allowing Jean to rediscover the idealized delinquents of his adolescence.

Like other narratives of the boy's penal colonies, *Miracle* describes its main character Jean's gendered development within the colony. *Miracle*, however, is the only narrative of the boy's penal colonies to fully describe the social requirements of the position of the *vautour* (sometimes used interchangeably with *giron*), a sort of respectable bottom within carceral hierarchies. For, contrary to what is often implied in discourses of the boy's penal colonies, sexual bottoms were not necessarily situated at the metaphorical "bottom" of carceral hierarchies, nor were they always fully feminized. This is demonstrated when, as his tribute of entry to Mettray, Jean must sing the latest popular songs from the *faubourgs* of Paris. His voice so pleases the "elder brother," Villeroy, that Villeroy chooses Jean as his *vautour*. In spite of being classed as a sexual bottom, Jean thus has the honor of having a powerful protector, an honor which, he explains, spares him the greater sexual shame of prostitution, "instead of going from hammock to hammock, or watching all the males crawling at night to come into mine, my pal, my *marle*, my friend saw to it that I was respected."³² Being Villeroy's *vautour*, moreover, does not spare Jean the masculine rites of passage that define virility in other narratives of the boy's penal colonies. During Jean's first night at Mettray, Rio, an older inmate, deliberately knocks Jean's belongings onto the ground. In spite of his lack of a guide to explain to him what he must do, Jean instinctively understands the significance

³² "Au lieu d'aller de hamac en hamac, ou de voir tous les mâles ramper la nuit pour venir dans le mien, mon pote, mon marle, mon social me faisait respecter," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 189.

of his reaction:

I had the feeling that the whole rest of my life depended on my attitude at that moment. Suddenly, I was gifted with a very deep political sense, for I realized that the children's insight was extraordinarily sharp. Following a very sure method, they were testing me, and, according to my reaction, I would be classed among the *marles*, the *cloches*, or the fairies [*les lopes*].³³

Horrified at the prospect of being relegated to the bottom of Mettray's social hierarchies, Jean masters his fear and fights. However, while in heterosexual accounts of the colonies, passing the test of virility temporarily banishes the menace of pederasty, in this case, the test grants Jean entry into pederastic coupledness by proving him a worthy *vautour* for Villeroy: "I defended myself and Villeroy took me under his wing."³⁴ For to be a respectable bottom (and here Mettray's misogyny is striking), is to not be fully feminized and, indeed, to offer periodic proofs of one's nascent virility. As Jean explains, Villeroy "would not have accepted – as no *marle* accepted – for his *vautour* to be a fairy [*une lope*]. He made me fight."³⁵ As Villeroy's *vautour*, Jean thus receives a virile education. He is required to sustain Villeroy's honor by adopting manly rather than feminine gestures, by fighting, and, eventually, by taking his own *vautour*. Rather than fixing static and tyrannical hierarchies of dominance and submission, the "noble" form of pederasty between *marles* and *vautours*, much like virile friendship in coming-to-virility narratives, functions as a veritable method for producing, propagating, and

³³ J'eus le sentiment que tout le reste de ma vie dépendait de mon attitude en cet instant. Je fus doué soudain d'un sens politique très profond, car je compris que celui de ces enfants était d'une acuité extraordinaire. Selon une méthode très sûre, ils me tâtaient et, selon ma réaction, je serais classé parmi les marles, les cloches ou les lopes," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 190.

³⁴ "Je me défendis et Villeroy me pris sous sa garde," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 190.

³⁵ "n'aurait pas accepté # -# comme aucun marle ne l'acceptait # -# que son vautour fût une lope. Il m'obligeait à me battre [...]," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 262-3.

schooling virility.

If carceral pederasty is a form of education, however, it is an education that passes through the sentiments. In this respect, carceral pederasty constitutes less a direct challenge to Mettray's institutional practices than a perversion of them. Chapter 1 discussed how Mettray's innovative affective education sought to get Mettray inmates affectively "hooked" on family-like institutional hierarchies.³⁶ Such an affective education was intended to normalize young delinquents and to help them eventually achieve the position of head of a patriarchal household. Carceral pederasty, on the other hand, reroutes such affectively invested institutional hierarchies onto alternative masculine trajectories. The ambiguous position of pederasty in relation to institutional hierarchies is particularly evident in the case of Jean and Villeroy. As an inmate assigned the position of the "elder brother" of Jean's inmate "family," Villeroy is already the institutionally designated object of Jean's affection; Jean's pederastic relationship with him might therefore signify the *success* of the "elder brother" position in producing in Jean the values of respect for authority, obedience, and admiring emulation. However, Villeroy's attack on Guépin, the head guard, to avenge Jean's honor suggests that pederastic solidarities can become disarticulated from institutional hierarchies, producing both competing loyalties and movements of resistance.

But what exactly are the methods of a pederastic education? Jean describes it as the result of a form of love that compels an imitation and even a becoming of the elder partner. As an adolescent, Jean recalls propping up the softness and changeability of his

character with his love for "a man of stone with clean angles," stating that, "I could never be entirely at ease unless I could completely take his place, his qualities, and his virtues; when I imagined myself to be him, when I performed his gestures, uttered his words: when I was him."³⁷ Pederastic education relies on a love that, rather than foreclosing identification, coincides with a desire for perfect identity. This account of pederastic subject formation through identification deconstructs the novel's earlier opposition between feminine imitation and virile autonomy, as pederastic education employs the "feminine" capacities of imitating, taking the place of, and even becoming someone else in the service of schooling masculinity. The virility formed through a pederastic education, however, *has no essence*; rather than being the expression of an internal masculine core, it is constructed from the adoring theft of another's attributes – his gestures, his words, and his virtues.

But if pederastic education produces an imitative and non-essential masculinity, does this mean that heterosexual carceral masculinity, by contrast, is autonomous, unique, and internally anchored? In one remarkable passage, Jean suggests that the impermeable masculinity of the heterosexual pimp is produced through the same loving imitation that characterizes pederastic education:³⁸

³⁶ See Henri Gaillac, *Les maisons de correction 1830-1945* (Editions Cujas, 1991), 83-84.

³⁷ "un homme de pierre aux angles nets"; "je n'avais tout à fait le repos que si je pouvais tout à fait prendre sa place, prendre ses qualités, ses vertus; lorsque je m'imaginai être lui, que je faisais ses gestes, prononçais ses mots : lorsque j'étais lui," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 37.

³⁸ At other points, Genet makes it clear that within criminal subcultures, the pimp, with his knowledge of and control over women, is considered the epitome of virile heterosexuality, whereas the burglar, who lacks control over women and who works either alone or with other men, is always a potential pederast. Since the inmates of Mettray are too old to learn to control female sexual commerce when they are released, Genet writes that they become burglars or

The little delinquents go instinctively toward [the insolent pimps]. They surround them, listening to them, their mouths half open. The pimp impregnates them. And if you shrug your shoulders over what seems a ridiculous ideal, you are mistaken, for they obey the amorous impulse that obliges them to resemble the one they love: a tough [*un dur*], until the day when, finally, they have become the one they loved. They then lose, in hardening, the thrilling tenderness imparted to them by the movement of marching toward their goal, the inconsistent flow – that is only passage – of yearning youth toward maturity. Everything in them then forgets this amorous march. They have become banal pimps, no longer remembering the adventure they had to pursue to become these pimps. They, in turn, will serve as a magnetic pole to other minors, for this is God's way, perhaps impure, of fabricating the impassive men of prisons.³⁹

In this fable of virility, a history of homosocial love and desire is the condition for the production of the impermeable masculinity of the *dur* – the tough or, literally, the "hard." Just as in a pederastic education, the tough is produced through an adolescent's adoring imitation of a virile model, an imitation which eventually leads to his becoming what he previously desired. In addition to describing the origins of tough masculinity, this fable also constitutes a strikingly apt theorization of the role of pederastic friendship in the boys' coming-to-virility narrative. In Chapter 1's memoirs of the penal colonies, we saw that a boy's friendship with an adored older friend or mentor, who spurs him to perform his virility and to reject pederasty, is of primary importance in his journey to a

sailors (that is, potential pederasts) rather than pimps.

³⁹ "Les petits voyous vont d'instinct vers [les macs insolents], ils les entourent, ils les écoutent, la bouche entrouverte. Le mac les féconde. Et si l'on hausse les épaules à propos d'un idéal qui paraît ridicule, on aura tort car ils obéissent à l'impulsion amoureuse qui les oblige à ressembler à celui qu'ils aiment: un dur, jusqu'au jour où, enfin, ils sont devenus celui qu'ils aimaient. Ils perdent alors, en durcissant, l'émouvante tendresse que leur donnait le mouvement de marche vers leur but, l'inconsistant écoulement de jeunesse désirante à maturité et qui n'est que passage. Alors tout en eux oublie cette marche amoureuse. Ils sont devenus un mac banal, sans davantage se souvenir de l'aventure qu'il leur fallut parcourir pour être ce mac. Ils serviront à leur tour de pôle attractif à d'autres minos, car c'est de ce moyen, peut-être impur, que Dieu se sert pour fabriquer les hommes impassibles des prisons," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 215-216.

normative, heterosexual masculinity. The younger boy's virile performances are not spontaneous; rather, they are inspired by his love for his mentor, his impulse to resemble him, and his desire to win and hold his affection. "Pederastic education" might, then, describe a method for the production not only of pederastic masculinities, but also the heterosexual masculinity of the pimp, and even the normative masculinity of the coming-to-virility narrative. Genet's fable, however, insists on the role of forgetting in the production of an appropriately "banal" heterosexual virility. Forgetting is the method by which becoming is stopped and desire is frozen until the rock-like stasis of a non-desiring, non-imitative masculinity is finally attained. But does this process always work as smoothly as this passage seems to imply, or are there desiring movements that never become fully fixed, *durs* who never entirely forget their adolescent desires, tough prison men who nonetheless mourn and remain haunted by their lost loves?

Jean would appear to be an example of someone who never fully succeeds at transitioning from imitating virile models to attaining a fully static, frozen, and non-imitative virility. His abrupt transformation into Villeroy while fighting Charlot suggests that Jean's adult virility still requires propping up by a beloved model. Compared to the hard impermeability of the true tough, Jean is a leaking vessel, full of cracks. As he admits halfway through the text, "[t]here's something in me that knows very well that it's vain to take pains to appear strong and master of myself, for my

flamboyant nature [*ma folle nature*] will always appear through a thousand fissures."⁴⁰ In this figure, hardness is merely a thin shell, inevitably fissured by the insuppressible pressure of Jean's "flamboyant nature." This figure of the crack or the fissure, however, soon multiplies throughout the text to afflict even the hardest of masculinities. The above confession is, in fact, foreshadowed by a rather cryptic commentary inspired by Jean's ex-lover Divers. Jean recalls being struck, as an adolescent at Mettray, by Divers's features, darkened as if by a veil of mourning. While Jean is impelled to liken Divers to an angel carved into a glass window, he must acknowledge that this carving has a crack. As he mysteriously comments, "I later discovered the meaning of this crack [*cette fêlure*], a second sign of mourning, as well as the one, more theatrical yet, that furrows Bulkaen, that furrows all the *marles*, from Botchako to Charlot."⁴¹ What do these cracks signify, in what sense are they theatrical, how are they signs of mourning, and why do they afflict all of the prison toughs?

Genet's fable about the prison system's infallible fabrication of *durs* through the forgetting of adoring pederastic imitation omits one key step. Far from occurring automatically, the transition from "the flow of yearning youth" to the impassivity of the tough requires the survival of a series of painful losses.⁴² The tough is hardened not only by the physical blows that he receives, but also, and indeed especially, by the loves that

⁴⁰ "C'est quelque chose en moi qui sait très bien qu'il serait vain de me donner du mal pour paraître fort et maître de moi, car ma folle nature apparaîtra toujours par mille fissures," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 165.

⁴¹ "Je découvris plus tard le sens de cette fêlure, deuxième signe de deuil, et de celle, plus théâtrale encore, qui sillonne Bulkaen, qui sillonne tous les marles, de Botchako à Charlot," Genet, *Miracle de la Rose*, 112-113.

⁴² "L'écoulement de jeunesse désirante," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 216.

he loses or is forced to renounce. In reminiscing about his adolescence, Jean thus unearths an alternative, less triumphant genealogy of masculine hardness. One day, when Jean mistakenly imagines that Villeroy is cheating on him, he undergoes a telling transformation, becoming "what any punk without his *marle* is: a temple of distress."⁴³ Jean, who at this moment is still soft of character and without a settled identity, suddenly becomes a ceremonial structure in memory of his lost lover, a temple whose hardness exists only to be inhabited by Villeroy's spirit. Although this transformation, born of a misperception, is only temporary, Jean's momentary accession to the state of "any punk without his *marle*" foreshadows the transformation that every punk who receives a virile education must undergo – for the first condition of becoming a *marle* is to give up one's *marle*. When Villeroy definitively leaves Mettray, Jean's pride at his inclusion amongst the *marles* is shadowed by a pervasive sense of loss: "the sadness of his departure very quickly lost its primitive meaning to become a sort of chronic melancholy, like a foggy autumn, and that autumn is the foundational season [*la saison de base*] of my life, for it reappears often, even now."⁴⁴ This fundamental melancholy, built of deep loss, is quite literally foundational, for it marks the trace of loss's conversion into a masculine hardness. Reflecting, "I guess that, to others, I can seem tough [*dur*], for Bulkaen's toughness [*dureté*] too was composed of his profound desolation to find himself abandoned," Jean realizes that this history of loss is not his

⁴³ "ce qu'est n'importe quel giron sans son marle : un temple de détresse," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 179.

⁴⁴ "la tristesse de son départ perdit bien vite son sens primitif pour devenir une espèce de mélancolie chronique, pareille à un automne embrumé, et cet automne est la saison de base de ma vie car il réapparaît souvent, maintenant encore," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 164.

alone; it has shaped Bulkaen and might, therefore, characterize all of the tough masculinities forged from carceral pederasty.⁴⁵

In some ways, Genet's location of masculinity in relation to, for the pederastic toughs, a pervasive melancholy and, for the heterosexual pimps, a banalizing forgetting articulates nicely with Judith Butler's theory of melancholy gender. However, by theorizing the *multiple* masculinities forged, not in the bourgeois nuclear family, but in all-male institutional "family-like" hierarchies, Genet goes beyond Butler's theory of gender identification. Genet's account of the gender formation of the pederastic toughs, in particular, requires the conceptualization of a form of a gender nostalgia that hovers *between* mourning and melancholia.

2.1.2 Melancholia's Genders

In her elegant "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," Judith Butler mines Freud's theory of melancholia for its potential insights into the process by which subjects are constituted as boys and girls within a "heterosexual matrix" of same-sex identification and opposite-gender desire. Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," contrasts the two possible responses to loss, "normal" mourning and "abnormal" melancholia. Whereas, in mourning, the subject gradually withdraws his libidinal energies from the lost object until he is able to let go of it completely and reinvest his libido in a new object, in melancholia, whose affects of extreme sadness and disinterest in the outside world mimic those of mourning, the subject clings to the lost

⁴⁵ "je devine ce qu'aux yeux des autres, je puis paraître dur, car la dureté de Bulkaen était faite aussi de sa profonde désolation de se voir abandonné," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 279.

object instead of letting it go. Melancholia, however, is no ordinary refusal to let go; for the melancholic's loss must remain, on some level, unconscious. As Freud puts it, the melancholic "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest the melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious."⁴⁶ Refusing to mourn his unconscious loss, the melancholic retains it by setting it up inside the ego as an identification. Freud uses the metaphor of primitive cannibalization to describe this identification of the lost object with the ego: "[t]he ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it."⁴⁷ The metaphorical figure for Freudian melancholia is thus that of an unconscious, devouring primitive identification.

Whereas "Mourning and Melancholia" maintains a rigid distinction between the normal process of mourning and the abnormal disorder of melancholia, this distinction is partially abandoned in Freud's revised 1923 theory of melancholia in *The Ego and the Id*. Freud begins this essay by suggesting that melancholia is far more common than previously thought and might even play a role in normal ego formation:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego – that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 254.

⁴⁷ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 258.

determining the form take by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its "character."⁴⁸

His revised theory makes a series of provocative claims: that, far from being an abnormal condition, melancholia might be *the only way* in which the Id can give up its objects; that the ego is itself composed of the sedimented history of the objects that it has lost and melancholically incorporated into itself; and that, out of this multilayered history, it is nevertheless one's childhood identifications with one's parents that permanently fix the gendered form taken by one's ego. This revision raises more questions than it answers, particularly in its attempt to draw causal connections between the Oedipus crisis, melancholic identification, and gender identity.

Butler's "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" picks up on these ambiguities to rethink rigid gender identifications as based on a melancholic foreclosure of the possibility of same-gender love and opposite-gender identification. She begins with a return to a characteristic of melancholia central within "Mourning and Melancholia" but dropped from *The Ego and The Id*; namely, melancholia's status as a form of unresolved grief resulting from an object loss that remains unconscious. Freud never explains why certain losses should be unconscious and produce melancholia whereas others should remain fully conscious and mournable. Butler, on the other hand, proposes that those forms of object loss that are unconscious and ungrievable and that, therefore, result in formative melancholic identifications must be structured by prohibitions both on loving and on grieving that love. She suggests that the Oedipus

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. James Strachey, The Standard Edition (New York: W.

complex, which goes to great lengths to explain the prohibition on heterosexual incest, tacitly presumes a more absolute prohibition on homosexual desire, since it presupposes the heterosexualization of desire. The gendered subject of the Oedipus complex, Butler argues, is formed through the melancholic incorporation of a repudiated desire for the same-gender parent that the child "never" loved and "never" could have lost. This repudiated desire is then performed, or "acted out," as a same-gender identification. In Butler's account, rigid gender and sexual identifications become legible as melancholic structures founded on a socially sanctioned disavowal of homosexual love and loss.

Butler's account of gender melancholy, however illuminating and evocative, relies on highly schematized Freudian models of the bourgeois family, of binary gender, and of prohibited homosexual love that are thoroughly deconstructed within narratives of the boys' penal colonies. For the inmates of the boy's penal colonies, who were often either orphans or children from "broken," poor, and working-class families in which bourgeois gender norms did not prevail, gender identification may have operated much differently than in Freud's bourgeois nuclear family. Moreover, for inmates of the boys' penal colonies, the family might not have been the primary formative social unit at all, and the gendering processes of love, identification, and melancholic renunciation may have taken place within the affect-dense all-male hierarchies of the colonies as well as within the family. Moreover, narratives of the boys' penal colonies complicate the easy assumption of a radical foreclosure of homosexual love. To the contrary, both in the normative coming-to-virility narrative and in Genet's theorization of pederastic

education, masculinity is schooled through an institutionally prescribed adoring imitation of one's same-sex mentor, friend, lover, and/or "elder brother." Differences between the masculinities of the "normal" heterosexual, the "hard" pimp, and the pederastic tough are not rigorously demarcated as either pederastic or heterosexual. Rather, they reflect different gender trajectories available *within* a pederastic education. Of these trajectories, that of the heterosexual in the coming-to-virility narrative is perhaps the closest to Butlerian gender melancholy. To become a "normal" heterosexual within the coming-to-virility narrative, a boy must disavow the passionate, sensual, and submissive elements of his attachment to his older friend, acting out this disavowed ambivalence as a paranoid aggression against an eroticized pederastic figure. But what roles do melancholia and mourning play in shaping the alternative masculinities of the boys' penal colonies?

2.1.3 Spectral Mourning

The temple, Jean's metaphor for the sorrowful state of a punk abandoned by his *marle*, in some ways resembles a melancholic structure. Erected upon the pain of his lover Villeroy's imagined abandonment, the temple that Jean becomes is a psychic monument to loss. Rather than melancholically burying an unconscious loss, however, Jean's temple remains haunted and open to possession by Villeroy's living memory. This openness to possession and to haunting by lost objects that are neither fully mourned (for then, Jean's melancholy would not be a chronic state) nor entirely disavowed and forgotten (for then, Jean would be a "banal pimp") is figured as a series

of tiny openings – fissures and cracks – in the hardness of Jean’s masculinity. Is this, then, the sense of the fissures that traverse the other toughs from Mettray? At one point, Jean reflects on another figure for wounded masculinity. Of Mettray’s former inmates, he speculates, “[t]hey will have women, but I daren't think that these kids who for so long were courtesans, or males adoring them, could possibly not keep, in their hearts, in their souls, and in their muscles, the bruise of Mettray.”⁴⁹ The “bruise of Mettray,” like the cracks on the surface of the *marles*, marks the fissured and swollen hardness of toughs in perpetual mourning for the haunting pleasures of imprisonment, of adolescent femininity, and of pederastic bottoming. The impermeable and fixed hardness of the heterosexual pimps, on the other hand, resembles that of the tomb rather than the temple. Abraham and Torok have likened the melancholic fantasy of incorporation to the entombment of an ungrievable loss, writing evocatively that “[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject.”⁵⁰ They characterize incorporation as the “confinement, imprisonment, and (in extreme cases) entombment,” of the object, which, in the process, is made lifeless and inert.⁵¹ Entombing a lost love rather than invoking spirits, the pimps attain a perfect hardness through the melancholic forgetting of their adolescent passions. This hardness is precisely that of their idealized virile models, whom they have melancholically incorporated, the better to deny having loved and lost them. By contrast, Jean’s fissured pederastic masculinity – which, he at times

⁴⁹ “Ils auront des femmes, mais je n’ose croire que ces gosses qui furent si longtemps courtisanes, ou mâles les adorant, puissant ne pas garder au coeur, à l’âme et dans les muscles la meurtrissure de Mettray,” Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 198.

⁵⁰ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.

suggests, is not so very different from that of the other toughs who were once incarcerated at Mettray – is that of the temple, a hard structure that nevertheless encourages, by its hospitable hollowness, the ephemeral passage of honored spirits.

If Jean erects a temple for his lost loves, he builds a prison to hold onto his childhood memories: "'As a prison gate guards me, my hear guards your memory... I won't allow my childhood to escape.'⁵² While the metaphor of the prison cell is undoubtedly more coercive than that of the temple, both are hard psychic structures built to be inhabited by memories and spirits from the past. As such, both might be read as figures for what Derrida would term *spectral mourning*. For Derrida, spectrality is an ethical attitude towards both the past and the future characterized by an openness towards transformative inhabitations. The disjunctive temporality of the specter, which visits, live, from the past, figures the possibility of a form of justice beyond the juridical, based on the principle of a "hospitality without reserve."⁵³ Spectral mourning, "a mourning in fact and in right interminable, without any possible normalcy, without a reliable limit either in reality or conceptually, in between introjection and incorporation," might, therefore, mean a receptivity to haunting by specters from a past that is never fully closed and mourned.⁵⁴ Between introjection – the full assimilation of a loss after a completed mourning process – and incorporation – the melancholic "swallowing" of an

⁵¹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 132.

⁵² "'Comme une porte de prison me garde, mon cœur garde ton souvenir... Je ne laisserai pas mon enfance s'échapper," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 42.

⁵³ "une hospitalité sans réserve," Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 111.

⁵⁴ "un deuil en fait et en droit interminable, sans normalité possible, sans limite fiable, dans la réalité ou dans le concept, entre l'introjection et l'incorporation," Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 160.

unmournable and disavowed loss – spectral mourning is never complete and does not exclude such "pathological" symptoms as haunting and possession.⁵⁵ However, whereas Derrida conceives of spectrality as a supremely ethical relationship to the past, Genet's metaphor of the heart as a prison for its memories, like that of the abandoned punk as a commemorative temple, eloquently figures both the persistent melancholy and the trauma-induced hardening that can accompany spectral mourning. For Jean, imprisoning the past and becoming a temple to his ex-lovers function less as ethical stances than as means of keeping alive losses that cannot be publicly expressed. Shut down thanks to the efforts of reporters like Alexis Danan and attacked in the writings of former inmates, Mettray, and therefore Jean's adolescence, is both literally and figuratively in ruins. In one of the most melancholy passages of *Miracle*, upon revisiting Mettray after its closure, Jean writes, "[a]fter having glanced at those ruins, the sadness of my soul will never be healed. [...] All I found was a cadaver. I know my youth is dead. Nothing remains of the passage of so many hoodlums."⁵⁶ Mettray is a cadaver, murdered and forgotten, and Jean's sadness at its death can never be healed; for he knows of no socially recognizable way to mourn Mettray's carceral subculture as something of value, as a true loss which can be recognized and communicated as such. The public discourse that figures the boys' penal colonies as abusive institutions and

⁵⁵ For a fuller development of this distinction between introjection and incorporation, see Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation" in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1* (University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 125-138.

⁵⁶ "Davoir jeté un coup d'oeil sur ces ruines, jamais ne guérira la tristesse de mon âme. [...] Je n'ai trouvé qu'un cadavre. Je sais que ma jeunesse est morte. Il ne reste plus rien du passage de tant de voyous," Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, 306.

pederasty as the sign of their moral corruption relegate the pleasures, the pedagogies, and the social forms of the colonies to the status of abandoned cadavers and unmourned phantoms.

It is in light of the inexpressibility, within available public discourses, of the loss of the boys' penal colonies that *Miracle's* play between different styles of writing remembrance can be understood. Although *Miracle* begins with the pretense that remembering the past is a virile sport, as memory unearths melancholic remainders, buried and forgotten within public discourses on the boys' penal colonies, its gendered function gradually changes. The "exact vision" of virility gives way to a voluptuous falling into remembrance, and memory is transformed from an objective, virile faculty into a volatile, seductive, and potentially queering practice. In the process, Jean's narrative style becomes increasingly poetic, imaginative, and even fantastical. Memory, at this point, has veered into the excess "without any possible normalcy" of a spectral form of mourning that, bent on healing, is performative rather than constative.⁵⁷ The discursive project of mourning melancholic remainders is, properly speaking, an act of sorcery, which seeks to raise the socially unmournable to the dignity of a true loss through the magic of an poetic, excessive, and even miraculous "feminine" mode of writing.

The miracles, fantasies, and rites that increasingly litter *Miracle's* pages – such as the miraculous transformation of death row inmate Harcamone's chains into roses, Jean's childhood fantasy of being a cabin boy tortured by the older sailors but beloved

by the captain, and Bulkaen's ritual desecration by Mettray's *marles* spitting into his open mouth – mark the text's turn to a performative, magical mode of writing that breaks with both the "exact vision" of virility and the conventions of the memoir. In its foregrounding of the improbable, the magical, and the fantastical, *Miracle* is certainly not a "truer" account of the boy's penal colonies than the narratives studied in Chapter 1. Like these narratives, *Miracle* operates a series of omissions and idealizations with regards to the "truth" of life in the boys' penal colonies. *Miracle's* distinction lies, rather, in its exploration of memory's effects on the rememberer. Typically, the genre of the memoir establishes a linear narrative of maturation that finds its accomplishment in the person of the author at the moment of writing. As we saw in Chapter 1, the memoirs of former inmates of the penal colonies recount the narrator's achievement of normative heterosexual masculinity through the renunciation of a childhood dependence on other boys and on the culture of pederasty that this dependence implicitly or explicitly evokes. The material writing and distribution of these narratives itself has the effect of shoring up the normativity of their authors, whose history of incarceration and youthful deviance would otherwise mark them aberrant, morally suspect, and incapable of giving truthful testimony. As I argued, the truth value of the former inmate coming-to-virility narrative, whose telos is the mature narrator/author himself, is established less by the successful activation of codes of realism, *vraisemblance*, or autobiography and more by the narrative performance of a rejection of carceral cultures and attainment of a normative masculinity. The fact of the former inmate's accession to the position of

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 160.

autobiographical authorship, with the capacity for moral self-reflection and autonomous interiority that this position implies, itself stands as the ultimate proof of his maturity, morality, and social integration. By contrast, Genet's willful inhabitation of authorial abjection, that is, his authorial dramatization of his position as an unrepentant criminal conversant with and, indeed, crucially subjectified by pederastic inmate cultures, disqualifies his writing from genres of truth-telling such as the testimony or the memoir. The leeway afforded by *Miracle's* ambiguous position *between* memoir and novel, on the other hand, allows Genet to both invoke and to critically disaggregate the conventions of the memoir. Genet does not tell the story of how he survived the aberrant cultures of the penal colonies to become a normative masculine subject of work and marriage, whose narrative can be trusted precisely because he has become this subject. He does not even recount the story that *Miracle's* opening promises – that of a properly *carceral* development, in which he would mature from the position of the noble bottom, the *vautour*, to that of a top in a pederastic relationship with a younger, feminized inmate. Rather, he shows how Jean's attempt to tell this triumphal narrative fails, seduced by the feminine lures of memory, and undoes, in the process, Jean's tenuously attained virility. *Miracle* thus unlocks the capacity of memory to disaggregate the unity of the self, of autobiographical writing to interrupt, rather than culminating in, the present, and of fantasy and poetry to supplement the shortcomings of dry narrative, singing those affects and dependencies abjected within the liberal discourse of penal reform and foreclosed from collective mourning. If, as Genet writes in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *vraisemblance* is the melancholic "disavowal of unavowable reasons," then *Miracle's*

fantastical mode of writing carries out the impossible, spectral mourning of that which must be disavowed for a narrative of the boys' penal colonies to qualify as "truth."⁵⁸

2.2 The Ascesis of the Abject

I open the second part of this chapter with another scene of mourning the unmournable, taken from Genet's *The Thief's Journal*:

They, who one of them calls the Carolines, arrived in procession to the site of a destroyed urinal. During the riots of 1933, the rebels tore out one of the dirtiest, but dearest basins. It was close to the port and the barracks, and the hot urine of thousands of soldiers had corroded its metal. When its definitive death was verified, in shawls, in veils, in silk dresses, in waisted jackets, the Carolines – not all of them, but chosen in a solemn delegation – came to lay there a bouquet of red roses tied with a crepe veil. [...] their shrill voices, their cries, their outrageous gestures had no other purpose, it seemed to me, than to pierce the layer of contempt of the world. The Carolines were great. They were the Daughters of Shame.

Once they arrived at the port, they turned right, toward the barracks, and, on the rusted and stinking metal of the butchered urinal, over a pile of dead scrap metal, they laid the flowers.⁵⁹

In this passage, a procession of impoverished Barcelonian queens solemnly mourn the passing of a derisory and even filthy object, publicly utilized for the disposal of bodily waste, for homosexual cruising, and for queer sex acts: a urinal. Not just any urinal,

⁵⁸ "désaveu des raisons inavouables," Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 27.

⁵⁹ "Celles, que l'une d'entre elles appelle les Carolines, sur l'emplacement d'une vespasienne détruite se rendirent processionnellement. Les révoltés, lors des émeutes de 1933, arrachèrent l'une des tasses les plus sales, mais des plus chères. Elle était près du port et de la caserne, et c'est l'urine chaude de milliers de soldats qui en avait corrodé la tôle. Quand sa mort définitive fut constatée, en châles, en mantilles, en robes de soie, en vestons cintrés, les Carolines – non toutes mais choisies en délégation solennelle – vinrent sur son emplacement déposer une gerbe de roses rouges nouée d'un voile de crêpe. [...] Je savais que ma place était au milieu d'elles, non à cause que j'étais l'une d'elles, mais leurs voix aigres, leurs cris, leurs gestes outrés n'avaient, me semblait-il, d'autre but que vouloir percer la couche de mépris du monde. Les Carolines étaient grandes. Elles étaient les Filles de la Honte.

Arrivées au port elles tournèrent à droite, vers la caserne, et sur la tôle rouillée et puante

however. Situated near the barracks, this particular urinal, beloved by the queens, was frequented by servicemen, providing the queens with esteemed military meat. The funeral procession of the Carolines, then, does not only mourn a filthy object, but specifically, one associated with public acts of queer sex and with a particular subcultural taste for military men – characteristics which, in the dominant imaginary, would only intensify the urinal's abjection. The unmournability of the loss of a public site where queens and military men might cruise and rendezvous is, in fact, signified by the disgustingness of the lost object itself – a filthy, corroded urinal – now only a stinking and rusted mass of butchered metal. Unlike the solitary act of writerly mourning that *Miracle* enacted, however, the Carolines' method of mourning the unmournable is courageously public and collective. Its genre is the performative ritual of the funeral procession, a recognized way for an affected group (most often a family) to visually manifest its loss to happenstance spectators by the mass occupation of and movement through public space – a genre not too distant from that of the parade or the street protest. The procession's style and syntax, however, draw from the queer practice of camp. As with *Miracle's* fantastical and "feminine" mode of writing, the Carolines' public display of camp – notable, to cite from Susan Sontag's camp checklist, for its "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms," its "spirit of extravagance," and its penchant for being "serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" – is shown to be not merely a sensibility or an aesthetic, but

de la pissotière abattue sur le tas de ferrailles mortes elles déposèrent des fleurs," Jean Genet, *Journal du voleur*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 72-3.

the creative and necessary means for materializing an alternative set of values within which a vibrant queer sexual culture would be of paramount importance.⁶⁰ The extravagant and bold cultural practice of camp is necessary in order to "pierce the layer of contempt" which banishes things deemed properly private – the shame of queerness and of male femininity as well as of the corporeal acts of micturation and sex – from public expression. The Carolines' florid gestuality, their sonic penetrations, and their theatrical street politics constitute transgressive public stylizations of the vulgar, the private, and the "disgusting" that not only seek to raise them to the status of an art form and a sensibility, but that, more significantly, mark them as products of collective elaboration, and as the media of what Michael Warner would call a world-making counterpublic.⁶¹ The historical detail that the urinal was destroyed in the Barcelona anarcho-syndicalist uprising of 1933 suggests that any revolution, however radical, that does not fundamentally interrogate bourgeois sexual and corporeal morality must itself be questioned.

If the prior section examined how *Miracle* responds to the unmournable abjection of carceral subcultures within the discourse of liberal penal reform by elaborating a fantastical form of spectral mourning, this section will consider another kind of transformation that emerges from the experience of social abjection, that wrought by what Foucault would term *ascesis*. The funeral procession of the Carolines mediates between these two sections. The Carolines mourn the abjectly unmournable through

⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador USA, 1966), 279, 283, 288.

⁶¹ See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

camp's performative stylization of collective abjection, materializing, in the process, an alternative set of values and an alternative relation to shame, corporeality, sex, and male femininity. The Carolines' funeral procession is thus an example, but not the prototype, of the varied forms of the ascesis of the abject that this section will explore. I begin with a critique of Didier Eribon's *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un thème de Jean Genet*, arguing that Eribon's understanding of the resubjectifying process of ascesis in Genet's novels is marred by his overreliance on the model of gay pride. I then go on to explore modalities of the ascesis of the abject, including camp, in *The Thief's Journal* and *Our Lady of the Flowers*, that embrace and transfigure abjection, modeling alternative subjectivities based more on desubjectivation, the transgression of one's predilections, and a continual self-transformation than on the prideful affirmation of an internal identity.

2.2.1 Gay Pride or Queer Ascesis?

Didier Eribon's *Une morale du minoritaire* is precisely a study of the theories of abjection and of ascesis developed within Genet's novels. Eribon's understanding of abjection as the process by which "a human being loses its humanity and finds itself relegated to the status of a pariah by the dominant's gaze" both emphasizes abjection's social determinants and gestures toward the process of transformation that abjection sets into motion, in which humanity is lost, a subjectivity debased, and a self undone.⁶² However, his description of Foucaultian ascesis, which he considers central to Genet's

⁶² "un être humain perd son humanité en se trouvant relégué au statut de paria par le regard des dominants," Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un thème de Jean Genet* (Paris:

ethics of abjection, often resembles a naive account of gay pride. Eribon at one point describes ascesis as "the work on the self that one must do in order to accept oneself," echoing the popularized post-gay liberation notion that the principle battle facing closeted, self-hating gays is to learn to accept "who they really are" and to affirm their core gay identities.⁶³ In a more interesting description that highlights the possibility of collective forms of ascesis, the role of social exclusion in transforming the psyche, and the idea of self-reinvention, Eribon argues that the central problem Genet's work investigates is "how 'shameful' individuals reinvent themselves out of the very exclusion that shames them and become, by the affirmation of what they are, productive of new forms of subjectivity, individually and collectively constructed."⁶⁴ Even in this description, however, the relation between the dynamic transformations of abjection and ascesis and the identitarian fixity of "the affirmation of what they are" remains murky. How exactly does accepting or affirming what one is lead to self-reinvention or to a fundamental transformation in one's subjectivity? And is what one is something pre-given and essential, or is it itself the product of the process of self-transformation that abjection sets into motion? In this description, the movement from shame to self-affirmation once again evokes the dynamics of gay pride. This evocation is rendered concrete in another passage, to which I will later return, in which the movement from

Fayard, 2001), 69.

⁶³ "ce travail que l'on doit faire sur soi pour s'accepter soi-même," Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 93.

⁶⁴ "comment les individus 'honteux' se réinventent à partir de l'exclusion qui les fait tels, et deviennent, par l'affirmation de ce qu'ils sont, les producteurs de nouvelles formes de subjectivités, construites individuellement et collectivement." Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 294.

shame to self-affirmation leads explicitly to pride: "[i]t is the consciousness of being what one is, and the fact of assuming it, of desiring it, that secrets pride. Hence pride is but an emanation of shame, which covers it, little by little, and deprives it of its subjectifying force."⁶⁵ In this passage, the movement from shame to pride through an active consciousness of, assumption of, and desire for "what one is" celebrates ascesis as, precisely, a version of gay pride.

Eribon's reliance on homosexuality as the final referent of heterogeneous forms of social abjection and on gay pride as the ultimate reference for imagining abjection's potential futures are symptomatized in his efforts to interpret Foucault's life work through the lens of his homosexuality. In one passage, Eribon reads both Foucault's and Genet's interest in multiple forms of social exclusion as mere "detours" through which they attempt to speak the master signifier of homosexuality. He wonders, "could it be that madness, [for Foucault], like 'thievery' for Genet or 'Evil' for Jouhandeau, was a sort of detour, following the paths of metaphor, of analogy, or of 'structural homology,' in order to think homosexuality and to describe the processes of exclusion at work in contemporary societies?"⁶⁶ The implication – that gay men's writings about different forms of abjection are really just "detours" through which they attempt to write about their own homosexuality – is particularly puzzling given that Foucault was not only gay

⁶⁵ "C'est la conscience d'être ce que l'on est, et le fait de l'assumer, de le vouloir, qui secrète l'orgueil. Ainsi l'orgueil n'est-il qu'une émanation de la honte, qui peu à peu la recouvre, et la prive de sa force assujettissant," Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 101.

⁶⁶ "la folie fut-elle pour [Foucault], comme le 'vol' pour Genet ou le 'Mal' chez Jouhandeau, une sorte de détour, suivant les chemins de la métaphore, de l'analogie ou de l'homologie structurale', pour penser l'homosexualité et pour décrire les processus d'exclusion à l'œuvre dans les sociétés contemporaines," Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 191.

but also, according to some psychiatrists, psychologically perturbed, and that Genet was not only a sexual deviant, but also a convicted thief. Eribon's assumption that the question of homosexuality is the motivating force behind Foucault's and Genet's writings on madness and thievery, respectively, accords homosexuality an unwonted primacy as the code for a diverse series of homogenized "structural homologies." Just as he reads *Madness and Civilization (Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique)* as Foucault's tortured attempt to think homosexuality, Eribon implies that the critique of gay identity in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I (La volonté de savoir)* was Foucault's instinctive reaction, as an older generation queer, to the seventies gay liberation politics of "coming out" and "gay pride."⁶⁷ Eribon never addresses Foucault's cogent critique of how the gay liberation movement to affirm one's desire as one's identity risks assenting to rather than challenging the subjectifying power of medical discourses. Given Eribon's desire to understand Foucault's work solely in terms of Foucault's (for Eribon) closeted gay identity, it is unsurprising that Eribon fails to note that Foucault never located ascesis in the moment of proud affirmation of one's identity, but rather in the self-transformative practices that operate beside, apart from, or in contradiction to such an affirmation.

Foucault's writings on ascesis describe a turning of the self on itself in a project of self-transformation that could not be more distant from the banal acceptance of what one already is. As he defines it in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-2 (L'Hermeneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-2)*, ascesis is "a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self on the self, a progressive

⁶⁷ Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 62.

transformation of the self on the self for which one is oneself responsible in a long labor which is that of ascesis."⁶⁸ As suggested by the term "labor," ascesis requires a series of concrete exercises, veritable "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."⁶⁹ Such a technology "implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of *acquiring certain attitudes*," which might include alternative dispositions, sensibilities, or even "structures of feeling."⁷⁰ The move from shame to pride might, in some cases, constitute a form of ascesis, but only when it goes beyond the banal affirmation of what one is to become a technology of the self, a modification of one's dispositions and attitudes that leaves "the self" fundamentally changed in the process. There is no reason, however, to think that the transformation of shame to pride should be the *only* form of ascesis, whether for the abjected or for "proper" subjects.

Foucault's reference, for his major writings on ascesis, is the freeborn Greek man, for whom ascetic practices cemented relations of privilege, proving him worthy of

⁶⁸ "un travail de soi sur soi, une élaboration de soi sur soi, une transformation progressive de soi sur soi dont on est soi-même responsable dans un long labeur qui est celui de l'ascèse," Michel Foucault, *L'hermeneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frederic Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2001), 17.

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 225.

⁷⁰ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 225. Raymond Williams's influential use of the term, "structures of feeling," can be found in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.

governing and ruling a wife and slaves.⁷¹ It is only in his less formal interviews that Foucault recognizes the existence of forms of ascesis that do not reinforce relations of domination, discipline, and control. Interestingly, it is to sexual subcultures that he most frequently turns for contemporary examples of such forms of ascesis. In "Friendship as a Way of Life" ("L'amitié comme mode de vie"), originally published as an interview in a gay magazine, Foucault urges his gay reading public not to merely affirm the truth of their desire, but rather to *make use* of this desire in order to collectively become something else. In this context, Foucault poses ascesis, "the work that one does oneself on oneself to transform oneself or *to make appear that self that, happily, one never attains*" as an implicit counter to the gay pride project of accepting a pre-existing gay self.⁷² He coins the term "homosexual ascesis" to describe neither the affirmation of a present self nor a movement towards an attainable state, but rather, a horizon of transformational aspiration: "[I]et us move forward in a homosexual ascesis that would have us work on ourselves and invent, I did not say discover, a still improbable manner of being."⁷³ Since Foucault understands of homosexual ascesis as an aspirational horizon rather than an achieved or achievable state, he gives no blueprint for practicing it. He does, however, repeatedly suggest that uninstitutionalized affects and relationalities,

⁷¹ See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001).

⁷² "le travail que l'on fait soi-même sur soi-même pour se transformer ou *pour faire apparaître ce soi qu'heureusement on n'atteint jamais*," Michel Foucault, "L'amitié comme mode de vie," in *Dits et Écrits II: 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 984, my emphasis.

⁷³ "À nous d'avancer dans une ascèse homosexuelle qui nous ferait travailler sur nous-mêmes et inventer, je ne dis pas découvrir, une manière d'être encore improbable." Foucault, "L'Amitié comme mode de vie," 984.

such as the passions of male friendship, the relational innovations of a gay subculture, or the corporeal experiments of BDSM, could constitute subaltern forms of asceticism that might either trouble relations of power or operate in regions invisible to power.⁷⁴ While shame-pride dynamics might play a certain role in these subaltern sites, it seems clear that they are not at the center of the varied technologies of the self that Foucault believes gay subcultures have the potential to elaborate.

2.2.1 Asceticism of Abjection

In Genet's novels, the subject must engage in ascetic practices of self-transformation in order to negotiate their impossible position as society's refuse. At the same time as these novels frame asceticism as a necessary practice of survival, they often portray characters that evince a peculiar predilection for asceticism's self-annihilating vertigo. Both *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *The Thief's Journal* abound with descriptions, in starkly different tonalities, of modes of asceticism unassimilable to the model of gay pride. In these novels, Genet's characters engage in transformative operations on the self, elaborating subjectivities that are but fleeting moments within a continuous process of self-transformation, that tend toward the pleasures of *desubjectivation* rather than those of identity, and that, through camp stylizations of abjection, trouble depth models of identity, of gendered subjectivity, and of self-coherence. The forms of asceticism that Genet's characters pursue are, above all, multiple, for they are improvised in ecstatic

⁷⁴ See Foucault, "L'amitié comme mode de vie," 982-986; Michel Foucault, "Une esthétique de l'existence," in *Dits et Écrits II: 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1549-1553; Michel Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté," in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1527-1548; Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in *Dits et Écrits II:*

moments, in traumatically unexpected encounters, and in the long boredoms of imprisonment. In the remainder of this chapter, I seek to do justice to this diversity in the methods, origins, and aims of ascesis by outlining, in discontinuous catalogue form, the most striking of Genet's ascetic practices of abjection.

I open with a passage from *The Thief's Journal* in which the narrator, Jean, describes in detail the rigorous discipline by which he learned to embrace abjection at Mettray. Given the somber and anti-fantastical tone of *The Thief's Journal*, it is unsurprising that Genet here emphasizes not the queer pleasures of Mettray, but rather the painfulness of the experience of social abjection Jean suffers there. Jean writes:

Mettray, which satisfied my amorous tastes, had always hurt my sensibility. I suffered. Cruelly, I felt the shame of having my head shaved, of wearing an odious uniform, of being sentenced to that vile place; I knew the contempt of the other inmates, stronger or meaner than me. To survive my desolation, once my attitude was sufficiently reflective, I elaborated, without being aware of it, *a rigorous discipline*. The mechanism was more or less as follows (I would employ it from that moment on): to each accusation leveled against me, even if it was unjust, from the depths of my heart, I would respond, "yes." Hardly had I uttered this word – or the phrase that signified it – when I felt, within, the need to become what they had accused me of being. [...] I recognized myself as the coward, the traitor, the thief, the fag [*le pédé*] that they saw in me. An accusation can be made without proof, but to find myself guilty, it would seem that I would have to commit the acts that make traitors, thieves, or cowards; well, none of that: within myself, with a bit of patience, I discovered through reflection reason enough to be named these names. And I was stupefied to know that I was composed of refuse [*immondices*]. *I became abject*. Bit by bit, I grew accustomed to this state. I will confess it calmly. Their contempt became hatred: I had succeeded. But how it rent me.⁷⁵

1976-1988 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1139-1154.

⁷⁵ "Mettray qui comblait mes goûts amoureux blessa toujours ma sensibilité. Je souffrais. Cruellement j'éprouvais la honte d'être tondu, vêtu d'un costume infâme, d'être consigné dans cet endroit vil; je connaissais le mépris des autres colons plus forts que moi ou plus méchants. Afin de survivre à ma désolation, quand mon attitude était davantage repliée, j'élaborais sans y prendre garde *une rigoureuse discipline*. Le mécanisme en était à peu près celui-ci (depuis lors je l'utiliserai) : à chaque accusation portée contre moi, fût-elle injuste, du fond du coeur je répondrai

At the beginning of this passage, Jean's sensibility is the cause of his acute suffering from the shame of social abjection at the Mettray. Almost instinctively ("without being aware of it"), he elaborates a rigorous discipline, which he later refers to as "a training [...] like that of spiritual exercises," in order to survive the desolation of debasement.⁷⁶ This form of asceticism is primarily internal; through a process of self-reflection, Jean aims to change both his inner sense of self and the sensibility that causes him so much pain. Inwardly responding "yes" to every accusation leveled against him, Jean soon realizes that he can become a thief, traitor, coward, and pederast without even committing the acts thought to constitute these social categories. Recognizing that the boys' cruel insults represent aggressions on his character and on his moral self rather than explicit accusations, he learns to find abjection, the essence of these insults, within himself. In this spiritual exercise of self-reflection, Jean trains himself to recompose his memories, feelings, and desires into a new self, saturated with abjection. Jean's transformation does not occur at the moment of insult; rather, it is the outcome of Jean's ascetic practice of self-reflection, wherein, stupefied at finding himself composed of filth, he *becomes*, rather than merely discovering himself to already be, abject. Jean instinctively practices here *the asceticism of*

oui. A peine avais-je prononcé ce mot – ou la phrase qui le signifiait – en moi-même je sentais le besoin de devenir ce qu'on m'avait accusé d'être. [...] Je me reconnaissais le lâche, le traître, le voleur, le pédé qu'on voyait en moi. Une accusation peut être portée sans preuve, mais afin de me trouver coupable il semblera que j'eusse dû commettre les actes qui font les traîtres, les voleurs, les lâches, or il n'en était rien: en moi-même, avec un peu de patience, par la réflexion je découvrais assez de raisons d'être nommé de ces noms. Et j'avais la stupeur de me savoir composé d'immondices. *Je devins abject*. Peu à peu je m'accoutumai à cet état. Tranquillement je l'avouerai. Le mépris qu'on me portait se changea en haine: j'avais réussi. Mais quels déchirements n'avais-je pas connus," Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 198-9, my emphasis.

⁷⁶ "un [...] entraînement – semblable aux exercices spirituels," Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 199.

becoming abject, the objective of which is to render inhabitable a foreign and unlivable state. Whereas initially, Jean's sensibility racked him with shame, the outcome of his spiritual training is the acquisition of new habits of thought and of feeling in which abjection becomes a banal and quotidian state of being. Described as a painful process of self-mutilation ("how it rent me"), this form of asceticism achieves *survival* within an unlivable situation through a transformation in sensibility that permits the vertiginous shame of abjection to be experienced as a tranquil and placid habitual state.

If, for the philosophical narrator of *The Thief's Journal*, asceticism is a strategy improvised to assimilate the terrorizing experience of social abjection, the onanistic narrator of *Our Lady of the Flowers* imagines asceticism as an almost primary impulsion, predating social abjection and expressed in a camp sensibility. This sensibility appears inborn in the novel's central character, the country boy turned Parisian camp queen, Culafroy/Divine, and flourishes once Divine comes into contact with Paris's queer subculture.⁷⁷ Jean, the incarcerated narrator whose masturbatory fantasies compose the narrative of *Our Lady*, presents Culafroy as the quintessential dreamer, a country boy drawn to refined artistic pursuits such as violin-playing and ballet, but tragically lacking in the institutional and material support to pursue them seriously. To the worldly reader, this renders Culafroy's naive attempts at artfulness all the more campy:

He learned to dance by himself, just as he had learned to play the violin by himself. So he danced as he played. His every act was served by a gesture necessitated not by the act itself, but by a choreography that transformed his life

⁷⁷ I follow the practice of *Our Lady* of using masculine pronouns to refer to Culafroy before his transformation into Divine and feminine pronouns in reference to Divine herself. Given the novel's emphasis on Culafroy/Divine's self-transformation, I think this change of pronouns is warranted.

into a perpetual ballet. He quickly succeeded at dancing on his toes, and he did it everywhere: in the shed, while gathering sticks of wood, in the little barn, under the cherry tree... He would put aside his sabots and dance in black wool slippers on the grass, his hands clinging to the low branches. He populated the countryside with a multitude of figurines who thought themselves ballerinas [*danseuses*] in white tulle tutus, and remained nevertheless a pale schoolboy in a black smock, looking for mushrooms or dandelions.⁷⁸

Camp is present here not only in the evocation of ballet, which Sontag lists as an art form "saturated with Camp," or in the intimation of drag in the feminine ballerinas that Culafroy seeks to embody, but also in the reader's tender awareness of Culafroy's failure.⁷⁹ Culafroy's solitary ballet in the countryside is off, too artful and sophisticated for such a rough "natural" environment, and crucially lacking in an appreciative audience. His compulsion to dance anyhow thus constitutes "the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive" required to produce the tender yet knowing camp affect of "a seriousness that fails."⁸⁰ Interestingly, the explanation that we are given for Culafroy's compulsive dancing is not simply that he wishes to become a ballerina, but more ambiguously, that he is moved by an inner choreography to embellish his gestures beyond the necessities of useful action. This inner compulsion to a continuous *stylization of existence* is the animating source of Culafroy's camp artfulness, the core trait of his character, and the sensibility that will propel him through an ascetic

⁷⁸ "Il apprit seul à danser, comme seul il avait appris le violon. Il dansa donc comme il jouait. Tous ses actes furent servis par des gestes nécessités non par l'acte, mais par une chorégraphie qui transformait sa vie en un ballet perpétuel. Il réussit vite à faire des pointes, il en fit partout: au bûcher, en ramassant les morceaux de bois, dans la petite étable, sous le cerisier... Il posait ses sabots et dansait en chaussons de laine noire sur l'herbe, les mains accrochées aux basses branches. Il peupla la campagne d'une multitude de figurines qui se voulaient danseuses en tutu de tulle blanc, et restaient pourtant un écolier pâle, en tablier noir, cherchant des champignons ou des pissenlits," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 168.

⁷⁹ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 278.

journey of self-transformation.⁸¹ In fact, Culafroy's transformation into the camp queen, Divine, is presented not as the result of the discovery and affirmation of an innate sexual or gendered identity, but rather, as a form of private poetry: "Culafroy became Divine; he was thus a poem written only for himself, hermetic to whoever doesn't have the key."⁸² Culafroy's transformation into Divine does not conform in the slightest to the coming-out narrative: there is no intimation that, internally, Culafroy was always Divine, or that becoming Divine is a matter of publicizing this internal identity. To the contrary, Culafroy's gender transformation is represented as a continuation of the private practices of self-stylization that always rhythmized Culafroy's life. Camp thus describes both Culafroy's innate sensibility of self-transformation and self-stylization and the tender, comic, and cruel effects of disjuncture that this sensibility inevitably produces.

⁸⁰ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 283.

⁸¹ The phrase "stylization of existence" is my rendition of the Greek *techne tou biou* which Foucault most often translates as an "aesthetics of existence." Foucault describes his interest in the possibilities of *techne tou biou* in an interview: "The idea of the *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something which fascinates me. The idea also that ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure. All that is very interesting." We might speculate that such a process of self-modification through the creation of guidelines for existence would be particularly necessary for those living in the vacuum of social abjection, deemed outside of social morality and, thus, needing to create their own structure of existence. In another elaboration of *techne tou biou*, Foucault intriguingly states that, "[f]rom the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art." Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Dreyfus Hubert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 348, 351. Culafroy/Divine, who refuses the notion of a given core self, takes this injunction to heart, creating and recreating his- or herself continually. For Foucault's analysis of *techne tou biou* in classical Greek thought, see Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

⁸² "Culafroy est devenu Divine; il fut donc un poème écrit seulement pour lui, hermétique à quiconque n'en a pas la clé," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 342.

Once Culafroy becomes Divine, moves to Paris, and begins to make her living as a prostitute, these moments of disjuncture increasingly plague her everyday life, multiplying in order to push her, according to Jean, further along her path to sainthood. One scene details Divine's creative response to an everyday form of torture to which she is subjected, as an improperly gendered being, by a group of young hoodlums on the street:

The hoodlums were teasing her. They said that pricks must hurt, that old men...; that women had more charm...; that they, at least, were pimps... and other things, that they no doubt said without meaning any harm, but that hurt Divine. She grows more and more uncomfortable. They are just young little hoodlums, and she's thirty; she could shut them up with the back of her hand. But *they* are males. Still young, but with hard muscles and hard gazes. All three stand there, dreadfully inflexible, like the Fates. Divine's cheeks burn. She feigns being seriously occupied with drawing on her nails, and occupied with that only. "Here's what I could say," she thought, "to make them think I'm not upset." Stretching out her hand, displaying her nails, she say, smiling, to the children, "I'm going to start a fashion. Yes, yes, a new fashion. See, it's pretty. We women and the other women [*les femmes-nous et les femmes-autres*] will have lace drawn on our nails. We'll have artists come from Persia. They'll paint miniatures that we'll have to look at through a magnifying glass! Oh! God!"

The three hoodlums were taken aback, and one of them, speaking for all the others said, "Holy Divine," [*Sacrée Divine*].

They left.⁸³

⁸³ "Les voyous se moquaient d'elle. Ils disaient que cela devait faire mal, les bites, que les vieux...; que les femmes ont plus de charme...; qu'ils sont des macs, eux... et d'autres choses, qu'ils disent sans doute sans méchanceté, mais qui blessent Divine. Sa gêne augmente. Ce sont des petites gouapes toutes jeunes, et elle, elle a trente ans, elle pourrait les faire taire d'un revers de main. Mais eux, ce sont des mâles. Tous jeunes encore, mais le muscle et le regard durs. Et tous trois là, effroyablement inflexibles, pareils aux Parques. Les joues de Divine brûlent. Elle feint de s'occuper sérieusement du dessin de ses ongles et de ne s'occuper que de cela: "Voici ce que je pourrais dire, pensa-t-elle, pour leur faire croire que je ne suis pas troublée." Et tendant sa main, les ongles offerts, aux enfants, souriante, elle dit: – Je vais lancer une mode. Oui, oui, une nouvelle mode. Vous voyez, c'est joli. Les femmes-nous et les femmes-autres feront dessiner de la dentelle sur leurs ongles. On fera venir des artistes de Perse, ils peindront des miniatures qu'on regardera à la loupe! Ah! mon Dieu!

Les trois voyous furent décontenancés, et l'un d'eux, pour tous les autres, dit: – Sacrée Divine.

Ils partirent," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 222-3. For a reading of this passage and the crown of pearls passage in the context of camp's relation to corporeality and materiality, see Pascale Gaitet,

Initially, Divine reacts to the youth's shaming interpellation of her not as a lady, but as a homosexual man, with a nervous and automatic manifestation of her predilection for self-stylization: drawing obsessively on her fingernails. It is with camp panache, however, that Divine realizes how she can incorporate this self-stylization into her repartee. Rather than fighting the youths, which would only confirm to them that she really is a man, Divine succeeds in confounding them with a camp change of register. To their crude sexual teasing she counterposes the sophistication of a cosmopolitan lady's fashion; to the threat of physical violence she juxtaposes an infinitely delicate miniature; and to the gravity of her situation she responds with an exaggerated frivolity. Most of all, however, Divine succeeds by putting on a brilliant performance of the very queerness that the youths sought, with their clumsy teasing, to render abject. "Flaunting it," Divine shows the youths that their shaming and their muscle has no power over her, for she will only become *more* stylized, *more* queerly feminine, and *more* superficial with every insult. This not to say that Divine is really not ashamed. To the contrary, her embarrassment and hurt at the youths' crude taunts are precisely what drive her camp performance, fueling her elaborate Orientalist fantasy of Parisian ladies commissioning Persian artists to develop her new fashion. Sontag's observation that camp is "serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" barely scratches the surface of Divine's creative queer strategy. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has proposed, "shame and camp

"The Politics of Camp in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*," *L'Esprit Créateur* XXXV, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 40-49.

have important, entangled relations with each other."⁸⁴ Rechannelling the shame of stigma into a defiant performance of frivolity, superficiality, and fantasy, Divine fashions a subjectivity that deflects insult by embracing and cultivating abjection.⁸⁵

In another scene, surrounded by queens, with a crown of false pearls on her head, Divine finds herself abruptly brought low:

The crown of pearls falls to the ground and breaks. Condolences, to which a malicious joy lends rich tonalities: "The Divine is uncrowned!... It's the Great Fallen-One! The Poor Exile!..." [...] Divine lets out a cascade of strident laughter. Everyone is attentive: it's her signal. She rips her dentures out of her open mouth, rests them on her skull and, her heart in her throat but victorious, cries with a changed voice, her lips drawn inside her mouth, "Damn it all, ladies, I'll be queen anyhow."⁸⁶

The shame of sitting, toothless, with a denture on one's head is surely greater than that of merely losing a crown of false pearls. However, once again, the magic of Divine's camp victory resides not in its ability to diminish shame, but rather, in its transfiguration of shame's power. As Sontag acutely observes, "[w]hat [camp] does is to find the success in certain passionate failures."⁸⁷ Divine converts failure to success and shame to glory by making her daring embrace of both the incongruity of a used set of dentures serving as a crown and the abjections of old age and bodily infirmity the very source of her royalty.

While Sontag is notoriously dense and even dismissive concerning camp's origins in

⁸⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 213.

⁸⁵ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 288.

⁸⁶ "La couronne de perles tombe à terre et se brise. Condoléances auxquelles la joie méchante donne des richesses de tonalité : "La Divine est découronnée"... C'est la Grande-Déchue!... La pauvre Exilée!...' [...] Divine pousse un rire aux cascades stridente. Tout le monde est attentif: c'est son signal. De sa bouche ouverte, elle arrache son dentier, le pose sur son crâne et, le cœur dans la gorge mais victorieuse, elle s'écrie d'une voix changée, et les lèvres rentrées dans la bouche – Eh bien, merde, mesdames, je serai reine quand même," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 212-213.

queer subcultures, Esther Newton's ethnography of Kansas City female impersonators more accurately understands camp humor as a subcultural stylization of stigma.⁸⁸ As Newton perspicaciously writes, "[c]amp humor is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms."⁸⁹ Since queers and, in particular, queens find themselves perpetually occupying the site of the incongruous in relation to tacit straight norms, camp humor has evolved as a strategy for bringing this situation to a high pitch of comedic absurdity without giving in to normative expectations (by crying, for instance), while, in fact, performatively demonstrating the utter irrelevance of such expectations. As Newton importantly underlines, this form of humor does not merely "cover up" the shame and awkwardness of incongruity; it transforms it, converting it into laughter, pleasure, and triumph. Lacking the seriousness of prideful efforts to rehabilitate and affirm a stigmatized identity, camp embraces abjection, incongruity, and stigma and transforms them, through the stylizing practices of improvisational wit, theatrical extravagance, and studied frivolity, into signs of distinction and genres of collective humor. In its use of self-stylization and performance to convert negative affect, to transform sensibilities, and to make possible new realities (such as Divine as queen) camp humor constitutes a collectively elaborated queer practice of ascesis.

⁸⁷ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 291.

⁸⁸ Sontag has been roundly critiqued for her abstraction of camp from its queer subcultural origins. See, for example, D.A. Miller, "Sontag's Urbanity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 212-220. Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-19.

⁸⁹ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 109.

As we saw, Culafroy's gender transformation into Divine is depicted as yet another example of Culafroy/Divine's lifelong labor of self-stylization. If this is the case, then Divine is neither the internal truth of Culafroy's identity nor the mature culmination of Culafroy's development. *Our Lady's* characterization of Culafroy/Divine as involved in a continual process of improvisational and random self-stylization therefore undoes both the depth and the development models of self, opening identity up to the vagaries of chance and to the agencies of technologies of the self. This is true not only of Culafroy's gender transformation, but also of his youthful discovery of queer erotics. Unlike in his prior solitary practices of self-stylization, Culafroy's erotic awakening is portrayed as a form of *joint* ascesis, as a self-transformation that Culafroy is incapable of initiating on his own and that requires the assistance of another. One passage gives a momentarily detailed account of the process through which Alberto, an Italian snake catcher, entices Culafroy to touch his serpents. This passage can either be read figuratively, as an extended sexual metaphor or literally, as a saga of erotic disgust, fascination, and *jouissance* just as transformative as any literal sexual initiation.

Culafroy's introduction to the reptilian world of serpents is gradual, for he is initially unable to surmount his repulsion. The particular disgust that serpents inspire in Culafroy is, like many, also a form of spellbound attraction: "serpents fascinated him, yet he felt like he was about to vomit."⁹⁰ Alberto begins by drawing Culafroy's hand toward a serpent, but Culafroy closes his hand and merely grazes the serpent with his

⁹⁰ "les serpents le fascinaient, pourtant il se sentait sur le point de vomir," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 162.

closed fist. Alberto responds by laying another serpent on Culafroy's naked arm, around which the serpent gradually winds itself. The moment of transformation does not occur, however, until Alberto opens Culafroy's hand and places the serpent within it:

That was the revelation. From that moment on, it seemed to him that a host of serpents could have invaded him, scaled him, and insinuated themselves in him without him feeling anything other than a friendly joy, a sort of tenderness; meanwhile, Alberto's sovereign hand had not left his, nor had one of Alberto's thighs left his own, so that he was no longer quite himself.⁹¹

With a little help from Alberto, Culafroy attains the moment of revelation wherein disgust and fascination are transformed into both an erotic openness and a tender fellow-feeling for serpents. Absorbing Alberto's touch at the same time as he fantasizes about serpents invading his body, Culafroy loses his sense of corporeal boundaries, sensing, ecstatically, that he is no longer quite himself. Later, the narrator will describe the effect of Culafroy's encounter with Alberto as nothing less than a mutation in Culafroy's chemical composition: "[a] chemical operation took place in him, giving birth to new compounds."⁹² Culafroy's encounter with Alberto and his serpents therefore performs something other than the unveiling of a latent sexuality. It is presented as a form of joint ascesis, provoking a mutation in Culafroy's sensibility, his fantasy structures, and his affective responses that can only be affected with the aid of another,

⁹¹ "Cela fut la révélation. Dès cet instant, il lui sembla qu'un peuple de serpents aurait pu l'envahir, l'escalader et s'insinuer en lui sans qu'il en éprouvât autre chose qu'une joie amicale, une sorte de tendresse, cependant que la main souveraine d'Alberto n'avait pas quitté la sienne, ni même une de ses cuisses, les siennes, et de la sorte il n'était plus tout à fait lui-même," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 163-4.

⁹² "Une opération chimique s'était faite en lui, donnant naissance à des composés nouveaux," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 263.

and that leaves Culafroy fundamentally changed, composed of new elements and, therefore, no longer quite himself. It is perhaps such forms of joint transformation that Foucault had in mind when he invited gays to "move forward in a homosexual ascesis that would have us work on ourselves and invent, I did not say discover, a still improbable way of being."⁹³ Working on Culafroy, Alberto and his snakes are able to propel him into an ecstatic self-transcendence that modifies his erotic body and renders him other to himself.

As a character, Culafroy/Divine embodies this principle of continual self-transformation, enacted variably through private stylizations of the self, improvisatory responses to shaming situations, and receptivity to the decentering influence of others. Divine highlights the queer temporality of this processual self when she reflects, "[w]hat does it matter to me what X... thinks of the Divine that I was. What does it matter *to me* the memory he keeps of me. I am another. Each time, I will be another."⁹⁴ At any particular moment, Divine suggests, she is already a different being than she was at any prior moment. The mobility of reference of the pronouns "I" and "me" in this passage, which sometimes refer to the present Divine and sometimes to one of her past incarnations, underline the temporal discontinuity of this construction of self. Finally, the fact that this reflection is sparked by Divine's rejection of someone's implicitly negative opinion of her is suggestive of the escape routes opened to Divine by her

⁹³ "avancer dans une ascèse homosexuelle qui nous ferait travailler sur nous-mêmes et inventer, je ne dis pas découvrir, une manière d'être encore improbable," Foucault, "L'amitié comme mode de vie," 984.

⁹⁴ "Que m'importe ce que pense X... de la Divine que j'étais. Qu'importe *à moi* le souvenir qu'il garde de moi. Je suis une autre. Je serai chaque fois une autre," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 357.

refusal to coincide with herself. She need not fear being pinned down, whether by a given regime of gender or sexuality, or by someone's negative opinion of her, for she will already be beyond such judgments, already another.

In *Our Lady*, this ascetic process of becoming-another occurs not through the proud affirmation of what one already is, but through the far more difficult exercise of going against one's nature. When Culafroy touches Alberto's serpents, he is not revealed to himself through a discovery of the "truth" of his desire; rather, he becomes other to himself by transgressing, with the help of Alberto and the serpents, his sensory dispositions. It is only through this pleasurable labor of transgression that Culafroy, Alberto, and the serpents can, together, recompose Culafroy's erotic body. Connecting this labor of transgression to sainthood, Jean writes, "Culafroy and Divine, with delicate tastes, will always be forced to love what they abhor, and this constitutes part of their sainthood, for it is renunciation."⁹⁵ Sainthood, in *Our Lady*, is a discomfiting process of ascesis that operates through the systematic transgression and even renunciation of one's tastes, sensibility, and apparent "nature." Like many of Genet's most important characters, "Divine [...] had a very hard time being immoral and achieved it only at the cost of long detours that pained her."⁹⁶ To gradually overcome her "natural" goodness and thereby achieve sainthood, Divine must learn to steal, to abandon her habitual tics, and even to cause a child's death – acts that do not come naturally to Divine and that she does not commit for her own pleasure. The necessity of this labor is foreshadowed upon

⁹⁵ "Culafroy et Divine, aux goûts délicats, seront toujours contraints d'aimer ce qu'ils abhorrent, et cela constitue un peu de leur sainteté, car c'est du renoncement," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 164.

⁹⁶ "Divine [...] avait beaucoup de mal à être immorale et n'y parvenait qu'au prix de long détours

Divine's arrival to Paris, when she shocks the bourgeois patrons of a Montmartre café with her incongruous femininity. "The entire café thought that the smile of (for the colonel: the invert; for the shopkeepers: the fairy; for the banker and the waiters: the fag; for the gigolos: 'that one' [*celle-ci*]; etc.) was abject."⁹⁷ As this passage wryly indicates, the multitude of appellations for the aberration that Divine represents converges around a single referent: abjection. Nevertheless, abjection is not a defined identity; hence its capacity to generate a multitude of approximate and always inadequate signifiers. As Divine is leaving the café, suddenly, "[t]he café disappeared and Divine was metamorphosed into one of those beasts painted on walls – chimeras or griffins – for, in spite of himself, a customer murmured a magic word while thinking of her, "Pederasque."⁹⁸ The customer need not know the proper word, "pederast," nor even precisely what it signifies in order to give voice to the café's perception of Divine. To the contrary, the radical ignorance about the queer world that the customer's mangling of the word "pederast" indicates is what *most successfully* translates the utterly fantastic and improbable alienness of the world of abjection vaguely fantasized by the normals of the café. Divine's metamorphosis by this magic word into a fantastic and monstrous beast cannily figures the inhuman otherworldliness of the state of abjection. We might understand Divine's later painstaking efforts to go against her every natural tendency,

qui lui causaient de la peine," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 153.

⁹⁷ "Tout le café pensa que le sourire de: (pour le colonel: l'inverti; pour les commerçants: la chochette; pour le banquier et les garçons: la proutt; pour les gigolos: 'celle-ci', etc.) était abject," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 40. I am indebted to Bernard Frechtman's translation of this passage.

⁹⁸ "Le café disparut et Divine fut métamorphosée en une de ces bêtes peintes sur les – chimères ou griffons – car un consommateur, malgré lui murmura un mot magique en pensant à elle: – Pédérasque," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 41.

on the other hand, as a demonstration of the sort of labor required for a subject deemed abject to actually *become* an abject being, transforming herself into the monster that, by normative standards, she ought to already be.

Unlike Divine, Mignon, Divine's beautiful pimp and sometimes boyfriend, has a distinct taste for immorality. However, Mignon's pleasure in certain unethical acts, such as informing on his friends, is less a manifestation of any specific desire to harm or betray those close to him than it is the mark of Mignon's own favored version of asceticism, which seems, in turn, to be derived from that of the narrator: "[b]etraying others for money pleased him, for it dehumanized him. Dehumanizing *myself* is *my* deep tendency."⁹⁹ Jean intriguingly reads Mignon's unethical yet pleasurable act of betrayal as the expression of something far more complex and perverse than the desire for personal gain, a sadistic pleasure in harming others, or the manifestation of an evil nature; he interprets it as the symptom of Mignon's *tendency to dehumanize himself*. In order to desire to dehumanize oneself, one must be human to begin with – that is, subject to and subjectified by social values – yet one must also somehow derive pleasure from a betrayal of this humanity. The sudden turn to the first person of the self-describing narrative voice lays bare the connection between the mostly invented character, Mignon, and the narrator responsible for inventing him, while begging the question of how dehumanizing oneself can possibly constitute one's deep tendency. Just as Divine achieves sainthood through the painful asceticism of going against her natural goodness,

⁹⁹ "Vendre les autres lui plaisait, car cela l'inhumanisait. *M'inhumaniser est ma tendance profonde,*" Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 53, my emphasis.

Mignon's ascesis of dehumanization betrays his humanity. However, Mignon's version of ascesis produces *pleasure*, not pain, and might, if Mignon is like the narrator, itself constitute the perverse penchant of his "nature." In other words, this passage raises the specter of a "nature" that, rather than constituting the cohesive core from which all acts and expressions logically flow, would continually undo this model of identity, tending toward the obscure pleasures of unintelligibility, desubjectivation, and becoming-inhuman.

Shortly after this textual moment, an intoxicating thought occurs to the usually unthinking Mignon:

A bit of childish fun [*une gaminerie*], born within, exalted him, "I'm a counterfeit." Descending the rue Dancourt, drunk with the hidden splendor, like a treasure, of his abjection (for it really must intoxicate us, if we don't want its intensity to kill us), he glanced at a store window where he saw a Mignon luminous with extinguished pride, aglow with it.¹⁰⁰

The specific context of Mignon's rare thought is that, strolling down the street in his sharpest finery, he appears to embody the perfectly masculine pimp; yet, whether because of his queer proclivities or his equivocation of street codes of honor, he knows himself to be a counterfeit. Mignon's abjection, then, is not precisely that of being an abject category of person, such as a traitor, a pederast, or a thief (though, in fact, Mignon is all three). Delinked from these identities, Mignon's pleasure is secreted by the thought that he is a fake, a counterfeit, and an imitation. It expresses less the delight of

¹⁰⁰ "Une gaminerie, née du dedans, l'exaltait: 'J' suis un faux jeton.' En descendant la rue Dancourt, ivre de la splendeur cachée, comme d'un trésor, de son abjection (car il faut bien qu'elle nous grise, si nous ne voulons pas que son intensité nous tue), il jeta un coup d'oeil sur la glace d'un magasin où il vit un Mignon lumineux d'orgueil éteint, éclatant de cet orgueil," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 53.

being a specific abject category of being than the jouissance of fundamentally scrambling the equation of ethos, gender, and desire that make up the subjectivity of the pimp according to what Jean calls "a theory of pure pimps."¹⁰¹ Likewise, the glow of extinguished pride that Mignon sees reflected in the store window is that, not of his fully assumed abjection, but of his special, secret knowledge that he is a fake. This version of pride seems contingent on *not* being made visible or public; for then, Mignon would not be a fake at all; his abjection would be known and recognized. As a walking, talking counterfeit, fully aware of his own internal dissonance and incoherence, Mignon glows with a pride to which only he can be privy. Like his penchant for dehumanization, Mignon's onanistic delight in knowing himself a fake constitutes one of the pleasures of desubjectivation.

The figure of the luminosity of abjection reappears in a passage of *The Thief's Journal* describing the event with which I opened this section – the funeral procession of the Carolines. While Eribon makes much of these heroic characters, "come out of the shadows" at dawn, presumably to claim their place in the sun, the passage's metaphors of light and shadow tell a more nuanced story¹⁰²:

Covered with ridicule, the Carolines were sheltered. No laugh could hurt them; the indigence of their rags bore witness to their asceticism [*leur dépouillement*]. The sun spared this garland emitting its own luminosity. They were all dead. What we saw walking down the street were Shadows, cut off from the world. The Pansies [*Les Tapettes*] are a pale and many-colored people that vegetates in the conscience of good folk [*des braves gens*]. They will never have the right to the broad daylight, to the true sun. But drawn back in this limbo, they provoke the most curious disasters, premonitions of novel beauties.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ "une théorie des macs purs," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 53.

¹⁰² "sortis de l'ombre," Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 26.

¹⁰³ Couvertes de ridicule, les Carolines étaient à l'abri. Aucun rire ne pouvait les blesser, la

Throughout this passage, the Carolines are figured as creatures of another realm. Parading in the sun, they are temporarily *within* the world of the normals, yet not *of* this world. It is precisely their exclusion from this world that protects them, sheltering them from ridicule and barbed insults. The Caroline's funeral procession simultaneously pierces the normalcy of the straight world and further enfolds them within the queer world of social exclusion. Even the sun cannot touch them; for, rather than emerging from the shadows into the light, the Carolines *are* Shadows, socially dead, yet emitting their own luminosity. Though the narrator asserts that they will never have the right to broad daylight or to the true sun, within the ecology of this passage, this does not appear to constitute a loss. It is precisely from the liminal position of exclusion from the world within which they must nevertheless walk that the Carolines are capable of provoking "the most curious disasters, premonitions of novel beauties."¹⁰⁴ The beauties that the Carolines' collective ascesis of the abject might unexpectedly produce remain unrepresented and futural, a horizon of curious and necessarily unpredictable "disasters." In this, they resemble Genet's definition – or rather, his insistence on the radical *in*definition – of sainthood:

Unable to successfully define sainthood – any more than beauty – at each instant, I want to create it, that is, to make all of my acts lead toward this thing of which I am ignorant. [...] A long period of blind groping leads me there. No method

pouillierie de leurs oripeaux témoignant de leur dépouillement. Le soleil épargnait cette guirlande émettant sa propre luminosité. Toutes étaient mortes. Ce que nous en voyions se promener dans la rue, étaient des Ombres retranchées du monde. Les Tapettes sont un peuple pâle et bariolé qui végète dans la conscience des braves gens. Jamais elles n'auront droit au grand jour, au véritable soleil. Mais reculées dans ces limbes, elles provoquent les plus curieux désastres annonciateurs de beautés nouvelles," Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 113.

¹⁰⁴ "les plus curieux désastres annociateurs de beautés nouvelles," Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 113.

exists. [...] Starting with the elementary principle of morals and of religions, the saint reaches his goal if he rids himself of them.¹⁰⁵

Like the rare beauties projected as the future of the Carolines' counterpublic practices, sainthood is "defined" as the horizon of the improvisatory and unsystemizable practice of ascesis. Both tend toward the invention of novel and as-yet-unimaginable modes of being. Remaining nameless and thereby open to the imagination, abjection's novel beauties do not announce a given political or identitarian program; rather, they call for the continual invention of what cannot yet be foreseen. One thing, however, remains certain: they would fade instantly if the goal of the Carolines' procession were to achieve visibility and acceptance; if they were ever to win a place in the true sun.

2.2.2 Conclusion

Genet's novels are not precisely *against* pride. Rather, they celebrate queer modalities of pride that have nothing to do with the search for recognition, that remain intimately wedded to shame, that embrace and transfigure abjection through the stylizations of camp humor, and that, rather than affirming a settled state, propel the self along the vertiginous path of ascesis. Sensing something mysterious, unpredictable, and unknown about commonplace pride, Genet at one point refers to it, evocatively, as "a sentiment that we barely understand: pride."¹⁰⁶ In Eribon's more conventional understanding, which I quoted earlier, and to which I now return, "[i]t is the

¹⁰⁵ "Ne pouvant réussir une définition de la sainteté – pas plus que de la beauté – à chaque instant je la veux créer, c'est-à-dire faire que tous mes actes me conduisent vers elle que j'ignore. [...] De longs tâtonnements m'y conduisent. Il n'existe pas de méthode. [...] Parti des principes élémentaires des morales et des religions le saint arrive à son but s'il se débarrasse d'eux," Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 237.

consciousness of being what one is, and the fact of assuming it, of desiring it, that secrets pride. Hence pride is but an emanation of shame, which covers it, little by little, and deprives it of its subjectifying force."¹⁰⁷ Pride affirms, desires, and assumes what one already is, covering up shame and, presumably, suffocating it until it loses its subjectifying power. The long passage from *Journal* that Eribon quotes to support this reading, however, theorizes pride not as shame's murderer, but as *shame's ascesis*:

If he has heart [...] the guilty one [*le coupable*] decides to be he that crime has made of him. Finding a justification is easy for him, otherwise, how would he live? He draws it from his pride. (Note the extraordinary power of verbal creation of pride, as of anger.) He encloses himself within his shame through pride, a word that denotes the manifestation of his most audacious liberty. Within his shame, in his own saliva, he envelops himself, weaving a silk that is his pride. This dress is not natural. The guilty one has woven it to protect himself, and purpled it [*pourpre*] to beautify himself. No pride without guilt. If pride is the most audacious liberty – Lucifer clashing with God – if pride is the marvelous cloak in which my guilt stands tall, woven of it, I want to be guilty.¹⁰⁸

The path to pride begins not with choosing what one already is, as if it were an internal essence to be claimed and publicized, but with deciding *to be what one's crime has made of one*; that is, by choosing to follow the path of ascesis set into motion with one's propulsion, by a criminal act, into abjection. Pride is the creative affect that helps one to

¹⁰⁶ "un sentiment qu'on connaît peu: l'orgueil," Genet, *Journal d'un voleur*, 124.

¹⁰⁷ "C'est la conscience d'être ce que l'on est, et le fait de l'assumer, de le vouloir, qui secrète l'orgueil. Ainsi l'orgueil n'est-il qu'une émanation de la honte, qui peu à peu la recouvre, et la prive de sa force assujettissant," Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 101.

¹⁰⁸ "S'il a du coeur [...] le coupable décide d'être celui que le crime a fait de lui. Trouver une justification lui est facile, sinon, comment vivrait-il? Il la tire de son l'orgueil. (Noter l'extraordinaire pouvoir de création verbale de l'orgueil comme de la colère.) Il s'enferme dans sa honte par l'orgueil, mot qui désigne la manifestation de la plus audacieuse liberté. À l'intérieur de sa honte, dans sa propre bave, il s'enveloppe, il tisse une soie qui est son orgueil. Ce vêtement n'est pas naturel. Le coupable l'a tissé pour se protéger, et pourpre pour s'embellir. Pas d'orgueil sans culpabilité. Si l'orgueil est la plus audacieuse liberté – Lucifer ferrailant avec Dieu – si l'orgueil est le manteau merveilleux où se dresse ma culpabilité, tissé d'elle, je veux être

survive one's abjection. It does so, paradoxically, by enclosing one in one's shame, just as the Carolines' march in the sun wrapped them in their own shadowy luminosity. Or, in another metaphor, like the protective web of silk spun from its own spit within which the spider envelops itself, pride is shame's artful, protective, and decorative transubstantiation. In it, the abject being is no longer naked and vulnerable, but rather dressed in the purple finery of his or her own shame. As the narrator emphasizes, this dress is not natural. It is spun or woven *out of one's own substance* in a cultivation that tends *away* from the given or the natural. It is in this sense that the narrator deems pride the most audacious liberty. Pride does not cover up shame, much less suffocate it, and it certainly does not deny shame its subjectifying power. To the contrary, guilt and shame are only able stand tall when dressed in the marvelous mantle of pride, a mantle that, Jean underlines, is *woven from them*. Pride is an unnatural fabric woven from shame, protecting it, adorning it, and perhaps even flaunting it; pride is shame's cultivation, shame's labor of ascesis, shame's resubjection.¹⁰⁹

Another weave – a text – exemplifies "the extraordinary power of verbal creation of pride," that is, of shame.¹¹⁰ Foucault has proposed that, at different historical moments, the journal and the autobiography served as genres of work on the self,

coupable," Genet, *Journal d'un voleur*, 276.

¹⁰⁹ For a brilliant reading of figures of fabric and dress in their relation to male homoeroticism and queer martyrdom in Genet's *Querelle de Brest*, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Cloth Wounds, or When Queers Are Martyred to Clothes: Debasements of a Fabricated Skin", in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Series Q) (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 39-66.

¹¹⁰ "l'extraordinaire pouvoir de création verbale de l'orgueil," Genet, *Journal d'un voleur*, 276.

constituting the self as a new domain of experience and of agency.¹¹¹ The imprisoned narrator of *Our Lady* repeatedly intrudes on his narrative to remind us that he is fabricating it out of his own masturbatory fantasies, which themselves weave together a reanimated collage of newspaper cuttings, adventure novel covers, actual criminals he has encountered, and aspects his own life history.¹¹² At one moment, Jean suggests that his narrative is not only a text partially fabricated from his own experiences; it is actually a highly pleasurable transformation of these experiences. "What is it all about for me, the one fabricating this story? In taking back my life, in retracing its course, to fill my cell with the voluptuous sensation of being what I just missed being."¹¹³ If *Miracle* allows Genet to elaborate a fantastical and excessive mourning for a loss denied recognition, the narrative of *Our Lady* presents itself as a conversion of experience into jouissance, of abjection into pleasure, and of Jean (or Genet?) into what he just missed being. Whether, in narrating *Our Lady*, Jean (Genet?) seeks to become a queen, a saint, or merely a being in perpetual asceticism, it seems clear that one form of abjection's asceticism takes place through a process of fantasizing, narrating, and writing in which raw experience and its affects are woven into gorgeous texts within which its author can finally stand tall, dressed and remade. As semi-fictional texts fabricated from autobiographical

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001), 362-369; Michel Foucault, "Self Writing" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 207-222.

¹¹² For a fascinating close reading of the moments, in *Notre-Dame*, when the narrator's fantasized or fictitious creations step into the frame of narration to become his flesh-and-blood cellmates and co-conspirators, see Michael Lucey, "Proust's Queer Metalepses," *MLN* 116, no. 4 (September 2001): 795-815.

¹¹³ "De quoi s'agit-il pour moi qui fabrique cette histoire? En reprenant ma vie, en remontant son cours, emplir ma cellule de la volupté d'être ce que faute d'un rien je manquai d'être," Genet,

experience that cultivate this experience and, through it, its subject and author, Genet's novel writing may constitute his principle technology of the self. No wonder, then, that he should respond to Sartre's monumental theorization of him in *Saint Genet* by protesting that Sartre "stripped" him.¹¹⁴ Against both a Sartrean metaphysics of being and biographical attempts to separate "the facts" of Genet's life from his own self-mythologizations, Genet's novels constitute textual cultivations of the self through which abjection may elaborate its own gorgeous, and finally livable, universe.

Notre-Dame, 36-7.

¹¹⁴ In a late interview, Genet says that he reacted to the publication of *Saint Genet* with "[u]ne espèce de dégoût – parce que je me suis vu nu et dénudé par quelqu'un d'autre que moi. Dans tous mes livres, je me mets nu et en même temps je me travestis par des mots, des choix, des attitudes, par la féerie. Je m'arrange pour ne pas être trop endommagé," Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

Chapter 3. Acting Out Racial Melancholia: *The Blacks, Black Skin, White Masks, and Négritude*

Victim of colonial trauma and in search of a new equilibrium, the black man [le nègre] is not through liberating himself [n'en a pas fini de se libérer]. All the dreams, all the desires, all the accumulated rancor, all the unformulated hopes repressed during a century of colonial domination, all of that needed to come out, and when that comes out and when that expresses itself and when that erupts, carrying along without distinction the individual and the collective, the conscious and the unconscious, the experiential and the prophetic, it is called poetry.¹

The above epigraph, by the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire, was written in 1942, just before the most active period of decolonization. Nevertheless, the liberation which Césaire deems incomplete is not a liberation from colonial rule, but rather from the black man's² particular enslavement by the persistent imaginaries and affective structures that constitute what Césaire terms "colonial trauma."³ Tying this trauma to the impossibility, under colonial rule, of expressing or even formulating the intense dreams, desires, resentments, and hopes that colonial domination incited in the black man, Césaire extols the healing and liberatory power of poetic expression. Affirming that "all of that needed to come out," Césaire makes his poetic argument by syntactically mimicking the liquid outpouring of such expression, "and when that comes

¹ "Victime du traumatisme colonial et à la recherche d'un nouvel équilibre, le nègre n'en a pas fini de se libérer. Tous les rêves, tous les désirs, toutes les rancunes accumulées, toutes les espérances informulées et comme refoulées pendant un siècle de domination colonialiste, tout cela avait besoin de sortir, et quand cela sort et que cela s'exprime et que cela gicle, charriant indistinctement l'individuel et le collectif, le conscient et l'inconscient, le vécu et le prophétique, cela s'appelle la poésie," Césaire, Aimé. "Liminaire." *Présence Africaine: Revue culturelle du monde noir*. 57 (1942) : 46. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² "Le nègre" could here be taken as a racialization of "l'homme" (*man*) that would theoretically include black women. However, since, in the rest of Césaire's work, the black poetic subject is presumptively male, I choose to make visible Césaire's masculine bias by translating it as "the black *man*."

out and when that expresses itself and when that erupts..." foregoing punctuation to suggest both ecstatic release and unstoppable momentum. Poetry, Césaire suggests, is the curative means by which the accumulated affective force of colonial wounds both conscious and unconscious, individual and collective, can at last be released.

This chapter pursues Césaire's insights both on the importantly *public* and *political* dimensions of affective structures often considered individual and private and on the potentially transformative force of what he names poetry and what I prefer to call *performance* – a broader category which might comprise literary and poetic production, theater and the performance arts, and a range of quotidian social rituals. Césaire, a Négritude poet, is at the forefront of a series of efforts, during the era of decolonization, to think the relationship between freedom from colonial rule and what many saw as its essential corollary: the more fundamental transformation of the troubled psyches that colonialism produced. The Négritude poetic movement, which was singularly self-conscious about its bid to transform the racialized "structures of feeling"⁴ of the post-World War II era has, nevertheless, been subject to reductive and dismissive readings ever since Sartre's designation of it, in "Black Orpheus" ("Orphée noir") (1948), as a moment of dialectical negativity on the way to a society without races.⁵ The time has come, I argue, for a critical reappraisal of the Négritude movement. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*) (1952) and Jean Genet's play *The Blacks* (*Les*

³ Aimé Césaire, "Liminaire," *Présence Africaine: Revue culturelle du monde noir*, no. 57 (1942): 46.

⁴ For Raymond Williams's definition of "structures of feeling," see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.

⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, "Orphée Noir," in *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948), i-xlii.

Nègres) (1958) might tell an alternative history of this movement, contesting Sartre's reductive understanding of Négritude by transmitting the urgency of its effort to transform racialized "structures of feeling," by speculating on its potential political dimensions, and, in the case of *The Blacks*, by elaborating its unrealized queer and feminist potential.

I turn to psychoanalysis to suggest that a critical rereading of the much-neglected performative dimension of melancholia might provide a tool with which to probe the affective and psychic valences of colonialism and racism, as well as their potential political futurities. I argue that the psychic pain and self-disregard that melancholia generates, can, in some cases, motivate forms of collective cultural creativity which use performance to both "act out" and "work through" the state of melancholia. This chapter focuses specifically on what David Eng and Shinhee Han term "*racial melancholia*," that is, the systemic production of melancholia in racialized subjects living in racist societies.⁶ I propose that the Négritude movement, along with a range of writings by black and anti-colonial thinkers on the racialized psychic lives of colonialism, might productively be read as part of an anti-colonial genealogy of thought on racial melancholia. Through a cursory survey of this genealogy, I suggest that racial melancholia might name the one of colonialism's major psychic technologies, producing racialized subjects riven with ambivalence, self-hatred, and a psychic subjection to white supremacy. The subjects of racial melancholia, however, are far more than merely passive victims in need of

⁶ See David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 343-371.

psychoanalytic treatment.⁷ Fanon's and Genet's particular, and indeed, peculiar readings of Négritude allow us to envision racial melancholia less as a permanent psychic structure of oppression and more as a collective experience which, in the post-World War II period, generated a range of performative elaborations and transformative cultural practices. I suggest that such collective practices, hovering between "acting out" and "working through" and between volitional performance and nonvolitional performativity,⁸ might go to work directly on psychic life. This chapter's genealogy of racial melancholia aims to unsettle a contemporary moment in which the putative end, in some nations, of racism in its legalized form abets the haunting persistence of racist fantasy. I therefore close, through a reading of Christopher McElroen's innovative 2003 Harlem Classical Theater production of *The Blacks*, with a reflection on *The Blacks'* affective and performative force in the context of the contemporary United States.

In the epigraph by Césaire, the temporality of liberation remains ambiguous. On the one hand, the passage might be read as implying that, through poetry, the black man might have done with his oppression once and for all. Césaire's decision to stage the black man's liberation as yet to be completed, however, could be taken to imply that liberation from the psychic and affective traumas of colonialism is a perpetually unfinished, and perhaps endless project. In the French, Césaire writes that the black man "n'en a pas fini de se libérer," employing the expression "*en finir*," which connotes

⁷ For strong arguments against the pathologization of racial melancholia, see Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*; Eng and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia"; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

⁸ For Judith Butler's influential distinction between performance and performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

definitively putting an end to something which threatens to perpetuate itself to infinity.⁹

The wording of the passage suggests both a desire to have done with and a sense that that with which one would like to have done might prove frustratingly resistant to termination. It is in its very temporal uncertainty that the passage is most suggestive of the contemporary stakes of a return to the psychic lives of both racism and colonialism. At this post 9/11 historical moment, it has become painfully clear, yet again, that in spite of the deinstitutionalization of some of the blatantly forms of institutionalized imperialism and state racism, both imperialism and racism persist, and indeed, prove astoundingly adaptable to new historical and political circumstances. Christopher Lane has likened the recursive temporalities of racism to the figure of haunting. As he puts it, "[e]very citizen of Europe and North America is haunted by the specter of racism. Despite our concern to restrict this specter to traumatic chapters of history, it revisits contemporary society in shocking and surprising forms."¹⁰ Contemporary interest in the "specters" of racism or the "haunting" of imperialism might be taken to reflect the realization that liberal, democratic societies are never really done with the forms of racism and colonialism that they have proclaimed forever dead and vanquished.¹¹ The end of legal colonialism and racism has not eliminated socio-economic inequalities and

⁹ Césaire, "Liminaire," 46. As its example for the proper usage of "en finir de" in the negative form, the *Trésor de la langue française* cites André Gide's phrase, from *Ainsi soit-il*, "I shall never be done praising him" ("Je n'en finirais pas de le louer"), which invokes the timeless infinity of devotion.

¹⁰ Christopher Lane, "Introduction," in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (Columbia University Press, 1998), 1.

¹¹ See, for example, Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Christopher Lane, ed., *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (Columbia University Press, 1998); and Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies*

de facto discrimination, nor has it neutralized racism's psychic life. Rather, the references of specific racial affects have shifted in accordance with the changing contours of structural inequality. As Angela Davis reminds us in a U.S. context, "[t]he ideological reproduction of a fear of black people, whether economically or sexually grounded, is rapidly gravitating toward and being grounded in a fear of crime."¹² While one might therefore argue that contemporary racism is vitally alive rather than uncannily undead, references to the "specter" of racism do suggest a perhaps specifically intellectual sense of mystification before racism's tenacious refusal to die. Antiracist scholars and intellectuals have long proceeded as if the project of demystifying racist stereotypes, underlining the base irrationality of prejudice, and proving the constructedness of race itself would, by proving race a fantasy, make racism disappear. It may be, however, that if race remains intractably alive despite scholars' best efforts, it is *because* and not in spite of the fact that it is a fantasy – one which remains compelling both for racialized and for "white" subjects. Theorists of race have scarcely begun to develop methodological tools that would give an account of racism's complex psychic and affective life, as much for the objects of racism as for those who perpetuate it. Melancholia, particularly in its recent critical elaborations by postcolonial and critical race scholars, may provide one such way of theorizing the twists and turns between social inequalities, the forms of psychic life that they produce, and the practices through which agential subjects and collectivities inhabit, negotiate, and even transform this

of Intimacy in North American History (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² Angela Davis, "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 65.

psychic life.

3.1 Racial Melancholia: Assimilation and its Unassimilable Reminders

In Chapter 2, we saw that, as an account of loss and mourning gone wrong, Freud's theory of melancholia could be reenvisioned as an account of the psychic burden carried by subjects whose losses are denied public recognition. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler has argued that melancholia might describe how coercive social norms come to be incorporated by the subjects they most damage, producing guilty consciences passionately attached to the norms that subject them.¹³ Whether as an internalization of disciplinary norms or as a painful entombment of losses which cannot be expressed, melancholia names the way in which social norms and prohibitions, because of their coercive ideality, cross into the psychic domain to map ambivalent internal topographies of oppression. Given that racist societies impose concrete losses – of life, of economic power, and of self-regard, to name just a few – on racialized subjects, while placing the responsibility for these losses on the individuals who suffer them, it seems likely that one effect of racism would be the production of melancholic racialized subjectivities. Insofar as colonialism and racism work by destroying and delegitimizing non-white cultures while elevating Euro/U.S. culture as simultaneously the *ideal* and the *only* legitimate civilization, melancholia might also describe racialized subjects' attachments to white cultural ideals which denigrate and exclude them. While melancholia shows promise, then, as a means of theorizing the ways in which racist

¹³ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University

societies produce and manage racialized subjectivities, thinking melancholia along with race is a risky endeavor. First, since melancholia has been used to describe the modern subject's attachment to disciplinary and gendered norms, how are we to distinguish, within melancholia, different modes of subjection and different qualities of affect pertaining to specific kinds of subjects? Second, what are the consequences of describing racialized subjectivities as melancholic, given that melancholia has been used to name the essentially conservative installation of an attachment to normativity within the subject? Does melancholia here risk becoming merely a pathologizing diagnosis of the debilitating effects of racism on racialized psyches? As we saw in Chapter 2, one of the primary differences between mourning and melancholia is that, in Freudian melancholia, the subject "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in [the object]."¹⁴ For Freud, not only does some part of the melancholic loss remain unconscious; but the aggressive, self-berating, and identificatory performances melancholia occasions are themselves assumed to be unconscious, compelled, and non-volitional. Does calling racialized subjects melancholic, then, deprive us not only of agency, but also of consciousness of our situation, reducing us to the status of unconscious automatons, compulsively acting out losses we can neither mourn nor even comprehend?

Recent theoretical engagements with racial and colonial modes of melancholia respond to these dilemmas by both demonstrating the insidious ways in which

Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 254.

colonialism and racism operate on the subjectivities of racialized and colonized subjects and acknowledging the critical and transformative practices that might emerge from melancholic states. David Eng and Shinhee Han as well as Ann Anlin Cheng have written on what might constitute a specifically Asian-American form of racial melancholia.¹⁵ Elaborating on Freud's statement that both mourning and melancholia may be reactions not only to the loss of a loved one but also "to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on," these authors suggest that Asian Americans must contend with the losses of a series of ideals to which we remain, nevertheless, ambivalently attached – from that of the homeland, to that of an all-but-impossible assimilation into U.S. standards of whiteness, to that of the stereotype of Asian Americans as uniquely docile and productive "model minorities."¹⁶ Given a series of identificatory ideals of assimilation that promise to assuage the losses associated with immigration, yet prevented by everyday racism from achieving these ideals, Asian Americans are forced to melancholically incorporate them as ungrievable, unacknowledged losses, formative of Asian-American subjectivity.

If, in the context of immigration and racialization, the unassimilable object of melancholic loss is, par excellence, the false promise of assimilation, then melancholia might signal not only a coerced attachment to normativity, but also that which, finally,

¹⁵ See David L Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," *Feminisms at a Millennium*. Spec. issue of *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1275-1281; David L Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

remains *unassimilable* to this normativity. Ranjana Khanna has picked up on this valence of melancholia to argue that subaltern subjects excluded from representation in colonial or post-colonial nation are themselves these states' haunting, unassimilable remainder. She urges organic intellectuals and cultural critics to psychoanalytically read cultural texts and performances for symptoms of a melancholia which, rather than being merely debilitating and conservative, would constitute a "disenfranchised, subaltern call for justice."¹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz has argued that, in the United States, it is precisely amongst those queer and culturally hybrid subjects excluded from dominant representations that melancholia has the greatest chance of becoming an agent of transformation. Through inventive cultural performances, such subjects carve positionalities toxic to them – such as the phobic stereotype of the black bulldagger – and roles that exclude them – such as that of the white diva – into sites of queer identification infused with both difference and critique.¹⁸ I would argue that, in so doing, they "rescue" impossible melancholic identifications, externalizing what had been modes of internalized oppression and converting them into practices of performative self-transformation and of cultural critique.

Each of these thinkers seeks to depathologize melancholia, to trouble Freud's normative distinction between mourning and melancholia, and to show how racialized subjects excluded from full representation within the national imaginary, if not within its political life, both suffer in specific ways from the burdens of melancholia and find

¹⁶ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 252.

¹⁷ Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 21.

¹⁸ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

particularly innovative means of working on and through their melancholic states.¹⁹ As David Eng has forcefully argued, while it may be true that, insofar as we are all burdened with some form of unacknowledged loss, we are all melancholics, the *kinds of lost objects* that engender melancholia crucially influence how melancholia is lived. "A political reading of this aspect of melancholia is crucial," Eng asserts, "for the social status of the lost object seems largely to determine whether the subject is fated to an existence of depression and despair."²⁰ Whereas the heterosexual man's conversion of his love for his father into a melancholic, yet empowered identification receives strong social support as the founding requirement of male social power,²¹

women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials are all coerced to relinquish and yet to identify with *socially disparaged objects* on their psychic paths to subjectivity. This ambivalent attachment to devalued objects [...] comes to define – indeed, to produce – minoritarian subjectivities.²²

If such differentially oppressed subjects suffer from particularly debilitating forms of melancholia, then it is all the more necessary to emphasize, as Muñoz does, the project of "depathologizing melancholia and understanding it as a 'structure of feeling' that is necessary and not always counterproductive and negative."²³ Emphasizing the *everydayness* of melancholia for oppressed subjects, Muñoz argues that

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁹ As many critics has noted, the distinction between mourning and melancholia becomes all but untenable in Freud's *The Ego and the Id*.

²⁰ David L Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," *Feminisms at a Millennium*. Spec. issue of *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1278.

²¹ Eng is referencing Judith Butler's reading of the melancholic formation of normative opposite-sex attraction and same-sex identification in Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-150.

²² Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," 1278.

melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. [...] It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men.²⁴

When melancholia is an everyday, collective structure of feeling, produced and exacerbated by social injustices, it may become both tangible and available for collective work in a way that more evenly distributed forms of melancholia do not. As Khanna reminds us, the melancholic agency of those unassimilable within the nation is necessarily a *critical agency*, protesting against the nation's false claims to inclusive representation while keeping its traumatic pasts alive.

3.2 Toward an Anti-Colonial Genealogy of Melancholia

While many contemporary scholars theorize melancholia as an affective structure characteristic of the postcolonial moment,²⁵ this chapter suggests that tracing the genealogy, not only of racial melancholia itself, but also of critical thought on racial melancholia back to the work of black and anti-colonial authors during the long era of decolonization (from roughly 1900-1980) might generate important insights concerning melancholia's colonial histories and its potential political futures. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to undertake a thoroughgoing analysis of anti-colonial writings of this period, even a cursory survey demonstrates the extent to which anti-racist and anti-colonial thinkers saw the colonized's *racially-divided psyche* as one of *the* major

²³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.

²⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.

²⁵ For readings of melancholia as characteristic of the postcolonial state, see in particular Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century"; and Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a detailed engagement with both colonial and postcolonial forms of melancholia, see Khanna, *Dark Continents*.

political issues of the time. These writers return continually to the theme of the colonized's *doubled* or *divided* consciousness, analyzing both how it facilitates self-hatred and consent to white rule, and how it might contain the seeds of a revolutionary political consciousness. As early as 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois famously described the "double-consciousness" of the black American as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."²⁶ The contemptuous and pitying gaze that, internalized, splits the black American's consciousness in two is implicitly white, so that the figure of "double-consciousness" comes to describe the internally divisive inscription of the white racist gaze *within* black consciousness. Four decades later, in his now classic study, *The Colonizer and the Colonized (Portrait du colonisé, Portrait du colonisateur)* (1957), the Tunisian Jewish intellectual Albert Memmi analyzed "the essential ripping apart of the colonized," caught between his own culture and that of the colonizer.²⁷ Memmi saw this internal ripping or tearing ["déchirement"] as politically dangerous, critiquing the "bad faith" of those who revolted against the external manifestations of colonial rule without engaging in a more fundamental transformation of the colonized consciousness. He writes that, "[i]n the midst of revolt, the colonized continues to think, feel, and live against and, thus, in relation to the colonizer and to colonization."²⁸ The most famous figure for the racially divided subjectivity of the colonized, however, is probably Frantz

²⁶ Du Bois, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1994), 2.

²⁷ "Le déchirement essentiel du colonisé," Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 124.

²⁸ "la mauvaise foi," "En pleine révolte, le colonisé continue à penser, sentir et vivre contre et donc par rapport au colonisateur et à la colonisation," Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, 153.

Fanon's striking visual metaphor of "black skin, white masks." Stuart Hall astutely underlines that while Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* does address the colonial dichotomy between black and white persons, "it is the split or divided self, the two sides within the *same* figure – the colonial Negro – which centrally preoccupies him."²⁹ While none of these authors describe the racially divided psyche of colonialism and racism with reference to the psychoanalytic category of melancholia, their common accounts of incorporative identifications that result in racially divided psyches might be productively reread as part of an anti-colonial genealogy of melancholia.

These authors are perhaps the most internally divided concerning the temporal relationship between political decolonization and the decolonization of the mind. For Memmi, the colonized's divided, alienated consciousness cannot be fully healed until colonial inequalities *and* their psychic aftereffects have played themselves out entirely: "[t]o see the colonized's complete cure, his alienation must end completely: we must wait for the *complete* disappearance of colonization, including the period of revolt."³⁰ With postcolonial hindsight, however, the complete disappearance not only of actual colonialism, but also of its psychic and affective aftermaths retreats so far into the future as to appear unattainable. Fanon's call, during the Algerian war of decolonization, "to detect and eradicate" the germs left by imperialism in the colonized's mind and land lends the colonized a greater agency by suggesting that he actively struggle to

²⁹ Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?" in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, Institute of International Arts, 1996), 18.

³⁰ "Pour voir la guérison complète du colonisé, il faut que cesse totalement son aliénation: il faut attendre la disparition *complète* de la colonisation, c'est-à-dire période de révolte comprise,"

decolonize both his psyche and his territory.³¹ Aimé Césaire's anti-colonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, on the other hand, is more pessimistic. When Prospero asks his servant, Caliban, what he will do alone on the island after his departure, Caliban passionately replies, "[f]irst, I'll rid myself of you... Vomit you. You, your ceremonies, your works! Your white toxin!"³² Caliban poignantly describes psychic decolonization not as coextensive with liberation, but as its anticlimactic aftermath: long after Prospero's physical departure and his own liberation, Caliban is left alone to vomit out colonialism's internal debris.

As this cursory survey suggests, a consideration of both the psychic injuries of colonialism and the potential political futurities of these injuries was central to the work of anti-colonial writers during the long period of decolonization. If I argue that we should reread the genealogy of melancholia through the writings of anti-colonial authors during this time, it is because this epoch saw *both* vast amounts of intellectual work poured into thinking the affects and subjectivities of racialization and colonization *and* a series of cultural efforts to transform these subjectivities and affects. During this historical period, the efflorescence of a range of black political, cultural, and literary movements – such as Pan-Africanism, independence movements in Africa and the Caribbean, Civil Rights, the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, the Black Arts movement, and black nationalism, to name just a few – is suggestive of the shifts in collective black

Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, 154.

³¹ "détecter et extirper," Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 239.

³² "D'abord me débarasser de toi... Te vomir. Toi, tes pompes, tes oeuvres! Ta blanche toxine!" Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête: d'après "La Tempête" de Shakespeare: Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997), 87.

consciousness that were taking place, throughout the "Black Atlantic," at this time.³³

This density of new black political, cultural, and artistic movements is indicative of the emergence of novel "structures of feeling" among racialized collectivities during this historical period. Such structures of feeling, I will argue, synthesized experiences of colonial oppression, affects of racial identification, and yearnings for revolutionary change into a new *decolonial* way of apprehending and understanding. At this time of massive shifts in the political, cultural, and racial consciousness of people of color, Négritude should be carefully and imaginatively studied as a part of the emergence of what Davarian Baldwin calls a transnational "culture of decolonization," a culture whose energy powered this period's more visible and memorable politics of decolonization.³⁴

3.3 Toward an Alternative Historiography of Négritude

The Francophone movement of Négritude has seldom received the critical attention it merits. This is both because of a certain critical discomfort at Négritude's emphasis on a politics of racial identification and because of a lack of curiosity about what such a politics may have meant. Certainly, a number of just criticisms have been leveled against Négritude – namely that it founds its poetic vision of blackness on colonial fantasies of "the African," that it tends to ignore black women's subjectivities, and that it represses the facts of racial mixing and Creoleness in the Caribbean. I would

³³ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁴ See Davarian Baldwin, "Introductory Comment: "Culture is a Weapon in our Struggle for Liberation": The Black Panther Party and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

argue however, that neither Négritude's problematic implications nor its transformative political force have been adequately studied.³⁵ As scholars, we actually know very little about the shifts that Négritude represented. Négritude's emergent structures of feeling may have *both* coalesced into oppressive new hegemonies *and* left behind what Ann Stoler has evocatively referred to as "arrested futures" – futures which appeared immanent at a certain historical moment, and which, for whatever reason, were never actualized.³⁶ The time has come for alternative and imaginative new historiographies of the period of decolonization, historiographies which attend to the multiple potentialities of this time of burgeoning collective aspirations, retrieving its "arrested futures" to render them available for a new political life.

The intensification of critical interest in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* within the last twenty years might be seen as one such reappraisal of decolonization-era thought. Kobena Mercer has suggested that the interest of black diasporic artists of 80s and 90s in *Black Skins, White Masks* rather than Fanon's more overtly political texts "[c]ould be understood as a response to the failure of revolutionary nationalism – the political failure of the radical humanist utopian vision associated with Fanon's name in the past."³⁷ Such reappraisals of this "failure," however, need not be purely negative. As

³⁵ One notable exception to this trend is Ranjana Khanna's *Dark Continents*, whose careful location of Négritude within the political nexus of decolonization and psychoanalysis has been an inspiration for this chapter.

³⁶ Ann Stoler spoke of her concept of "arrested futures" in her graduate seminar, "The Logos and Pathos of Empire," at the Cornell School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, June-July 2007.

³⁷ Kobena Mercer, "Decolonisation and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics," in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. Ed. Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, Institute of International Arts, 1996), 116.

Stuart Hall has noted, "[t]he grain of [Fanon's] texts runs incontrovertibly towards the recognition that an account of racism which has no purchase on the inner landscape and the unconscious mechanisms of its effects is, at best, only half the story."³⁸ This is particularly true of *Black Skin*, which is at once the most psychoanalytic, the most personal, and the least overtly political of Fanon's texts. The critical reappraisal of *Black Skin* signals, as Hall puts it, a "return of the repressed," and specifically, a return, after the failure of revolutionary political utopianism, to the troubled mental, affective, and sexual lives of colonialism.³⁹ Such a return aims both to trace how some of colonialism's psychic and affective structures may have carried over into the post-independence state, and to begin to account for the haunting persistence of racism, racialization and what Diana Fuss has aptly termed "interior colonies" long after the fact of decolonization.⁴⁰

This chapter undertakes a similar reappraisal of the Négritude movement through the revealing sidelong glances of Frantz Fanon and Jean Genet. Fanon's *Black Skin* is usually read, not as a text of Négritude, but as a devastating critique of the Négritude movement. Such a simplistic reading, however, fails to do justice to Fanon's ambivalent meditation on his own affective engagement with the Négritude movement in *Black Skin*. As he writes, "I have attached myself in this study to touch the misery of the Black. Tactilely and affectively. I did not want to be objective. This is false: it has been impossible for me to be objective."⁴¹ Fanon's writing inscribes the hesitations, the

³⁸ Hall, "The After-Life of Frantz Fanon," 17.

³⁹ Hall, "The After-Life of Frantz Fanon," 14.

⁴⁰ Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics* 24, no. 2/3, Critical Crossings (Summer - Autumn 1994): 19-42.

⁴¹ "Je me suis attaché dans cette étude à toucher la misère du Noir. Tactilement et affectivement.

ambivalences, and the passionate investments of his simultaneous encounter with both French racism and with Négritude after moving to France as a young man. The French title of the chapter of *Black Skin* which contains Fanon's meditation on Négritude, bizarrely translated as "The Fact of Blackness" in the standard English edition of the text, is actually "L'expérience vécue du Noir" or "The Lived Experience of the Negro." In this chapter, Fanon reads Négritude neither as a mere school of poetry nor as a coherent theory of race, but as part of a phenomenology of black being under the specific conditions of twentieth century French racism. This phenomenological reading of blackness is matched by Fanon's rendition of the fits and starts of his own experience, as a Martiniquan *evolué* in Paris, of reading Négritude. His non-linear writing, with its alternating autobiographical and philosophical voices, might have much to tell us about the affective economies of Négritude, the forms of agency that it offered to men of color, and the internal limitations of this agency. In his peculiar blend of philosophical, autobiographical, poetic, and phenomenological writing styles, Fanon may be the reader who comes the closest to unfolding the structures of feeling inscribed in Négritude. Moreover, both Fanon's writerly performance of his encounter with Négritude in *Black Skin*, and his critical engagement with the cultural and political performances of the colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*) (1961), make unique contributions to thinking the political futures and the performative effects of racial melancholia.

Je n'ai pas voulu être objectif. D'ailleurs, c'est faux: il ne m'a pas été possible d'être objectif." Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 70.

As a gay white French author, Genet is, without a doubt, a surprising choice for a reader either of Négritude, usually understood as a hetero- and adrocentric black movement, or of affective economies of racial identification more generally. While *The Blacks* is clearly not a straightforward emanation of the Négritude movement, it does contain enough thematic and stylistic references to French colonialism, Négritude, and *Black Skin, White Masks* to warrant a serious study of its relation to contemporaneous black movements and thinkers. The French title of *The Blacks* – *Les Nègres* – explicitly references Négritude's politicized reinvestment of the pejorative term "nègre," while the play's poetic resignification of terms associated with blackness echoes that of Négritude poetry.⁴² Moreover, *The Blacks*, which was published just six years after Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, actually stages the title of Fanon's text – a fact that, surprisingly, has received next to no critical commentary. In Genet's play, part of the all-black cast dons white masks while the rest cover their faces with black wax before engaging in a performance of many of the racial stereotypes, power dynamics, and shifting identifications that Fanon dissects in *Black Skin, White Masks*. While other critics have

⁴² Some critics contend that "The Blacks" is a soft mistranslation of the French title, which would be more accurately translated as the infamous n-word. In my view, this argument is insensitive to the very different political contexts in which these terms acquired signification. In the Francophone context, Négritude poets and activists began to reclaim the pejorative term "nègre" in the 1930s. The closest historical correlate to the Francophone reclamation of "nègre" in the United States is the 1930s reclamation of the term "black" by the Nation of Islam. During the thirties, "Negro" was the preferred term for African Americans, seen as conferring dignity to them, while "black" was considered pejorative. The NOI's shocking use of the term "black" lent credence to their bid to empower African Americans. In fact, the use of the term "black" was still a political statement in the late sixties when it began to win more widespread usage with the advent of the Black Power movement. So, while *The Blacks* is by no means a precise translation of everything the French title *Les Nègres* connoted at this time, it is probably the best fit in terms of both its negative force and its historical resignification. I therefore translate "nègre" as "black," and "noir" as "negro" throughout this dissertation.

noted the thematic intersections between *The Blacks*, the Négritude poets, and *Black Skins, White Masks*, their readings have tended to restrict themselves to merely pointing *The Blacks'* similarities to writings by black authors.⁴³ Frieda Ekotto and Bénédicte Boisseron have critiqued this critical practice as a form of "reverse authentication" by which Genet, a white author, is granted legitimacy by his imitation of authentic black voices.⁴⁴ It is not as an imitation black poet that Genet should be read, but rather as an eccentric white commentator, whose sidelong gaze might reveal surprising reliefs and asperities in the affective landscape of Négritude. Part of *The Blacks'* unique perspective on Négritude is due to its utilization of the medium of theater rather than poetry to demonstrate the ritual and performative dimensions of both race and racial melancholia. *The Blacks'* most provocative contribution to decolonization-era thought is perhaps in its exploration of Négritude's queer and feminist horizons. The portrayal of distinctive female and queer subjectivities within *The Blacks'* lays bare Négritude's normative reliance on *masculinity* while speculating on its alternative futures in the hands of a *different kind* of black subject.

Most *Blacks* criticism, however, is strikingly *under*-preoccupied with possible relations between *The Blacks* and decolonization movements. While the publication, between 1986 and 1993, of the French editions of Genet's *Prisoner of Love* (*Un Captif amoureux*) and *The Declared Enemy* (*L'Ennemi déclaré*), as well as Edmund White's remarkable biography, has made Genet newly legible as a political author, it is only very

⁴³ See, for example, J. P Little, *Genet, Les Nègres, Critical guides to French texts* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1990).

⁴⁴ Bénédicte Boisseron and Frieda Ekotto, "Genet's *The Blacks*: 'And Why Does One Laugh at a

recently that critics have begun to reevaluate Genet's theater in light of his later political activism.⁴⁵ Critics frequently cite Genet's comment in his preface, "I repeat, this play, written by a White, is destined for an audience of Whites," as well as his statement in a 1964 interview, "I don't care if my plays serve the Blacks. Anyhow, I don't believe they do. I believe that struggle, direct action against colonialism do more for the Blacks than a theatrical play," to conclude that *The Blacks* is not a political play and need not be considered in relation to its historical context.⁴⁶ Such an argument mistakes Genet's ethical refusal to pretend either that his play would reach black audiences⁴⁷ or that it was able, in itself, to wage the properly political battle of decolonization, for an admission of the play's lack of political and historical relevance. It also ignores statements by Genet both in interviews and in an unpublished 1956-7 preface to *The Blacks*, which I will visit later in this chapter, in which he outlines his political motivations for writing the play while analyzing the limitations inherent in his position as a white author. *The Blacks'* complex play-within-a-play structure, its use of masking and unmasking, and its moments of metatheatrical commentary have also had the unintended effect of discouraging readings of its political import. When *The Blacks'* is considered merely a

Negro?," *Paragraph 27*, no. 2 (July 2004): 98-112.

⁴⁵ For a new volume of Genet theater criticism that represents a much-needed step forward in this direction, see Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery, and Maria Shevtsova, eds., *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁴⁶ "Cette pièce, je le répète, écrite par un Blanc, est destinée à un public de Blancs," Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, in *Oeuvres complètes, Tome V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 79. "Si mes pièces servent les Noirs, je ne m'en soucie pas. Je ne le crois pas, d'ailleurs. Je crois que l'action, la lutte directe contre le colonialisme font plus pour les Noirs qu'une pièce de theater," Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 23.

⁴⁷ Genet could not have known at this time that his play would travel beyond the overwhelmingly white Parisian theater-going public to be staged before more mixed audiences in

particularly ingenious example of high theatrical modernism, the infinite play of the signifier, and the simulacra of the political, the centrality of race and colonialism to its *content* becomes merely incidental.⁴⁸ Recent criticism has more productively read these techniques as a means of denaturalizing race and inquiring into its social production.⁴⁹ This emphasis on race's historically constructed and intensely *imaginary* nature is certainly important; however, it risks missing what I take to be the play's most original, powerful, and indeed, *political* contribution, that is, its *affective force in performance*. *The Blacks* is most interesting neither in its repetition of the themes of Négritude nor in its deconstruction of race, but the way in which it *plugs into* the context of its performance, cathecting spectators' powerful and affect-laden cultural fantasies of race so as to create explosive and potentially transformative effects. If, as I am arguing, *The Blacks* has a certain performative and affective force, it is due to the way in which the play manages to tap into both the racial tensions and the emergent black cultural and identitarian formations of the era of decolonization.

Contemporary critics have, thus far, been startlingly blind to something which

Civil-Rights era U.S..

⁴⁸ See Edith Melcher. "The Pirandellism of Jean Genet," *The French Review* 36, no. 1 (October 1962): 32-36; and Thomas B. Markus. "Jean Genet: The Theatre of the Perverse," *Educational Theatre Journal* 14, no. 3 (October 1962): 209-214.

⁴⁹ Hédi Khélil risks, in reading race as performative in *The Blacks*, rendering it merely ludic and detaching it from its bearing on contemporaneous black political and cultural movements : " La couleur noire n'est pas une fatalité épidermique propre à une race, mais devient, sur scène, raffinement dans le maquillage. Ce qui intéresse Genet, ce n'est pas la négritude en tant que projet de civilisation, de contestation politique ou poétique à la manière d'un Senghor ou d'un Fanon. Pour le dramaturge, ce qui est précieux, c'est la "négrification," c'est-à-dire le processus en train de se faire au théâtre, c'est le fait de nommer et de mobiliser les accessoires dont il a besoin pour que soit réalisée la prestation requise." Hédi Khelil, *Figures de l'alterité dans le théâtre de Jean Genet : lecture des Nègres et des Paravents* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 39.

no theater reviewer, spectator, or performer of *The Blacks* is likely to miss: its discomfiting affective force.⁵⁰ Throughout its performance history, the volatile affects that the play generates have consistently struck and, on occasion, scandalized directors, actors, and theater-goers alike. Many of the play's initial French reviewers expressed outrage, accusing Genet of attempting to alienate his audience and of maliciously using the play as a forum to spew forth his personal hatred of European civilization.⁵¹ This outrage, moreover, was not confined merely to conservative theater critics. The French absurdist playwright, Eugène Ionesco, famously walked out of a performance of *The Blacks*, throwing into relief the white bourgeois complacency that subtended many avant-guard French literary movements. According to the director, Roger Blin, "[a]s a white man [Ionesco] felt uncomfortable; he felt he was being attacked; he sensed the great pleasure the Negro actors took each time they insulted the whites."⁵² During its 1961-4 off-Broadway run, the play gave lie to the publicly peaceful and optimistic face of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.. Black spectators made up a significant portion of the audience and, reportedly, "[t]heir laughter, their participation, their pleasure during

⁵⁰ A notable exception is Carl Lavery, whose emphasis on the performative context of *The Blacks* has been formative of my own project. Carl Lavery, "Reading *The Blacks* through the 1956 Preface: Politics and Betrayal," in *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, ed. Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery, and Maria Shevtsova (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). In general, early critics of *The Blacks*' were more likely to comment on its ability to challenge and unsettle spectators than more contemporary critics. See Graham Dunstan Martin, "Racism in Genet's 'Les Negres': 'In Europe, the Black Man Is the Symbol of Evil' (Frantz Fanon)," *The Modern Language Review* 70, no. 3 (July 1975): 517-525; Allan Francovich, "Genet's Theater of Possession," *The Drama Review* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 25-45; and Richard C. Webb, "Ritual, Theatre, and Jean Genet's 'The Blacks,'" *Theatre Journal* 31, no. 4 (December 1979): 443-459.

⁵¹ For a description of *The Blacks*' reception by its Parisian reviewers, see Webb, "Ritual, Theatre, and Jean Genet's 'The Blacks.'"

⁵² Roger Blin and Bettina Knapp, "An Interview with Roger Blin," *The Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 113.

scenes expressing Black anger, contempt and desire for revenge startled the white members of the audience."⁵³ The play's impact on its actors was equally dramatic. Maya Angelou, who played the White Queen in Gene Frankel's 1961-4 off-Broadway run, reports channeling her experiences of racial oppression into a striking performance of disidentification⁵⁴: "I used the White Queen to ridicule mean white women and brutal white men who had too often injured me and mine. [...] I dressed myself in the hated gestures and made the White Queen gaze down in loathing at the rotten stinking stupid blacks."⁵⁵ At the charged height of the Civil Rights Movements, Angelou found it "obvious that the other actors also found effective motivation."⁵⁶ Such anecdotal evidence of critics, theater-goers, and actors' affective responses to the play, rather than being seen as merely incidental, should drive our critical readings. What exactly is it about the play that carries such an intense affective charge, and what cultural and political work does this charge perform?

This chapter will explore the racialized structures of feeling of the Négritude era through the oblique perspectives of *Black Skins*, *White Masks* and *The Blacks*. Both works, I will argue, explore the *affective economies* of racial identification during a period that saw important shifts in what being black signified, and both publicize the melancholic psychic and affective life of post-war French racism. This chapter will argue that the structures of feeling that Négritude, *Black Skin*, *White Masks*, and *The Blacks*

⁵³ Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 440.

⁵⁴ Angelou's ability to turn her awareness of how she and her people had been injured by those the White Queen stood for into an aggressive critical performance of whiteness is most certainly what José Muñoz would call a disidentificatory performance (Muñoz 1999).

⁵⁵ Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York: Random House, 1981), 179-80.

simultaneously cathect and seek to transform are those of a racial melancholia which I consider endemic to post-war France, the contemporary U.S., and any other culture which combines public ideals of universalism, multiculturalism, or equal opportunity with either institutionalized or informal racist practices. What distinguished the Négritude era, and what is rendered particularly evident in works like *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Blacks*, is a politicized turning of racial melancholia's divided self-consciousness and internalized pain *outward* in transformative forms of rhetorical, affective, and even political performance. Genet and Fanon, I argue, are original and important thinkers of the relationship between melancholic structures of feeling, performance, and politics during a period when this relationship was seen as a matter of urgent political import.

3.4 The Melancholic Object of Whiteness

The Blacks doubtless draws much of its discomfiting and even shocking force from its stark staging of racial inequality itself as a scene of, simultaneously, performance and judgment. The curtain rises on the spectacle of a group of black actors humming and whistling as they dance around a coffin to a minuet by Mozart. Another group of actors, whose black faces and hair are clearly visible behind their white masks, enter from stage left onto an elevated platform from which they watch the other actors. These actors constitute the White Court and are costumed to represent each of the branches of French power – the Queen, the Judge, the Valet, the Missionary, and the

⁵⁶ Angelou, *Heart of a Woman*, 180.

colonial Governor. As "the blacks" complete their dance, the Master of Ceremonies, Archibald, steps forward and introduces himself, the other "blacks" and the play they will put on with exaggerated formality. In a speech laced with both servility and aggressiveness, Archibald immediately makes it clear that the play's entertainment value is drawn from the actors' performance of their blackness, heightened with make-up, before a white audience: "to serve you we will use our face paint of a beautiful shining black [...] We beautify ourselves to please you. You are white. And spectators. Tonight we will act for you."⁵⁷ Since Archibald addresses himself "sometimes to the audience, sometimes to the Court," his "you" refers both to the Court and to the audience, immediately implicating theater-goers in this performance of racialized inequality.⁵⁸ Archibald goes on to explain that, to better entertain, "the blacks" have committed a crime: "[t]onight, we dream only of entertaining you [*à vous divertir*]: we have therefore killed a White woman. There she is. (*He points to the coffin [...]*)."⁵⁹ The night's entertainment will consist of "the blacks" acting out this crime of interracial seduction and murder before both the White Court and the coffin in which their white victim allegedly lies.

Gradually, however, we learn that this performance is motivated by something *other* than the simple desire to entertain. As the Judge reveals in a moment of impatience, "[y]ou promised to act out the crime in order to merit your condemnation.

⁵⁷ "pour vous servir nous utiliserons nos fards d'un beau noir luisant [...] [n]ous nous embellissons pour vous plaire. Vous êtes blancs. Et spectateurs. Ce soir nous jouerons pour vous," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 84.

⁵⁸ "tantôt au public, tantôt à la Cour," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 84.

⁵⁹ "Ce soir, nous ne songerons qu'à vous divertir: nous avons donc tué une Blanche. Elle est là.

The Queen is waiting. Hurry," prompting us to wonder under what regime of power the "blacks" would choose to perform their crime, not in order to be judged innocent or guilty, but *in order to merit their condemnation*.⁶⁰ To complicate matters, we learn that this is not merely a specific performance of a singular crime leading to a definitive condemnation. Rather, the "blacks" ritualistically put on exactly the same performance – which they refer to as a "rite" and a "ceremonial" – with a freshly murdered cadaver, night after night.⁶¹ Halfway through the play, this scene of performance is contrasted to the judgment and condemnation of a "real" traitor by black revolutionaries and as well as a real battle, both of which are occurring somewhere offstage. Commenting on this overtly political scene of crime and punishment, Archibald remarks, "[t]his is serious. It's no longer about acting [*Il ne s'agit plus de jouer*]," to which Ville de Saint-Nazaire protests incredulously, "[s]o then, this play in which we are acting, to you, it was only entertainment [*un divertissement*]?"⁶² Apparently referring to some prior offstage conversation, he queries, "I thought that tonight, thanks to you, everything was going to change? And that tonight would be the last?"⁶³ When Archibald responds, "[t]here's nothing new, at least, in the ceremony," Ville de Saint-Nazaire asks with rage, "[s]o you want to continue it to infinity? Perpetuate it until the death of the race? As long as the Earth turns around the sun, itself carried in a straight line to the limits of God, in a secret

(*Il montre le catafalque [...]*)" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 86.

⁶⁰ "Vous nous avez promis la représentation du crime afin de mériter votre condamnation. La Reine attend. Dépêchez-vous," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 93.

⁶¹ "rite" "cérémonial," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 87, 89.

⁶² "C'est grave. Il ne s'agit plus de jouer"; "Mais alors, cette comédie que nous jouons, pour vous, ce n'était qu'un divertissement ?" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 127-8.

⁶³ "Je croyais que ce soir, grâce à vous, tout devait changer ? Et que cette nuit sera la dernière?"

chamber, the Blacks," "[w]ill hate! Yes, sir," Archibald affirms, completing Ville de Saint-Nazaire's thought.⁶⁴ As this exchange indicates, even the ritual's producers and performers cannot come to an agreement about the ritual's function. Ville de Saint-Nazaire's comments indicate that, for him, the ritual is no mere play, and that he expects it to achieve some tangible culmination. Archibald's response suggests, more disturbingly, that the "blacks" are constrained to repeat this ritual of hatred, which seems to have nothing to do with the properly political judgment offstage, infinitely. Later on in the play, once the "whites" have removed their masks to reveal themselves to be black actors playing whites, "He who had the role of the Valet" suggests yet another relation between the on- and offstage judgments, proclaiming, "[t]hanks to us they have guessed nothing of the drama taking place elsewhere."⁶⁵ Should we interpret *divertissement* and *divertir* above, then, not as "entertainment/entertain," but according to their more literal sense of "distraction/distract"? Is the true purpose of the play to distract, not the White Court, since they are really black actors in on the joke, but we the audience members from the properly political drama offstage?

Clearly the "rational" explanations for the performance are not the whole story. If the purpose of the play were either to facilitate the judgment and condemnation of "the blacks" for a specific crime they had committed or to distract the audience from the

Genet, *Les Nègres*, 129.

⁶⁴ "Il n'y a rien de nouveau, au moins, dans la cérémonie"; "Vous voulez donc la continuer à l'infini ? La perpétuer jusqu'à la mort de la race ? Tant que la Terre tournera autour du soleil, lui-même emporté en ligne directe jusqu'aux limites de Dieu, dans une chambre secrète, des Nègres...", "[h]aïront ! Oui, monsieur," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 130.

⁶⁵ "Celui qui tenait le rôle du Valet"; "[g]râce à nous on n'a rien deviné du drame qui se passe ailleurs," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 146.

offstage action, there would be no need to repeat its performance, with a fresh cadaver, on a nightly basis. I want to suggest that in proposing multiple, contradictory readings of the relation between the ritual performance of racialized power and the scene of political struggle, *The Blacks* stages the question of the connection between political and psychic decolonization struggles. For Ville de Saint-Nazaire, it is impossible to choose one struggle over the other: "[o]ur goal is not only to corrode, to dissolve the idea that they would like us to have of them. We must also combat them in their persons of flesh and bone."⁶⁶ But if the political function of the ritual is to corrode and dissolve a certain idea that whites want blacks to have about them, how exactly does it accomplish this? *The Blacks'* depiction of the relationship between "the blacks" and "the whites" as one of simultaneous identification, adoration, aggression, hatred, guilt, and judgment maps intriguingly onto Freud's description of the relationship between the melancholic ego and its lost object, while what Ville de Saint-Nazaire suggests about the purpose of performance startlingly resembles what Freud describes as the "work" of melancholia. Since Freud nowhere explores the potential for a racialization of melancholia, however, I will first turn to Fanon's description, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of the middle-class black Martinican's troubled relation to French ideals of whiteness, in order to give an account of French universalism's production of racial melancholia in its more upwardly mobile colonial subjects.

In the chapter of *Black Skin* entitled "The Black and Psychopathology" ("Le nègre

⁶⁶ "Notre but n'est pas seulement de corroder, de dissoudre l'idée qu'il voudraient que nous ayions d'eux. Il nous faut aussi les combattre dans leurs personnes de chair et d'os," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 146.

et la psychopathologie"), Fanon suggests that, for the Antillean colonial subject educated in French schools and taught to believe that he was French, subjectivity was formed through an identification with the virtues and the cultural fictions of both European and American whiteness. Antillean children's culture of the time, Fanon points out, was essentially that of white European and American children. Through books, comics, and cartoons, Martinican children learned to sympathize with stories of white children fighting bad, brown "Injuns." Thanks to the centralized training of colonial schoolteachers in the metropole and the concomitant regularization of school curricula across the French colonial world, Antillean schoolchildren were taught to see French history, colonization, and cultural achievements as their own. As Fanon puts it, "in the Antilles, the young Black, who at school never ceases repeating, 'our fathers, the Gauls,' identifies with the explorer, the civilizer, the White who brings the truth to the savages, a completely white truth."⁶⁷ On the other hand, "at school, when he reads stories of savages in white works, he always thinks of the Senegalese."⁶⁸ However, the Antillean person of color, according to Fanon, cannot persist very long in failing to recognize himself as black. By the time he does come to this recognition, however, the toxic structure of white values are already in place. By the age of twenty,

the Antillean has understood himself as black, but, by an ethical slippage, he has noticed (collective unconscious) that one was black to the extent that one was bad, cowardly, mean, instinctive. Everything that opposed itself to these ways of

⁶⁷ "Aux Antilles, le jeune Noir, qui à l'école ne cesse de répéter 'nos pères, les Gaulois', s'identifie à l'explorateur, au civilisateur, au Blanc qui apporte la vérité aux sauvages, une vérité toute blanche," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 120.

⁶⁸ "à l'école, il lui arrive de lire des histoires de sauvages, dans des ouvrages blancs, il pense toujours aux Sénégalais," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 120.

being black was white.⁶⁹

The "ambiguity" of racial identification into which the Antillean has been lured has now intensified to the point of being "extraordinarily neurotic."⁷⁰ This state of ambiguity and doubling is brought to a crisis when the Antillean travels to Europe, where, "when they speak of blacks he will know that it is about him as well as the Senegalese."⁷¹ "The Psychopathology of the Black" constitutes an insightful description of French universalism's coercive effects on black Antillean subjectivity. Fanon clearly outlines how the seemingly innocent incitement of Antillean children's identification with white cultural fictions and histories and the displacement of the burdens of blackness onto Africans becomes a source of intense psychic strife when, upon adulthood, the Antillean learns that, to the French, *he is precisely the savage African that he has been taught to hate*. It is worth emphasizing that, throughout, the Antillean subjectivity Fanon describes is implicitly that of the educated middle-class boy who entertains projects of continuing his studies in France – assuredly a very slim segment of the Antillean population. The indisputable force of Fanon's analysis is therefore tempered by its lack of a consideration of the Antillean laboring classes' relationship to both whiteness and blackness.

Fanon's emphasis on the problem of black and Creole subjects of the French Antilles' simultaneous identification with the cultural values of whiteness and devaluation of everything associated with blackness was by no means new at this point.

⁶⁹ l'Antillais s'est connu comme nègre, mais, par un glissement éthique, il s'est aperçu (inconscient collectif) qu'on était nègre dans la mesure où l'on était mauvais, veule, méchant, instinctif. Tout ce qui s'opposait à ces manières d'être nègre était blanc. (*ibid.* 155)

⁷⁰ "ambiguïté"; "extraordinairement névrotique," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 155.

⁷¹ "quand on parlera de nègres il saura qu'il s'agit de lui aussi bien que du Sénégalais," Fanon,

As early as 1932, the first and only issue of *Légitime Défense*, a fiery journal assembled by a small group of Martinican students living in Paris understood as one of the founding documents of the Négritude movement, focused its Marxist inspired critique, not on colonialists themselves, but on the bourgeois French Antillians who they saw as both culturally and economically complicit in colonial domination. Proclaiming the French bourgeoisie of color "one of the saddest things of the globe," the authors of this political manifesto address themselves to "those who are not yet dead placed fucked academics successful decorated rotten established decorative prudish opportunistic marked; to those who can still claim to be representative of life with some appearance of vraisemblance."⁷² In the first article of the volume, "Note on the French bourgeoisie of color," Jules-Marcel Monnerot vociferates against the upwardly mobile French man of color's desire to "assimilate" and to "not stand out," ridiculing those who "through the strength of their conformism make themselves a whiteness."⁷³ René Ménéil's "Generalities on the Antillean writer of color" ("Généralités sur l'écrivain de couleur antillais") denounces the "objective, unconscious hypocrisy" by which Caribbean authors absorb French literary culture so thoroughly that their writing becomes indistinguishable from that of French authors. Ménéil's description of the process by which the Antillean of color strives to embrace the "universal" ideals of French culture

Peau noire, 121.

⁷² "une des choses les plus tristes du globe;" "ceux qui ne sont pas encore tués places foutus universitaires réussis décorés pourris pourvus décoratifs pudibonds opportunistes marqués ; à ceux qui peuvent encore se réclamer de la vie avec quelque apparence de vraisemblance" Etienne Léro et al., *Légitime défense* (Paris: E. Léro, 1932), 2.

⁷³ "Note touchant la bourgeoisie de couleur française"; "s'assimiler"; "ne pas se faire remarquer"; "à force de conformisme se font une blancheur," Léro et. al, *Légitime défense*, 4.

emphasizes both the phantasmatic abstraction of these ideals and the disavowal of Antillean culture that this embrace requires: "[t]he Antillean of color disowns his race, his body, his fundamental and particular passions, his specific manner of reacting to love and to death, and succeeds in living in an unreal domain determined by the abstract ideas and the ideal of another people."⁷⁴ It would not be an exaggeration to say that Négritude was, in its inception, a critique of the damaging effects of the identification with whiteness that French universalism developed in its *évolué* black and Creole colonial subjects. The fact that this movement originated among Martinican students *in Paris* is suggestive of the particular contradictions, underlined by Fanon, of the experience of exclusion from a full participation in French society *while in the metropole*, the presumed pinnacle of Antillean aspiration. The urgency with which black Francophone authors and intellectuals critiqued bourgeois Antilleans' pervasive and damaging identification with the cultural values of European whiteness suggests that they saw it as one of the major psychic structures of French colonial domination of the time. Such writers encourage us to consider this experience of identifying with the cultural values of European whiteness, then learning that one would forever be excluded from participating in these values as a systemic effect of late French colonial formations. I want to argue that, in addition, this experience was generative of this period's dominant form of racial melancholia.

To recapitulate an earlier discussion, Freud's thinking on melancholia shifted

⁷⁴ "hypocrisie objective, inconsciente"; "l'Antillais de couleur renie sa race, son corps, ses passions fondamentales et particulières, sa façon spécifique de réagir à l'amour et à la mort, et arrive à vivre dans un domaine irréel déterminé par les idées abstraites et l'idéal d'un autre peuple," Léro

from his view of it as a pathological form of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) to his understanding of it, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), as a far more universal and, indeed, normative process generative of the superego and, with it, of an attachment to social and moral ideals. The seeds of the latter position, however, are already present in Freud's assertion, in the earlier essay, that both mourning and melancholia may be reactions not only to the loss of a loved person, but also "to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."⁷⁵ Unlike the loss of a loved one, the loss of one's country, liberty, or another ideal presumes the operation of large-scale historical and social forces. Since in melancholia, rather than mourning the lost object and letting it go, the subject clings to it and metaphorically cannibalizes it, the melancholic loss of a social ideal would result in its installation within the psyche. Freud makes it clear that this process of incorporation, in which "one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object," leads to a split psychic life shot through with guilt, judgment, and aggression.⁷⁶ In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud revisits his earlier theory of melancholia, suggesting that, in "Mourning and Melancholia," "we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is."⁷⁷ He goes on to speculate that, instead of a troubled and abnormal reaction to loss, melancholic identification "may be [...] the sole condition under which the id can give

et. al, *Légitime défense*, 7.

⁷⁵ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia, 252.

⁷⁶ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 256.

⁷⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. James Strachey, The Standard Edition. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960), 23.

up its objects."⁷⁸ In Freud's revised theory, melancholic identification is not only normal but actually *normative*. Drawing the conclusions to which "Mourning and Melancholia" already gestured, Freud hypothesizes that the melancholic identification with authority figures and social ideals functions to set them up as internalized judges, installing a normative sense of conscience, guilt, and morality within the psyche.

For the bourgeois Antillean, French universalist ideals of abstract personhood, racial indistinction, and French cultural achievement were seductive, yet impossible sites of desire and identification. As Fanon demonstrated, while the Antillean's childhood sense of self was formed through an identification with the cultural values of French whiteness, upon adulthood, such ideals were *guaranteed* to lead to loss and disappointment. In the context of French culture's pretension to universalism, however, *disidentifying* with the cultural values of French whiteness was tantamount to renouncing one's status as a universal subject and one's claims to agency and rights. Unable, then, to acknowledge the loss of this subjectifying ideal, the bourgeois Antillean would have no choice but to melancholically incorporate it, producing a psyche ambivalently split between an ideal of whiteness and the forever inadequate ego it continually judges and berates. Such a psychic life would have had immensely useful effects for colonial domination, producing colonial mimics reduced to melancholically imitating a whiteness to which they would never accede, pandemics of colonial shame, and a sorely crippled capacity to devise alternative schemas of value and of political action.

⁷⁸ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 24.

The Blacks offers a stunning allegory of this mode of racial melancholia. One group of black actors dons white masks and the costumes of colonial rule, (as Fanon famously put it, "black skin, white masks"), allegorizing a black identification with white power and authority, then sets itself above and against another group of black actors. The primary function of this White Court is ocular. The members of the Court are present as spectators, set on a platform above "the blacks" so that their disciplinary gaze can enjoy undisturbed access to its object. In this way, the White Court carries out what Freud saw as the primary function of the melancholically produced superego: "*keeping a watch* over the actions and intentions of the ego *and judging* them."⁷⁹ The racialization of spectatorship and judgment in *The Blacks*, however, is even more suggestive of Duboisian double-consciousness: the black American's sense of constantly watching himself through a racist white gaze. If one sees Duboisian double-consciousness as the primary symptom of the racial melancholic's incorporation of white ideals, however, these two readings become far from contradictory. Du Bois enables us to understand how these incorporated white ideals become a second gaze within the psyche, whose tyranny is that of rendering one constantly aware of how the racist other would see one's every thought, intention, and deed.

The Blacks makes it is clear from the start that the presence of "white" spectators is far from inconsequential. Not only do "the blacks" stage their entire performance for the benefit of this sovereign white gaze, but specifically, *they stage a confessional performance*

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 765, my emphasis.

of their guilt so that "the whites" will condemn and punish them. "Don't forget this," Archibald sternly reminds his peers, "we must merit their reprobation, and lead them to pronounce the verdict that condemns us."⁸⁰ We are now better prepared to understand the strange economy of justice by which "the blacks" act out their crime not in order to be judged innocent or guilty, but to be *condemned as necessarily guilty*. On the one hand, the ritualistic dimension of the trial and condemnation seems to play out the Freudian script of egoic guilt and superegoic judgment. The *racialization* of the guilty consciousness in *The Blacks*, however, lends it a different resonance. No longer simply the woe of the ego that fails to reach an impossibly high ideal, the "blacks" performance of racialized culpability draws from the deeply historical script of black guilt and white judgment. Fanon transmits the lived experience of blackness as precisely this perpetual sense of unreasoned guilt: "I am guilty. I do not know what of."⁸¹ Typically, however, he brings the origin of this particular structure of feeling back to the historical conditions of its production: "[a]ll those Whites gathered, revolvers in hand, cannot be wrong."⁸² The characters in *The Blacks*, then, seek to defuse their historically produced sense of undeserved guilt by choosing to court and to merit the condemnation that they would, no doubt, receive anyhow.

The White Court, however, constantly interrupts the performance with bouts of racist stereotyping, displays of paternalism, and criticisms of the quality of the performance. The black characters respond ambivalently, both with shows of

⁸⁰ "N'oubliez pas ceci: nous devons mériter leur réprobation, et les amener à prononcer le jugement qui nous condamnera," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 96.

⁸¹ "Je suis coupable. Je ne sais pas de quoi," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 112.

subordination and with outbursts of vengeful rage. These tense and shifting power relations between "the whites" and "the blacks" make up much of the "action" of the play, tracing ambivalent dynamics of hatred, admiration, dependence, aggression, and subservience. It is worth emphasizing that *The Blacks* stages not only the embattled relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, but also that between the black characters and the white ideals which they have, to some degree, taken on. We are never permitted to forget that we are watching, not actual whites, but black actors with white masks posed "in such a manner that one sees a large band of black around it, and even frizzy hair," such that much of the affective force of the performance is generated precisely by the aggression, bitterness, and sarcasm with which these black actors perform white authority and power.⁸³ It would behoove us to recall that, for Freud, the superego's severity is founded less on the "the severity which one has experienced from [the object]" (though, in a colonial context, we should be wary of minimizing this aggression) than on "one's own aggressiveness towards it."⁸⁴ *The Blacks'* original white spectators were quick to perceive that what the vitriol of "the whites" in the play really expressed was a masked aggression against whiteness itself.

Given the various ways in which the play stages "the blacks'" aggression and rage toward the white ideals with which they are nonetheless forced to identify, there is a certain affective justice to the play's dramatic reversal toward the end. Significantly, rather than culminating in the White Courts' condemnation of "the blacks," as we are led

⁸² "Tous ces Blancs réunis, le revolver au poing, ne peuvent pas avoir tort" Fanon, *Peau noire*, 112.

⁸³ "de telle façon qu'on voie une large bande noire autour, et même les cheveux crépus," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 82.

to believe it will, the ceremony ends with the *black characters' ritualistic execution of the white characters*. This execution might be read as a striking literalization of what Freud terms "the work of melancholia."⁸⁵ Contemporary scholars writing on melancholia have tended to emphasize the ethical valence of melancholia as a means of holding onto one's losses and moving with them into the future. In so doing, they have neglected the passage of "Mourning and Melancholia" in which Freud speculates that the struggles of ambivalence so evident in melancholia might perform a type of psychic "work" much akin to the work of mourning. If mourning is a gradual renunciation of one's attachment to the lost object, in melancholia, "each single struggle of ambivalence loosens the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it."⁸⁶ This passage suggests that melancholia might be a dynamic and active, rather than a stagnant and repetitive process, that some of its symptomatic forms of "acting out" might also be covert means of "working through," and that its intrapsychic violence might, in some cases, have a freeing, and even healing, outcome. This is not to negate that, for some groups at some historical moments, melancholia might function as a means of ethically holding onto one's lost objects. The relation to the object that one might want to characterize as the most ethical or politically salient must necessarily vary according to the social positioning of *both* the melancholic *and* the lost object. For certain groups dealing with certain lost objects at certain historical moments, *doing away with* rather than holding onto one's melancholic attachments might be the

⁸⁴ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 761.

⁸⁵ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 265.

⁸⁶ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 267.

more politically salient task. This may be particularly true of racialized subjects living with damaging attachments to exclusionary cultural ideals of whiteness.

Thus far, however, we have not touched upon what is perhaps the most surprising aspect of *The Blacks'* performance of racial melancholia, namely, that it stages psychic life as a *collectively produced and enacted ritual*. Archibald's reference to the "text that we have perfected" indicates that it is *the characters themselves* who have created and perfected the ceremony which he takes it upon himself to direct and critique.⁸⁷ Such a collective and voluntary enactment of melancholic psychic life might appear puzzling. Since some part of the melancholic loss must remain unconscious, melancholic performances are themselves usually assumed to be compulsive, unconscious, and therefore either non- or pre-political. Melancholic performance, in other words, is taken to be a form of *performativity*. According to Judith Butler's influential distinction, *performance* refers to the volitional enactment of a role characteristic of the theater and other bounded spaces of performance, while *performativity* names our continuously compelled repetition and mis-repetition of regulatory social norms.⁸⁸ If we understand melancholia to be an incorporation of regulatory social norms, then melancholic performativity would describe the normative identity effects occasioned by this incorporation.⁸⁹ Since the melancholic ritual of *The Blacks* is collectively planned and enacted, however, ritual in *The Blacks* seems to mean something *other* than a blindly

⁸⁷ "le texte que nous avons mis au point," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 89.

⁸⁸ For a full account of Butler's distinction between performance and performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁹ As we saw in Chapter 2, Butler moves toward this understanding of melancholia in 1. Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in*

compelled form of performativity. *The Blacks* therefore suggests that vernacular forms of performance such as ritual mark the site at which collective psychic life becomes subject to cultural activity.

To make this argument is to go against the common understanding of the social function of ritual as always repetitive and conservative. One version of this reading is Fanon's own interpretation, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, of vernacular forms of African performance under colonialism as the ritual *neutralization* of potentially revolutionary violent impulse. Likening the "muscular demonstrations" of rites of possession and ritual dances to a hysterical fit, Fanon reads these vernacular modes of performance as release valves for the colonized's "affectivity in erection."⁹⁰ During these collective performances, Fanon writes, "one gathers only to allow the accumulated libido, the stopped up aggressiveness well up volcanically. Symbolic executions, figurative cavalcades, imaginary multiple murders, *all of that must come out* [*il faut que tout cela sorte*]."⁹¹ If this passage recalls Césaire's conviction that "all of that needed to come out" ("tout cela devait sortir") in this chapter's epigraph, the value that the two thinkers attribute to these externalizations could not be more different.⁹² Whereas Césaire trumpets poetic expression as a means of potentially having done with colonialism's psychic fallout, Fanon sees vernacular forms of colonial performance as temporary,

Subjection (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-150.

⁹⁰ "démonstrations musculaires"; "affectivité en érection," Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 57.

⁹¹ "l'on ne se réunit que pour laisser la libido accumulée, l'agressivité empêchée, sourdre volcaniquement. Mises à mort symboliques, chevauchées figuratives, meurtres multiples imaginaires, *il faut que tout cela sorte*" Fanon, *Les damnés*, 58.

⁹² Césaire, "Liminaire," 46.

imaginary cures for an ill that can only really be remedied by direct physical action against colonialism. In the midst of the Algerian war of decolonization, Fanon writes,

[a]fter years of unreality, after having wallowed in the most astonishing phantasms, the colonized, machine gun in hand, finally affronts the only forces that contested his being: those of colonialism. [...] The colonized discovers the real and transforms it in a the movement of his praxis, in the exercise of violence, in his project of liberation.⁹³

In espousing anti-colonial struggle not only as the sole viable remedy against colonialism proper, *but also* as the only possible cure for the affective and psychic wounds of the colonized, Fanon risks brushing aside the specific forms of psychic and cultural work that vernacular forms of performance might do.

Ritual performance in particular might contain the potential to transform collective psychic life, due to its location at the labile threshold between performance and performativity. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach argues against an understanding of ritual either as static repetition in the service of memory and tradition, or as a cultural safety-valve permitting a subsequent return to status quo. According to Roach, ritual and vernacular performance work less through reproduction than through what he terms "displaced transmission," a form of continual reinvention and recreation that permits the adaptation of popular behaviors and embodied forms of memory to changing historical and social conditions.⁹⁴ Roach's

⁹³ "Après des années d'irréalisme, après s'être vautré dans les phantasmes les plus étonnants, le colonisé, sa mitraillette au poing, affronte enfin *les seules forces qui lui contestaient son être: celles du colonialisme*. [...] Le colonisé découvre le réel et le transforme dans le mouvement de sa praxis, dans l'exercice de la violence, dans son projet de libération. Fanon, *Les damnés*, 58-9, my emphasis.

⁹⁴ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 28-9.

theorization of vernacular performance usefully emphasizes the ways in which rituals are neither novel inventions nor automatic repetitions, but collective engagements with the patterned modes of habitual behavior which constitute collective memory, identity, and cultural being. Roach's understanding of ritual would fit in the middle ranges of Schechner's continuum between *transformative* and *transportative* performance. In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Schechner attempts to bring the disciplinary distance between theater / performance arts studies and the rituals usually analyzed by anthropologists by situating both along a continuum.⁹⁵ At the transportative pole would lie classical European theater, in which the actors and spectators are temporarily transported into an alternative theatrical reality before they are returned, unchanged, to normalcy. At the pole of transformation, on the other hand, would lie initiation rituals from which one or more of actors emerge irrevocably transformed. Schechner ultimately argues, however, that most forms of performance fall somewhere in the middle ranges of this continuum, combining some degree of lasting self-transformation with a measure of temporary transport. In *The Blacks*, the characters actively write, direct, and perform their ritual, much as one would in a conventional theatrical production. While the ritual's intentional production partakes of classical theatrical practice, its engagement with and its bid to transform the deep psychic and affective lives of racism suggests that its aim is to function as a transformative mode of collective performance.

⁹⁵ See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

Following both Roach and Schechner, I would suggest that ritual toes the line between a compelled, non-volitional performance and a collective cultural elaboration; it marks, in other words, the volatile and transformative border between performance and performativity, between melancholic compulsion and melancholic creativity, and between "acting out" and "working through" one's disavowed identifications. By staging the characters' ritual as a collectively elaborated performance resulting in a potential working through of their melancholic attachments, *The Blacks* suggests that psychic life might become subject to cultural labor through performance. In so doing, this play participates in the decolonization-era effort to think the potentially transformative effects of a collective performance of racialized structures of feeling. Ranging from Césaire's call for a form of poetic expression that would liberate the black man from the psychic burdens of colonialism to Fanon's devaluation of vernacular African performance in favor of the politically *and* psychically curative performance of violent anti-colonial uprising, these efforts have in common their conviction that certain modes of collective performance might have the power to both externalize and to transform the embedded structures of feeling of what I have termed racial melancholia. Much remains to be said, however, about the role of cultural figures of blackness in this collective project of fundamentally transforming the racial imaginary.

3.5 Négritude; or Assuming Black Melancholy

*But what is a Negro [un noir]? And first of all, what color is he?*⁹⁶

If whiteness, in *The Blacks*, is defamiliarized by the characters' critical performance of troubled white identification, blackness is revealed to be no less of a complex and difficultly inhabited identification. Not only are the "black" characters in *The Blacks* no less involved in performing race than the masked "white" characters, but much of the play shows the "black" characters attempting to actually *become* black, both literally, by blackening their faces onstage, and figuratively, by assuming and, in some cases, resignifying racist stereotypes of blackness. This proves to be no easy matter. Characters labor strenuously to become black, frequently fall short, and are called to order by their peers. But, as Genet's famously asks in this play's preface, "what is a black?" and, we might add, how does he or she *become* black? At one point, Neige's speculation on Village's true motives for murdering the white woman turns, surprisingly, to a catalogue of the most phobic and mutually contradictory of racist stereotypes:

If I was sure that Village had killed that woman *in order to more radiantly become* a scarred, stinking, thick-lipped, flat-nosed Black, eater, pig, glutton of Whites and of those of all colors, drooling, sweating, burping, spitting, goat fucking, coughing, farting, licker of white feet, lazy, sick, dripping with oil and sweat, limp and submissive, if I was sure that he had killed him to blend in with the night... But I know that he loved her.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ "Mais qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir? Et d'abord, c'est de quelle couleur?" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 79.

⁹⁷ "Si j'étais sûre que Village eût descendu cette femme *afin de devenir avec plus d'éclat un Nègre* balafre, puant, lippu, camus, mangeur, bouffeur, bâtreur de Blancs et de toutes les couleurs, bavant, suant, rotant, crachant, baiseur de boucs, toussant, pétant, lécheur de pieds blancs, feignant, malade, dégoulinant d'huile et de sueur, flasque et soumis, si j'étais sûre qu'il l'ait tuée pour se confondre avec la nuit... Mais je sais qu'il l'aimait," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 94, my emphasis.

Neige's tirade suggests that the "blacks" murder was not the natural result of their blackness, but precisely part of *an effort to become black*, or rather, to inhabit the most phobic stereotypes of blackness, though Village may have spoiled this effort by loving the woman he murdered.

As before, it is Archibald who most often directs his peers' efforts, mercilessly driving them to ever greater performances of blackness, often in spite of their reticence and flagging conviction. When Village falls in love with Vertu, he expresses disenchantment with the collective project of assuming guilt: "[w]e no longer want to be guilty of anything. Vertu will be my wife."⁹⁸ Archibald responds with the parallel moves of attempting to expulse them from the black collectivity and of ordering them to whiten themselves: "[t]hen get lost! Get out! Leave. Take her. Go to them (*He points at the audience.*) [...] But first, get yourselves bleached [*faites-vous d'abord décolorer*]."⁹⁹ Village and Vertu agree to continue with the project, but when Village proves reticent during the reenactment of the murder, Archibald intervenes, not by ordering him to continue the ritual, but by ordering him *to be black*: "I order you to be black to your very veins and to carry black blood. May Africa circulate in them."¹⁰⁰ The purpose of the characters' ritual, then, is *to assume the most racist stereotypes of blackness* through the act of murder and the subsequent assumption of culpability. Throughout, their affective relation to this project is conspicuous – blackness is assumed with bitter anger, with

⁹⁸ "Nous ne voulons plus être coupable de rien, Vertu sera ma femme," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 102.

⁹⁹ "Alors foutez le camp! Sors! Va-t'en. Emporte-là. Va chez eux (*Il indique le public.*) [...] Mais faites-vous d'abord décolorer," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ "Je vous ordonne d'être noir jusque dans vos veines et d'y charrier du sang noir. Que l'Afrique y circule," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 110.

tense determination, with outrageous campiness, and with transfigurative grandeur – in any case, it is far from effortless and natural.

If *The Blacks'* peculiar representation of blackness as a set of toxic racist stereotypes to be collectively assumed through a ritual act of interracial murder appears to constitute a somewhat offbeat reading of Négritude, this is perhaps due to the way in which Négritude's cultural politics of black identification have been remembered as a rehabilitative and essentializing project. While Négritude is not without its uncritical celebrations of essential Africanness, it at times also explores the profound negativity of a descent into shame and savagery. Césaire's triumphal ending of his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land (Cahier du retour au pays natal)* (1939) with "the dance it-is-beautiful-and-good-and-legitimate-to-be black," is the outcome of a long struggle, within this poem, to come to transfigure toxic figures of blackness.¹⁰¹ In its use of ellipses, the following strophe conveys the panting and halting effort of this struggle to assume blackness: "I accept... I accept... entirely, without reserve... my race that no ablution of mixed hyope and lilies could purify."¹⁰²

My understanding of the forgotten negativity of Négritude differs fundamentally from Sartre's famous designation of Négritude as a moment of *dialectical* negativity on the way to an abolition of racial difference. In "Black Orpheus" ("Orphée noir") (1948), Sartre's preface to a volume of Négritude poetry, Sartre identifies the value of negativity,

¹⁰¹ "la danse il-est-beau-et-bon-et-légitime-d'être nègre," Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Éditions Presence Africaine, 1983), 64.

¹⁰² "[j]'accepte... j'accepte... entièrement, sans réserve... ma race qu'aucune ablution d'hyope et de lys mêlés ne pourrait purifier," Césaire, *Cahier*, 52.

and thus, that of Négritude, as primarily that of passage:¹⁰³

Négritude appears as the unaccented beat of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Négritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not self-sufficient and the blacks that exploit it know this very well; they know that it is focused on preparing the synthesis or realization of the human in a society without races. Hence Négritude exists in order to destroy itself, it is passage and not end, means and not final goal.¹⁰⁴

In his enthusiasm for the future to which he believed Négritude's dialectical negativity led, Sartre was never adequately interested in what went on *within* the moment of negativity. Fanon's impassioned reaction to Sartre's analysis, on the other hand – "[m]y black consciousness does not present itself as lack. It *is*. It is one with itself" – challenges us to imagine an inhabitation the moment of Négritude not as lack, but as plenitude, not as passage, but as being.¹⁰⁵

Fanon makes it clear, however, that this moment of black consciousness's self-coincidence is not given, but rather achieved at the term of an intense labor. What this

¹⁰³ Sartre's desire to see the Négritude as a single step in the progression to a society without races echoes his reading, in *Réflexions sur la question juive*, on how both the antisemite and the democrat ultimately want to eradicate the Jew: "Pour le Juif conscient et fier d'être Juif, qui revendique son appartenance à la communauté juive, sans méconnaître pour cela les liens qui l'unissent à une collectivité nationale, il n'y a pas tant de différence entre l'antisémite et le démocrate. Celui-là veut le détruire comme homme pour ne laisser subsister en lui que le Juif, le paria, l'intouchable ; celui-ci veut le détruire comme Juif pour ne conserver en lui que l'homme, le sujet abstrait et universel des droits de l'homme et du citoyen." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris: Paul Morihien, 1946), 72. Yet, ironically, Sartre's vision of a socialist revolution which would end social strife, antisemitism, *and* the necessity for an opposition Jewish identity performs the same eradication that he critiques.

¹⁰⁴ "la Négritude apparaît comme le temps faible d'une progression dialectique : l'affirmation théorique et pratique de la suprématie du blanc est la thèse; la position de la Négritude comme valeur antithétique est le moment de la négativité. Mais ce moment négatif n'a pas de suffisance par lui-même et les noirs qui en usent le savent fort bien; ils savent qu'il vise à préparer la synthèse ou réalisation de l'humain dans une société sans races. Ainsi la Négritude est pour se détruire, elle est passage et non aboutissement, moyen et non fin dernière," Sartre, *Orphée noir*, xli.

¹⁰⁵ "Ma conscience nègre ne se donne pas comme manque. Elle *est*. Elle est adhérente à elle-

labor must overcome is the divided racial consciousness exemplified by a black doctor who makes a brief appearance in *Black Skin*. This doctor enrolled in the army during World War II, but refused to go to the colonies or to have a colonial unit, because he wanted to rule specifically over a white staff. According to Fanon, "[i]n this way he avenged himself of the *imago* that had always obsessed him: the frightened, trembling black, humiliated before the white master."¹⁰⁶ For this doctor, blackness is neither a form of self-coincidence nor an identification, but rather an abject and haunting *disidentification*. Fanon's account of his own encounter, first with French racism, then with Négritude conveys the traumatizing effects of living with such a haunting *disidentification*. In his chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black," Fanon describes the profoundly destabilizing effects of a seemingly innocuous encounter with a French boy and his mother on the streets of Paris. Upon seeing him, the boy exclaims, "[l]ook, a black!" provoking a dramatic disintegration of Fanon's corporal schema as it comes into contact with a "historico-racial schema" encoding a history of racial stereotypes "woven of a thousand details, anecdotes, narratives."¹⁰⁷ If the exclamation, "[l]ook, a black!" is invested with power, it is because of the contradictory affective economies of French universalist racism. In Fanon's encounter, the mother/son pair seem to represent, respectively, the conscious and the unconscious of French racism. The mother assumes the rewarding role of the universalist Frenchwoman, telling him, "[d]on't mind him, sir,

même," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ "Ainsi se vengeait-il de l'*imago* qui l'avait de tout temps obsédé: le nègre effrayé, tremblant, humilié devant le seigneur blanc," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ "Tiens, un nègre!" "un schéma historico-raciale"; "avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récits," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 90.

he doesn't know that you are as civilized as us..."¹⁰⁸ Her worldly sophistication,

however, is belied by the boy's crescendoing waves of phobia and fear:

The black is a beast, the black is bad, the black is mean, the black is ugly; look, a black, it is cold, the black trembles, the black trembles because he is cold, the little boy trembles because he is afraid of the black, the black trembles with cold, that bone wrenching cold, the fair little boy trembles because he thinks that the black trembles with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: mommy, the black is going to eat me.¹⁰⁹

Caught between the manifestations of an unconscious negrophobia and a conscious French anti-racist universalism, it is no wonder that Fanon should ask, "[w]here to place myself? Or, if you prefer: where to stuff myself?"¹¹⁰ In the end, he takes on the position of blackness in order to have a place from which to stake his opposition:

"Look, he is handsome, that black..."
"The handsome black says go to hell, Ma'am!"
Shame adorned her face. I was finally free of my rumination. I accomplished two things at once: I identified my enemies, and I created a scandal. Fulfilled. I could have a good time now.¹¹¹

At this moment, Fanon's turn to Négritude is decided: "I decided [...] to affirm myself as BLACK. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, only one solution was left: to have

¹⁰⁸ "Ne faites pas attention, monsieur, il ne sait pas que vous êtes aussi civilisé que nous..." Fanon, *Peau noire*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ "Le nègre est une bête, le nègre est mauvais, le nègre est méchant, le nègre est laid; tiens, un nègre, il fait froid, le nègre tremble, le nègre tremble parce qu'il a froid, le petit garçon tremble parce qu'il a peur du nègre, le nègre tremble de froid, ce froid qui vous tord les os, le beau petit garçon tremble parce qu'il croit que le nègre tremble de rage, le petit garçon blanc se jette dans les bras de sa mère : maman, le nègre va me manger," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 91-92.

¹¹⁰ "Où me situer? Ou, si vous préférez: où me fourrer?" Fanon, *Peau noire*, 91.

¹¹¹ "Regarde, il est beau, ce nègre...-Le beau nègre vous emmerde, madame! La honte lui orna le visage. Enfin j'étais libéré de ma rumination. Du même coup, je réalisais deux choses: j'identifiais mes ennemis et je créais du scandale. Comblé. On allait pouvoir s'amuser," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 92.

myself recognized."¹¹² In so doing, he will attempt to assume the melancholic black identification that his faith in the ideals of French universalism had forced him to disavow. For, as Fanon's encounter with French racism demonstrates, such a disavowed identification leaves the subject in a state of peril, perpetually vulnerable to the trauma of being suddenly overcome by a flood of negative racial stereotypes.

Shattered and shamed by the sudden intrusion of the racialized imago, Fanon turns to Négritude and to recent writings on African civilizations to try to make sense of what this imago might be made to mean. The result of his readings is that, as Fanon reports, "I began to blush with pride [*rougir d'orgueil*]."¹¹³ Fanon's choice of the expression "to blush with pride" is immensely evocative, suggesting an affective resignification of shame's blush. After all, shame and pride are sister affects.¹¹⁴ Both are forms of heightened self-awareness, and both are accompanied by the physiological symptom of blood rushing to the face. However, since linguistically, in both French and English, it is far more common to blush with shame than with pride, the expression "to blush with pride" cannot but remain colored with shame's hot blush. Racial identification in *Black Skin* is intimately tied to the circulation of blood, such that the final blush in this chapter is described as a blush neither of shame nor of pride, but simply of blood. Fanon is discussing his embrace of the irrationality, the poetic sensibility, and the cosmic oneness with nature associated with Négritude. After citing a

¹¹² "Je décidai [...] de m'affirmer en tant que NOIR. Puisque l'autre hésitait à me reconnaître, il ne restait qu'une solution: me faire connaître," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 93.

¹¹³ "Je commençais à rougir d'orgueil," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 99.

¹¹⁴ Eve Sedgwick has explored the relation of shame and pride at length in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

passage from Césaire's *Notebook*, Fanon writes, "[t]hree quarters of the way plunged in the day's stupefaction, I felt myself *blush with blood*. The arteries of the world, disrupted, pulled out, and uprooted, turned towards me and impregnated me [*m'ont fécondé*]."¹¹⁵ Still suffering from the prior racist incident, Fanon describes Négritude's *resignification*, or better, its *rechanneling* of his circulation, so that his blush of shame becomes first, a blush of pride, and finally, the inseminating flow of vital blood from the arteries of the universe. Fanon's account of Négritude's transformation of a self-shamed and shattered by the traumatic intrusion of a historical-racial schema into one flushed with vitality and pride is one measure of Négritude's powerful ability to intervene within debilitating racialized structures of feeling to create a fresh sense of fecundity.

By staging the turn to Négritude in the context of a traumatic encounter with French racism, "The Lived Experience of the Black" renders Négritude's role as an affective response to French racism wonderfully clear. As Fanon succinctly wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth* nine years later, Négritude was "the affective, if not logical antithesis of the white man's insult to humanity."¹¹⁶ He also warns, however, that as an antithesis, Négritude risks playing directly into the hands of racists, since it revalues rather than contradicting racist theses about the proximity to nature, innate sense of rhythm, and spontaneous, intuitive nature of black people. As an *affective*, rather than a logical antithesis, however, Négritude permitted the assumption of a shameful and

¹¹⁵ "Aux trois quarts abîmé dans l'ahurissement du jour, je me sentis *rougir de sang*. Les artères du monde, bouleversées, arrachées, déracinées, se sont tournées vers moi et elles m'ont fécondé," Fanon, *Peau noire*, 100, my emphasis.

¹¹⁶ "l'antithèse affective sinon logique de cette insulte que l'homme blanc faisait à l'humanité," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 203.

traumatizing racialized disidentification, and its conversion to a vitally agential subject position. But what is the source of Négritude's peculiar capacity to convert racial shame to creative vitality?

Fanon's return to Négritude in *The Wretched of the Earth* emphasizes that Négritude not only responds to the shame of racialization, but is itself steeped in that shame. Here, however, Négritude's social location as the poetry of "the colonized intellectual," who has thoroughly incorporated the values of white civilization and just as thoroughly disidentified with indigenous cultures, is made apparent. In a striking formulation, Fanon describes the colonized intellectual's return to his roots as a frightening descent into a foreign barbarism.¹¹⁷ "The colonized," Fanon writes, "senses the necessity of returning toward unknown roots, of losing himself, come what may, in that barbaric people."¹¹⁸ Fanon registers the colonized intellectual's sense of alienation before his people: his effort to claim the cultural signs of indigeneity is the behavior of "a foreigner," and his attempt to take stock of the state of his continent leaves him "frightened by the void, the brutishness, the savagery."¹¹⁹ The first movement, not just of Négritude, but of the collective shift in black identification that Fanon is describing, is therefore that of laying claim to a fundamentally foreign and even dehumanizing blackness with its complex of negative stereotypes. "To rediscover one's people is sometimes in that period to want to be black, not a black like the others, but a real black,

¹¹⁷ "l'intellectuel colonisé," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 207.

¹¹⁸ "le colonisé sent la nécessité de revenir vers des racines ignorées, de se perdre, adienne que pourra, dans ce peuple barbare," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 207, my emphasis.

¹¹⁹ "un étranger"; "effrayé par le vide, l'abrutissement, la sauvagerie," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 212, 209.

a dog of a black, as the White desires him."¹²⁰ This almost suicidal bid to lose oneself in barbarism and to actually become the worst of racist stereotypes, however, is simultaneously a great release, opening the way to new life. Returning to his metaphors of circulation, Fanon writes that Négritude "reveals that man's discovery of *the need to hurt himself, to really bleed red blood, to liberate a part of his being that already contained germs of rot.*"¹²¹ Fanon's insistence that, as a form of self-mutilation, Négritude is both *necessary* and *real* implicitly contrasts it with the *unnecessary* and *derealized* forms of pain and self-mutilation that the racialized endure within racist societies. To follow Fanon's metaphors of circulation, if Négritude is a healing and freeing blood-letting, then we might liken the state before Négritude to the internalized bleeding of a bruise. Négritude's scary bid to embrace and inhabit damaging racial stereotypes can be freeing and healing precisely because those stereotypes were already present, exerting a toxic internal pressure on racialized psyches. The psyches of colonized intellectuals, in Fanon's writing, like that of the black doctor whose entire career was determined by his effort to escape the racial imago that haunted him, remain deeply haunted by abject racial disidentifications. As Fanon's own shattering trauma, provoked by a child's naïve exclamation demonstrates, these disidentifications determine one's subject position, both as that which does not resemble a "nègre" and as that which is always fundamentally vulnerable and perpetually blackmailable by the

¹²⁰ "Retrouver son peuple c'est quelquefois dans cette période vouloir être nègre, non un nègre pas comme les autres mais un véritable nègre, un chien de nègre, tel que le veut le Blanc," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 210.

¹²¹ "révèle la nécessité dans laquelle s'est trouvé cet homme *de se faire mal, de saigner réellement de sang rouge, de se libérer d'une partie de son être qui déjà renfermait des germes de pourriture,*"

ever-present possibility of being assimilated to "un nègre." Négritude defuses this vulnerability and blackmailability by bringing this foreclosed melancholic identification triumphantly, if disruptively, into consciousness. According to Fanon, Négritude is able to stimulate the eruptive release of unconscious energies through its use of poetic rhythm and imagery. Négritude is has "jerky, strongly imagistic style; for the image is the drawbridge that permits unconscious energies to scatter themselves in the surrounding prairies. A muscular style, animated with rhythms, inhabited to and through with an eruptive life."¹²² If, according to Freud, melancholia behaves like an "open wound," monopolizing libidinal energy and resulting in a state of listlessness and disinterest, Négritude's eruptive release of energy may be that which accompanies the bringing-into-consciousness of a foreclosed melancholic disidentification.¹²³ In spite of his criticism of the movement, Fanon saw Négritude as "capable of lifting bans and curses" and thus, as participating in a "mutation in the psychoaffective equilibrium" of the colonized which he considered of the utmost importance.¹²⁴

In *The Blacks*, characters' strenuous attempts to assume blackness explore both the perilous consequences and the transfigurative potential of avowing and embracing a foreclosed racial stereotype. In this respect, *The Blacks* might be said to enact Homi Bhabha's call for a "shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to

Fanon, *Les damnés*, my emphasis.

¹²² "Style heurté, fortement imagé car l'image est le pont-levis qui permet aux énergies inconscientes de s'éparpiller dans les prairies environnantes. Style nerveux, animé de rythmes, de part en part habité par une vie éruptive," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 209.

¹²³ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 262.

¹²⁴ "capable de lever interdictions et maledictions"; "mutation de l'équilibre psychoaffectif," Fanon, *Les damnés*, 203, 201.

an understanding of the *process of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse."¹²⁵ On the one hand, the danger and pain of this project is palpable in Archibald's fiercely self-destructive command:

Let the Blacks blacken themselves. Let them persist unto madness in what they are condemned to be, in their ebony, in their odor, in their yellow eyes, in their cannibal tastes. Let them not content themselves with eating the Whites, let them cook each other as well.¹²⁶

Archibald here explores the negativity of Négritude's project when carried to its logical conclusion, begging the question of whether we can know in advance the consequences of embracing a melancholic racialized figure. In Felicity's magical invocation of a black multitude, on the other hand, blackness is hilariously transfigured to become a poetic and empowering collective force:

Blacks from all the corners of the world, to the rescue. Come! Enter! Only in me. Let your tumult swell me! Come. Make room for one another. Penetrate wherever you wish: my mouth, my ear – or my nostrils. Nostrils, enormous shells, glory of my race, shadowy pavilions, tunnels, gaping grottos where sniffing battalions are at ease! Giant with my head tossed back, I await you. Enter in me, multitude, and be, for tonight only, my force and my reason.¹²⁷

In this passage, indigenous rituals of possession, a feminine receptivity and penetrability, and the racialized trait of large nostrils come together in a peculiar twist on Négritude's epic effort to assume and to become one with an imagined black

¹²⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 95.

¹²⁶ "Que les Nègres se nègrent. Qu'ils s'obstinent jusqu'à la folie dans ce qu'on les condamne à être, dans leur ébène, dans leur odeur, dans l'oeil jaune, dans leurs goûts cannibales. Qu'il s ne se contentent pas de manger les Blancs, mais qu'ils se cuisent entre eux," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 110.

¹²⁷ "Nègres de tous les coins du monde. Venez! Entrez! Mais pas ailleurs qu'en moi. Que me gonfle votre tumulte! Venez. Bousculez-vous. Pénétrez par où vous voudrez: la bouche, l'oreille - ou par mes narines. Narines, conques énormes, gloire de ma race, pavillons ténébreux, tunnes, grottes béantes où des bataillons enrhumés sont à 'aise! Géante à la tête renversée, je vous attends. Entrez en moi, mutitude, et soyez, pour ce soir, seulement, ma force et ma raison,"

collectivity. While the comic tone evident in Felicity's invitation of a black collectivity to enter her through her glorious nostrils might be read as a sign of Genet's ironic *distance* from Négritude, this comic tone could also be seen as playing a specific role in Négritude's transfigurative project. Felicity's combination of stereotypical "savage" African rituals with an outrageous glorification of racialized physiology generates an almost offensive hilarity which, when harnessed in the service of her strangely prophetic "force and [...] reason" at the end, suggests the manic explosion of abject racialized figures into a contained whirlwind of critical power. Taken together, Archibald and Felicity's passages evoke both the pain and the transfigurative potential that can be generated from assuming a melancholically foreclosed identification with an abject racialized stereotype.

With a queer sensibility very much foreign to the style of Négritude, however, Genet brings the gendered and sexual dimensions of the racial stereotype to the fore, twisting the risky bid to embrace black abjection into alignment with feminization, sexual shame, and even a certain transfigurative campiness. Of all the characters, it is perhaps Vertu, the black prostitute, who most stunningly accomplishes the blacks' project of descending into shame and culpability. "[T]onight's ceremony will be less effective for me than the one I accomplish ten times a day," Vertu informs us, "I am the only one to go to the very end of shame."¹²⁸ Vertu's statement scandalously reveals the gendered limits of Négritude's revitalizing descent into black shame. The black

Genet, *Les Nègres*, 106.

¹²⁸ "La cérémonie de ce soir aura sur moi moins d'efficacité que celle que j'accomplis dix fois par jour"; "Je suis la seule à aller jusqu'au bout de la honte..." Genet, *Les Nègres*, 101.

subjectivity that Négritude's poetics of negativity worked to transfigure, refigure, and rehabilitate was implicitly both heterosexual and male. This deformation of the poetics of Négritude to encompass the abjection of the black whore who sleeps with white men therefore gestures towards a host of provocative questions concerning the subjectivities of black women, the specific types of shame they have historically been made to bear, and the potential agencies of *this* shame. Vertu's character, moreover, queerly links sexual shame to racial identification. Given that the blacks' project is to become black by ceremoniously assuming culpability for their shared crime, Vertu's assertion that their ceremony is less efficacious than her nightly prostitution to white men suggests that Vertu's shameful prostitution functions as a ritual abasement through which she is able to assume racial shame and abjection. The resonance between Vertu's ritual assumption of sexual shame – coded, here, as "black" – and the range of *queer* assumptions of sexual shame in Genet's novels is striking. As Kathryn Stockton suggests in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, the signifiers "queer" and "black" tend to come together, in spite of all that would keep them apart, in a shared, if differently inflected, inhabitation of shame and abasement.¹²⁹ Genet might be said to inquire here into the queer overtones of one historically loaded sense of sexual shame, that of interracial sex between a black woman and a white man. Whereas the hyper-representability and intense affective charge of the scenario of interracial sex between a black man and a white woman is tied to the scandalous and triumphal overcoming of a historical prohibition, itself based, as Fanon

¹²⁹ See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

so well outlines, on the racist fantasy of black male sexual prowess, the scenario of interracial sex between a black woman and a white man suggests only ignoble sexual commerce, if not rape. How might the abasing "ritual" of a prostitute servicing white johns inflect the revitalized black male subjectivity associated with Négritude? What would it mean to think the seemingly unredeemable position of a sexual shame both black and female as one potentially generative of a queer form of agency?

It is another black female character, Bobo, however, whose mode of transfiguration is the perhaps most foreign, and the most challenging, to the aesthetics of Négritude. Bobo's defiant and fabulous transformation of the stereotypical stink of black people into a royal escort in the following passage can best be described as campy: "the stench frightens you, now? It rises from my African land. I, Bobo, on its thick waves want to promenade my train! May an odor of corpses carry me! And take me away!"¹³⁰ However, if Bobo's excessive and even parodic wallowing in corporeal stench, that most intimate and seemingly fixed signifier of essential vulgarity, is camp, it can only be described as "a dark camp that keeps the violent edge of debasement visibly wedded to camp caprice."¹³¹ This is a camp whose playfulness retains an edge of aggression and confrontational rage ("[t]he stench frightens you, now?"), and whose content – an embodied, racialized, thoroughly improper stink – remains indissolubly wedded to the shame of inspiring physical disgust. Bobo's dark camp therefore explodes the somewhat solemn aesthetics of Négritude with the affective power of a

¹³⁰ "La puanteur vous effraie, maintenant? C'est elle qui monte de ma terre africaine. Moi, Bobo, sur ses vagues épaisses, je veux promener ma traîne! Qu'une odeur de charogne me porte! Et m'enlève!" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 90.

shame-tinged, violence-edged, and transporting fabulousness. While Fanon's reading of Négritude in the context of French racism draws attention to both the historical urgency and the creativity of its rescue of toxic racialized stereotypes, Genet pushes at the queer limits of such a rescue, imagining an embrace of racial abjection at once feminine, queer, and improperly, campily, violently comic. Both Bobo and Vertu gesture toward Négritude's arrested futures, asking us to wonder at the alternative queer and feminine modes of subjectification *through* abjection that the Négritude movement may have unintentionally and queerly spawned.

3.6 *The Futures of Melancholia*

As we have seen, *The Blacks* offers a range of speculative models of how to put one's melancholic objects to work, as it were, either collectively, as with the black characters' ritual, or individually, as with Vertu and Bobo's astonishingly fabulous transfigurations of some of the more seemingly unredeemable aspects of black abjection. But, we might ask, does *The Blacks* offer any conclusions concerning the relative value of these transformative melancholic performances or any foretaste of the potential futures, utopian or otherwise, to which they point? It is through two narratives of love, one straight and absolutely central to the play's plot, and one decidedly queer, and so marginal as to be overlooked by most critics, that *The Blacks* explores the question of the potential futurities of racial melancholia and the shape that the black collectivity might take within these futurities.

The primary scenario of love and sex in *The Blacks*, far from being utopian,

¹³¹ Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom*, 205.

represents the archetypal scene of racial melancholia's enmeshment with sexuality. I am referring, of course, to the seduction and murder of the white woman by Village, which stands at the very center of the characters' ritual. If scenes of commingled desire and aggression between a black man and a white woman constitute what is perhaps the archetype of racial enmity at this time, it is in part because of the historical prohibition, under slavery, of miscegenation between white women and black men, so that the patriarchal white blood line could remain pure.¹³² As Fanon notes, however, neither the fantasies subtending this prohibition nor its ongoing effects can be grasped according to such a purely utilitarian explanation. Much of *Black Skin* is therefore occupied with an analysis of the tangled lines of interracial identification, desire, and aggression that bind blacks and whites in the wake of slavery and of colonization.

If Genet's play is so disturbing, it is in a large part because of its spectacular staging of the archetypal scene of interracial sex between the black man and the white woman precisely *as* an archetype. While we are given to understand that Village may have loved the white woman, and that the other black characters certainly hated her, such personal feelings are hardly the motive for the crime. As we have seen, *The Blacks* presents the crime not as the unstoppable efflorescence of passion, vengeance, or rage, but as a ritualistic assumption of culpability in a concerted effort to become "black." *The Blacks* makes it impossible for us to see this as a particular crime that develops out of the dynamics of a specific relationship between the criminal and the victim. Rather, the

¹³² Some works that explore this theme include Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Dutchman" in *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York, Morrow, 1964); William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York, Garland, 1987); Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, Random House, 2002); and Elridge Cleaver, *Soul*

murder of the nameless white woman *is committed in order to be reenacted before white spectators*: it is a performance drawing from historically embedded racial fantasies rather than an individually motivated crime. Village's murder of the white woman is the archetypal race crime, and this is precisely why it must be committed.

If, in this archetypal scene, the burdens of history overdetermine the specifics of a particular relationship, at the utopian kernel of *The Blacks* nestles the dream of a completely novel type of relationship, one that would require a short-circuiting of history and a reinvention of love itself. This is a relationship between a black man and a black woman. The choice of the characters of Village and Vertu to figure this utopian, and, as I will argue, non-melancholic love is significant, as both Village and Vertu are represented as being erotically bound to whiteness. Because of this, their burgeoning love is initially represented as both impossible and unimaginable. Village, the murderer of the white woman, is repeatedly accused of killing her out of love rather than hatred while, as Village reminds himself at one point, "Vertu walks in the rain in search of Whites."¹³³ As Village concludes, "[n]o, no, there will be no love for us..."¹³⁴ At the crux of their relationship is therefore the question of whether their love can divest itself of the ties that bind them each to whiteness. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that romantic love itself, with its characteristic gestures and poetry, is colored white in *The Blacks*. Village is thus unable to even voice his love for Vertu without employing the most clichéd, and presumptively white, of romantic commonplaces. He waxes poetic to

on Ice (New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1968).

¹³³ "Vertu marche sous la pluie à la recherche des Blancs," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 100.

¹³⁴ "Non, non, il n'y aura pas d'amour pour nous..." Genet, *Les Nègres*, 100.

Vertu about "[t]he limpidity of your blue eye, that tear that trembles at its corner, your heavenly throat..." before Vertu interrupts him: "[a]re you delirious? Who are you talking to?"¹³⁵ Nevertheless, at the end of the play, once the ritual has been completed and the other characters leave the stage, Vertu pushes Village to invent with her a novel form of love:

VERTU: All men are like you: they imitate. Can't you invent something else?

VILLAGE: For you, I could invent everything: fruits, fresher words, a wheelbarrow with two wheels, seedless oranges, a bed for three, a needle that doesn't prick, but gestures of love are more difficult... well, if you're really set on it...

VERTU: I'll help you. One thing's for sure, at least. You won't be able to wind your fingers in my long blond hair...¹³⁶

The play thus ends speculatively, with the utopian possibility of a reinvented, non-imitative love, neither modeled on a European tradition of romantic love nor erotically bound to colonial configurations of racialized power. It is worth emphasizing that this is the *only* moment in the play in which *any* type of relationship is presented as being potentially free of affectively invested melancholic attachments to *some* racialized power dynamic or fantasy. For the first time in the play, abandoning white ideals does *not* mean turning, instead, to abject colonial figures of blackness. Within the context of this play's obsession with acting out, working through, and reclaiming melancholic attachments to racial objects, this scene seems to propose a hope for a utopian future:

¹³⁵ "La limpidité de votre oeil bleu, cette larme qui brille au coin, votre gorge de ciel..." "Tu délirés ? À qui parles-tu?" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 119.

¹³⁶ "VERTU: Tous les hommes sont comme toi: ils imitent. Tu ne peux pas inventer autre chose? VILLAGE: Pour toi, je pourrais tout inventer: des fruits, des paroles plus fraîches, une brouette à deux roues, des oranges sans pépins, un lit à trois places, une aiguille qui ne pique pas, mais des gestes d'amour, c'est plus difficile... enfin, si tu y tiens...VERTU: Je t'aiderai. Ce qui est sûr, au moins, c'est que tu ne pourras pas enrouler tes doigts dans mes longs cheveux blonds..." Genet,

after the ritual working through of melancholic attachments to whiteness and the difficult rescue of the possibility of black identification, the black collectivity, through the characters of Village and Vertu, might of start anew, reinventing love and, by extension, the possibility of a sociality *beyond* racial melancholia.

The very ambiguity of the ritual's temporality, however, makes such as utopian reading hard to sustain. As we have seen, while Ville de Saint-Nazaire at one point suggests that he expects that night's definitive repetition to bring the ritual to an end, Archibald contradicts him, affirming that the ritual, and the anger that animates it will, in fact, carry on forever. In one combative exchange between Félicité and the White Queen, this temporal ambiguity assumes the figure of a haunting. After asserting, in an acknowledgement of the death march of colonial power and European domination, that she is a ruin but that, as such, she is eternal, the White Queen asks Félicité, "if I am dead, why do you have to kill me without end, to murder me infinitely in my color? My sublime cadaver, which is still moving – isn't enough for you? You must have the cadaver of the cadaver?"¹³⁷ Félicité's response – "I'll have the cadaver of the phantom of your cadaver" – is evocative indeed.¹³⁸ As with Prospero's departure from Caliban's island, it is neither the physical departure nor the death of the colonizer that marks the end of colonization, but rather an ongoing and temporally ambiguous work on the "ghosts" of the colonized imaginary. "Killing a ghost, if need be, again and again" is the

Les Nègres, 156.

¹³⁷ "si je suis morte, qu'as-tu à me tuer sans cesse, à m'assassiner à l'infini dans ma couleur? Mon sublime cadavre, mais qui bouge encore – ne te suffit pas? Il te faut le cadavre du cadavre?" Genet, *Les Nègres*, 141.

¹³⁸ "J'aurai le cadavre du fantôme de ton cadavre," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 142.

expression that might best translate the kind of psychic labor that *The Blacks* seems to prescribe. The continuation of Félicité and the White Queen's exchange, however, begs the question of how long this "again and again" might continue:

QUEEN: But if only a breath is left of my phantom and the breath of that breath enters through your body's orifices to haunt you...

FELICITE: We'll let out a fart, you'll be at the door.¹³⁹

Is this an ingenious way to show that, after an ongoing melancholic labor has gradually killed off the lost object, one's attachment to it becomes so insignificant as to be summarily dismissed with a vulgar fart, the excretory emission of a ghost's lingering breath? Or does the very leap of register between a phantom and a fart imply that one will never be up to the impossible project of freeing oneself entirely from one's haunting melancholic attachments?

The fact that it is given to a heterosexual couple to represent a future beyond melancholia suggests that there might be something suspiciously straight about the desire to be free of melancholia in the first place. While the heterosexual black couple figures the futurity of a utopian black collectivity, the possibility of a black identification with whiteness is coded queer and left behind. Diouf, the black character who is initially ridiculed for dreaming of love, understanding, and communication with "the whites," figures, in my reading, Négritude's queer remainder. His faith in the possibility of authentic interracial communication places him at the margin of the black collectivity, while distancing him from the collective project of assuming black abjection. Diverging

¹³⁹ "REINE: Mais si de mon fantôme il ne restait qu'un souffle et que le souffle de ce souffle, il entrerait par les orifices de votre corps pour vous hanter...FELICITE: Nous lâcherons un pet, vous serez à la porte," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 142.

both from "the blacks'" collective norms and from their rigorous definition of the forms of abjection that constitute blackness, Diouf's character is coded both white and queer. There is therefore a certain poetic justice to the fact that he is chosen to play the role of the white woman during the reenactment of the crime. Whereas the blacks playing the White Court remain full members of the black collectivity, masking themselves selflessly in the service of the collective ritual, Diouf dramatizes a certain queer pleasure in white identification that cannot easily be renounced. This pleasure "reads" in the queerest of theatrical conventions, Diouf's cross-dressing. His initial costume as the white victim, consisting of a mask, a long, blond wig, and knitting, proves insufficient. As soon as the seduction begins, Village stops the reenactment, exclaiming, "[b]ut he doesn't have a skirt! What kind of travesty is this? I'm stopping my tirade if someone doesn't get him a skirt."¹⁴⁰ Diouf thus spends the greater part of the play in both cross-racial *and* cross-gendered drag. After Village "murders" him, Diouf ascends to heaven, or rather to the elevated platform where the White Courts stands, and is welcomed among them as the soiled white woman who they must avenge. One of Diouf's first observations from on high, which he relays to "the blacks" below, is that, "they lie or [...] they're mistaken: they aren't white, but pink, or yellowish..."¹⁴¹ In a happy pun, this means that Diouf is "a Pink" ("une Rose") – simultaneously a pink-toned white, and, in the French, a rose, the most flowery and oft-repeated of Genet's gay signifiers. It is strange that Diouf's queerness has been all but ignored in Genet scholarship, particularly given that, in

¹⁴⁰ "Mais il n'a pas de jupon! Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette mascarade ? J'arrête ma tirade si on ne lui fout pas une jupe," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 115.

¹⁴¹ "ils mentent ou [...] ils se trompent: ils ne sont pas blancs, mais roses, ou jaunâtres..." Genet,

theatrical performance, he is often interpreted as a comically queeny character, swooningly delivering lines such as, "I felt Village's desire. How hoarse his voice was. And his gaze! Humble and conquering. One instant I was pregnant with his works."¹⁴² Before the execution of "the whites," when Diouf must choose sides, he sniffles, "I'm old... you could forget me... and anyhow, they've enveloped me in such a pretty dress....," choosing to remain with "the whites," queerly enough, because of the pretty dress they have given him.¹⁴³ Diouf's queerness is neither an insignificant detail nor a cheap form of comic relief, for it comes to play an important role in the ritual itself. At the end, Archibald grants Diouf the venerable title, "The Admirable Mother of the Heroes who died trying to kill us, devoured by our restlessness and our rages."¹⁴⁴ The dead heroes, of course, are "the whites," and, as their Mother, it is Diouf's role to bury them. Or, as Diouf ceremoniously puts it, "I am descending then to bury you, since it is written," implying that, far from diverging from the ritual, his queer role is *written into it*.¹⁴⁵

Diouf's character functions as an implicit critique, lodged within the play, of "the blacks'" project of purity. Both the desire to finally be done with whiteness, and the uncompromising version of "blackness" that the characters struggle to attain, Diouf's character suggests, are ultimately utopian and exclusionary. Unable to conform to such

Les Nègres, 132.

¹⁴² "Je sentais le désir de Village. Comme sa voix était rauque. Et son regard ! Humble et vainqueur. Un instant je fus grosse de ses œuvres," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 133.

¹⁴³ "Je suis vieux... on pourrait m'oublier... et puis enfin ils m'ont enveloppé d'une si jolie robe..." Genet, *Les Nègres*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ "l'Admirable Mère des Héros morts en croyant nous tuer, dévorés par nos fourmis et nos rages," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 154.

uncompromising standards of purity, Diouf gives himself over to the queer pleasures of impure and improper cross-identifications. While, in one sense, Diouf occupies the Genetian position of the traitor, putting the project of "the blacks" into question without presenting a concrete alternative to it, a more creative reading might seize upon the queer possibilities implicit in the peculiar work Diouf performs on his melancholic identifications. Diouf's is a queer take on melancholic performance, gesturing towards an alternative conceptualization of melancholic labor. Rather than using the work of melancholic performance as a means of gradually killing off a melancholic identification (a use which, I have argued, is far from illegitimate), Diouf plays his role to the hilt, turning the shame of his exclusion from the black collectivity and of his naive faith in white goodness and understanding into a performance of white femininity invested with both pleasure and queer critical *difference*. We should remember that, in his performance of white femininity, Diouf becomes neither a white nor a black, but rather "une Rose" – a courageous blossoming of queer difference in the most inhospitable and unlikely of soils. Diouf demonstrates what happens when, rather than being killed off, uninhabitable, disempowering, and toxic melancholic identifications are perverted until they can be inhabited as sites of both pleasure and of an improper, pieced-together form of agency. We might take Diouf to stand for an entire history of queers of colors' courageous inventions of new subject positions out of racialized identifications that exclude us through, for instance, white diva worship.¹⁴⁶ Diouf cannot be said to be a

¹⁴⁵ "Je descends donc vous ensevelir, puisque c'est écrit," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 155.

¹⁴⁶ José Muñoz reminds us of this rich history of survival and reinvention in *Disidentifications*.

member of either the White Court or of the black collectivity. Neither the white executed nor the black executor, he is the Mother of the Dead, his love consumed in a perpetual mourning. If Village and Vertu move into a future world free of melancholia, unburdened by history, and perhaps even beyond race, their progress is contingent upon Diouf's willingness to remain beyond to care for, bury, and, mourn their abandoned collective identifications. Diouf stands as a multivalent queer signifier at the edge of the play. We might read him, as I have suggested, as a reminder of the potential of a different *kind* of melancholic labor, as a haunting parable about the remainders of a utopian future beyond melancholia, or as a warning about the necessity of mourning white identification as a true loss, so it need not forever continue returning, like a forgotten ghost.

3.7 Performance Notes

*Here, the prejudice of color doesn't exist...*¹⁴⁷

Since we initially turned to racial melancholia in order to account for *The Blacks'* affective force in performance, I would like to close this chapter with a reflection on how *The Blacks'* reception history might help us understand its capacity to act on the structures of feeling of its audiences and performers alike. Fanon's mocking ventriloquism, above, of the urbane French universalist's dismissal of the possibility of a specifically French racism accurately reflects the attitude of those cultured, "non-racist" Parisian spectators that would have constituted the majority of *The Blacks'* audience

¹⁴⁷ "chez nous le préjugé de couleur n'existe pas..." Fanon, *Peau noire*, 90.

during Roger Blin's 1959 Paris production. *The Blacks*, with its binary and, to borrow Fanon's term, "Manichean" division between the complex of stereotypes constellating around "black" and "white," its affectively dense performance of dynamics of colonial power, and its repeated interpellation of spectators, not as innocent observers, but as precisely those whites for whom "the blacks'" ritual is designed, cannot be understood apart from a consideration of the Parisian audience for which it was written. In this social context, *The Blacks* stages a melancholic return, bringing "non-racist" audiences face to face with multiple forms of French racism – including exoticization, eroticization, exploitation, and paternalism – as well as and with the affectively and phantasmatically invested stereotypes of the black rapist, the cannibal, the groveling servant, and the grinning entertainer. In so doing, it plugs into the racial imaginary which subtends fictions of universalism, bringing it traumatically to life in order to provoke, disturb, and accuse.

That is to say, as Genet succinctly put it in his unpublished preface (1956-7)¹⁴⁸, "[t]his play is written not *for* the Negroes, but *against* the Whites."¹⁴⁹ This is the case not only because the Parisian theater going audience of this time was predominantly white, but also because of the limitations of Genet's own position as a white playwright, of which Genet was quite aware. In this preface, which constitutes Genet's most significant reflection on his position as a white author, he writes, "if I had to address myself to an audience of Negroes, I would decline. Before them, I would have too sharply the feeling

¹⁴⁸ This preface is now published in the 2002 Gallimard edition of Genet's *Théâtre complet*, edited by Albert Dichy and Michel Corvin. Jean Genet, "Préface inédite des *Nègres*," in *Théâtre complet*, ed. Albert Dichy and Michel Corvin (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

that Whiteness wants to speak to Blackness [*la Négritude*]."¹⁵⁰ Such a racialized directionality of authorial speech would participate in a certain charitable white paternalism which, Genet fears, might take the place of a more directly political intervention:

[w]anting to write for Negroes would partake of that moral abjection that consists of inclining oneself generously, with understanding, toward the weak, of giving oneself a clean conscience, of relieving oneself of all efficacious action.¹⁵¹

Genet suggests, in addition, that such an authorial speech would be ineffective, given his distance from the experiences and the imaginaries of people of color. "[T]o speak would be nothing," he writes, "where would I, the White Man, find the emotion capable of engendering the myth that would astonish them?"¹⁵² He goes on to claim that it would be impossible for him to understand either the necessity or the experience of *Négritude* for people of color: "[i]f real Blacks ought to exalt their blackness [*leur négritude*], how could I know? What, then, is this blackness [*cette négritude*] that I have not lived, of which intuition will never inform me?"¹⁵³ In such reflections, Genet articulates a salutary and ethical awareness of the limits of his position of a white author, the impossibility of him fully understanding the experiences of people of color, and the disastrous hubris

¹⁴⁹ "Cette pièce est écrite non *pour* les Noirs, mais *contre* les Blancs," Genet, "Préface inédite," 842.

¹⁵⁰ "si je devais m'adresser à un public de Noirs, je me récuserais. En face d'eux j'aurais trop aigu le sentiment que la Blancher veut parler à la Négritude," Genet, "Préface inédite," 835.

¹⁵¹ "Vouloir écrire pour les Noirs relèverait de cette abjection morale qui consiste à se pencher généreusement, avec compréhension, vers les faibles, à s'accorder bonne conscience, à se tenir quitte de toute action efficace," Genet, "Préface inédite," 838.

¹⁵² "parler ne serait rien, où prendrais-je, moi Homme-Blanc, l'émotion capable d'engendrer le mythe qui les bouleversera?" Genet, "Préface inédite," 835.

¹⁵³ "Que les Nègres réels doivent exalter leur négritude, comment le saurais-je? Qu'est-ce donc que cette négritude que je n'ai pas vécue, dont ne se rendra jamais compte l'intuition?" Genet, "Préface inédite," 842.

that would subtend any attempt, on his part, to write for audiences of color.

Genet's account of the play's origin indicates that it was written as a running commentary on the power dynamics and historical resonances of the fact of black actors performing before white spectators. He was commissioned to write the play in 1955 by Raymond Rouleau, the white director of a new Paris-based theatrical company, *Les Griots*, made up entirely of black Francophone actors. "[G]uessing that [Raymond Rouleau] saw in them admirable props until that day unused in Europe," Genet accepts the challenge of writing *against* the power dynamic of black performance and white spectatorial enjoyment: "[y]es, [...] Negroes will act. But they will organize a performance that will be a slap in the face to the spectators."¹⁵⁴ Genet's countermodel is Catherine Dunham's ballets, in which the depoliticized and beautiful spectacle of skillful black ballerinas, he argues, disguises, for white spectators, the affective burden of racism on people of color. He complains bitterly of Dunham's ballets,

[n]ot only did their performance never insult us, not only did their misery and despair never appear in it, but everything sung with what we call *joie de vivre* and basely consoled us of everything that we know of their life and of the entire negro population, telling us that nothing must wound them deeply since their joy was so fresh.¹⁵⁵

At this juncture, however, Genet comes close to doing what he considers himself ill-equipped to do; that is, speculating on black subjectivity. In a striking example of

¹⁵⁴ "croyant deviner qu'il [Raymond Rouleau] voyait en eux d'admirables objets scéniques jusqu'à ce jour inemployés en Europe"; "Oui, [...] les Noirs joueront. Mais ils organiseront un spectacle qui sera un camouflet pour les spectateurs," Genet, "Préface inédite," 836.

¹⁵⁵ "Non seulement jamais leur spectacle ne nous insultait, jamais n'y apparaissait leur misère ni leur désespoir, mais tout chantait ce qu'on nomme la joie de vivre et nous consolait basement de tout ce que nous savons de la vie et de toute la population noire en nous disant que rien ne devait les blesser profondément puisque leur joie était si fraîche," Genet, "Préface inédite," 836.

preterition, he writes, "I do not know if I would have the audacity to claim that every act – and every gesture – borne of humiliation should be colored with revolt."¹⁵⁶ He backs away, however, from actually affirming that black performance at this time, insofar as it is born of humiliation, ought to be tinged with revolt, to focus once again on white reception. Black performance should not "entertain the master's leisure," he writes.¹⁵⁷ Rather, "[i]t is justified if it incites to active revolt, or, at least, if it introduces in the soul of the oppressor the doubt and the malaise of his own injustice."¹⁵⁸ While, as a white author, Genet may not be "allowed" to write for black spectators, he writes, "I was allowed to attempt to wound the Whites, *and through this wound to introduce doubt*."¹⁵⁹ How exactly does *The Blacks* go about this ambitious project of penetrating white spectators, wounding them, and introducing into this wound doubt, malaise, and self-reflection? Genet describes *The Blacks'* cultural labor as a work on and against the reassuring image of the eager black servant. Genet suggests that, as a white fantasy, this image is actually located within the psyche of the oppressor and, hence, might be made to haunt him from within, asking "[i]f this image, *which, first of all, is within him,* suddenly disquieted the oppressor?"¹⁶⁰ Writing that the "trigger" for the writing of *The Blacks* was a music box in which four black servants in livery bowed before a porcelain

¹⁵⁶ "Je ne sais pas si j'aurai l'audace de prétendre que tout acte – et tout geste – nés dans l'humiliation doivent se colorer de révolte," Genet, "Préface inédite," 836.

¹⁵⁷ "amuser le repos du seigneur," Genet, "Préface inédite," 837.

¹⁵⁸ "Il se justifie s'il incite à la révolte active, ou, à tout le moins, s'il introduit dans l'âme de l'opresseur le doute et le malaise de sa propre injustice," Genet, "Préface inédite," 837.

¹⁵⁹ "il m'était permis de tenter de blesser les Blancs, *et par cette blessure faire entrer le doute*" Genet, "Préface inédite," 838, my emphasis.

¹⁶⁰ "Si cette image, *qui d'abord est en lui,* tout à coup inquiétait l'opresseur?" Genet, "Préface inédite," 838, my emphasis.

princesses, Genet wonders,

[w]hat goes on, then, in the soul of those obscure characters that our civilization has accepted within its imagery, but always under the slightly comic appearance of the column of a pedestal table, of a train holder, or of a uniformed café waiter?¹⁶¹

Genet therefore finds a way to reconcile his obvious interest in the affects of black oppression, humiliation, and revolt with his project of wounding whites: he seeks to invest the comforting cultural image of the eager servant with a complex affective life, *not* in order to convey the authentic experiences of actual black people, but rather to induce fear, guilt, and disquiet in white spectators. As Archibald at one point tells Village, "[y]ou are becoming a ghost before their very eyes, and you will haunt them."¹⁶²

Toward the end of this preface, however, Genet goes against what he had previously written to suggest that his own experiences with affects of negativity might actually position him to understand the affective life of a those oppressed by racism. "It is also possible," he suggests, "that my particular despair informs me, better than most, of the despair of an entire race."¹⁶³ "Will I know enough to surpass my own personal drama to describe another, more general?" he rhetorically queries.¹⁶⁴ Genet goes on to give voice to anticipated critiques of his subjectivity as author of *The Blacks*: "[d]o I still manifest [in *The Blacks*] the resentment of a man who was condemned to humiliation

¹⁶¹ "le déclic"; "Que se passe-t-il donc dans l'âme de ces personnages obscurs que notre civilisation a acceptés dans son imagerie, mais toujours sous l'apparence légèrement bouffonne d'une cariatide de guéridon, de porte-traîne ou de serveur de café costumé?" Genet, "Préface inédite," 839.

¹⁶² "Sous leurs yeux tu deviens un spectre et tu vas les hanter," Genet, *Les Nègres*, 101.

¹⁶³ "Il est donc possible aussi que mon particulier désespoir me mette mieux que quiconque au fait du désespoir de toute une race," Genet, "Préface inédite," 842.

¹⁶⁴ "Saurai-je assez dépasser mon drame personnel pour en décrire un autre, plus général?" Genet,

and despair? Is this play not a generous act, but the explosion of a mean soul?"¹⁶⁵

Returning to his metaphors of affective penetration, he asserts, "more surely than a generous sentiment, [cruelty] can be at the origin of a generous work of art, for it tends to pursue itself in the imaginary."¹⁶⁶ It is worth emphasizing that Genet does not *deny* the imagined charge that *The Blacks* routes his own aggression against French society through the theme of racial oppression; he merely argues that such a routing serves the purpose of wounding and haunting white spectators. Genet's location of his own white subjectivity as author of *The Blacks* is thus ambiguous and shifting in this preface, moving from the assertion that he is incapable of writing for people of color to the suggestion that his own experiences with abjection might make him particularly well-suited to understanding the experience of racial oppression, to the implication that *The Blacks* may reroute his own anger against French society through imagined black subjectivities in the service of perturbing the racial imaginary of its white spectators.

In sharp contrast to this tricky piece of writing is Genet's straightforward assertion, in a 1961 letter in which he refuses his permission for a Warsaw Theater production of *The Blacks*, that the play is the site for the expression of an authentic black subjectivity. Asserting that there are no black actors in Poland, Genet protests that "the drama would cease to exist in the hall if white actors, made up as blacks, appeared on

"Préface inédite," 842.

¹⁶⁵ "J'y manifesterais encore le ressentiment d'un homme qui fut condamné à l'humiliation et au désespoir? Cette pièce ne serait pas un acte généreux mais l'explosion d'une âme méchante?" Genet, "Préface inédite," 842-3.

¹⁶⁶ "plus sûrement qu'un sentiment généreux, [la cruauté] peut être à l'origine d'une oeuvre d'art généreuse, car elle aura tendance à se poursuivre dans l'imaginaire" Genet, "Préface inédite," 843.

the stage instead of *real blacks speaking out their real miseries*."¹⁶⁷ He follows with a striking analogy:

you can well understand that if, a few days before their execution, men under sentence of death – *real* ones – could, in the presence of their judges and executioners, perform, in the prison yard, a play dealing with the perfidious relations between themselves and their judges and executioners, the dramatic emotion arising out of such a performance would have nothing in common with what usually happens in the theatre. Now, it happens that Blacks – real ones – are under a weighty sentence delivered by that weighty tribunal of Whites – also real ones. The Blacks are thus in the situation indicated by the image I used above: real condemned men in the presence of judges and executioners.¹⁶⁸

Throwing out the window his prior assertion that *The Blacks* seeks to attack the white imaginary rather than representing actual black subjectivities, Genet here affirms that the play's "dramatic emotion" is rooted in the authenticity of the situation in which it places its black actors. This extraordinary statement suggests that *The Blacks* depends, for its dramatic force, on an embodied reality-effect that grounds its multiple layers of spectacle. Genet's reference, above, to the "real miseries" of the black actors echoes what observers have consistently expressed about the play: that is, a perception that when the play's black actors mock their white roles, when they express anger at white society or pain at having to perform blackness, they are not merely acting; they are using the characters as a mask through which to give vent to their own affective relationship to race. According to André Clair, who reviewed the 1958 Paris opening of *The Blacks*, "[y]ou don't have the impression that you are watching [the actors] act, but rather that

¹⁶⁷ Jean Genet, "To a Would-Be Producer," trans. Bernard Frechtman, *The Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 80, my emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ Genet, "To a Would-Be Producer," 80/.

you are seeing them live in front of you."¹⁶⁹ Whether or not this is actually the case, spectators' frequent complaints that the play is extremely upsetting, excessively aggressive, alienating to its audience, and impossible to watch all the way through are suggestive of the way in which the play plugs into the racialized setting of its performance, putting the white spectators under a spotlight, as it were,¹⁷⁰ while using the actors' authentically black bodies to toe the line between art and political reality.

The outrage and discomfort of many white spectators of the play's New York and Paris openings was based on the sense that the play was *too* true to life and that its black actors were not acting but actually *expressing* their hatred and aggression against white culture. While this reaction was no doubt a hysterical one based more on white anxiety during decolonization and Civil Rights than on fact, there is also evidence that, in some cases, black actors drew from their own experiences with racism and oppression to connect with their roles. In her memoir, Maya Angelou, cited earlier, affirmed that the on-stage performance mirrored the dramatic racial tensions touched off by white resistance to the burgeoning Civil Rights movement:

[o]n that small New York stage, we reflected the real-life confrontations that were occurring daily in America's streets. Whites did live above us, hating and fearing and threatening our existence. Blacks did sneer behind their masks at the rulers they both loathed and envied.¹⁷¹

In an interview one week before the play's Paris opening, Robert Liensol, who played Ville de Saint-Nazaire (Newport News) went beyond the notion that the play accurately

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Webb, "Ritual, Theater," 456.

¹⁷⁰ In the published preface to *The Blacks*, Genet writes that, if the play is ever performed before an entirely black audience, a white person should be formally invited, conducted ceremoniously to her seat at center-front, and illuminated by a spotlight during the entire performance.

represented race relations to affirm that it actually tapped into the psychic and affective lives of its black actors. He affirmed that, for its actors, the play constituted "a great release," adding, "[j]ust think, to be able to act out on stage in front of everyone and to the point of hideous distortion, everything which lies behind your complexes... It's an unexpected opportunity."¹⁷² Liensol's statement suggests that, in being asked to perform racial melancholia, the actors in *The Blacks* might find themselves using the play to cathartically and transformatively act out their own racialized structures of feeling. In this view, the characters' ritual would actually function as a *mise en abyme* of the actors' relationship to their roles. By performatively assuming the most abject of racial stereotypes, and by acting out both white identification and its ritual execution, the actors, like the characters, give vent to, and potentially transform the wounds and phantasms of centuries of racial and colonial oppression. While we should, of course, be wary of generalizing Liensol's experience, when his statement is considered together with the play's reception history and with Genet's own authorial intentions, an intriguing mapping of the play's affective economy emerges. As Genet was careful to point out, the play depicts not authentic black subjectivities, but rather, black characters' *imagined* struggles with the melancholic racial fantasies of French colonialism. The play's power in performance, however, depends on the embodied reality-effect of authentically black actors convincingly performing these affects of racial oppression, such that, for the white audience, the line between the actors and their roles is blurred.

¹⁷¹ Angelou, *Heart of a Woman*, 179.

¹⁷² Quoted in Webb, "Ritual, Theater," 455.

It is also staked, surreptitiously, on the hope that the affective dynamics portrayed on stage will draw a certain investment from black actors and audience members, such that the play itself becomes a site for the transformative performance of racial melancholia. The play's staging as the accusatory performance of a black collectivity before a white audience seeks to move racial melancholia from the realm of private pain to public practice, wounding or, alternatively, elating its spectators, breaking through the politically-correct fictions and erasures of color-blindness, and going to work on the racial imaginary.

3.8 *The Harlem Classical Theater*

The play's impact would vary widely depending on its staging, the background of its actors, the composition of its audience, and the particular racial histories of its location. In her memoir, Maya Angelou recounts an anecdote that casts some doubt on the transformative potential of the play's staging in the overtly racist Civil Rights-era U.S.. Emphasizing the violence of the play's critique of racial oppression and colonialism, Angelou expresses puzzlement that the play's white spectators seem to actually *enjoy* being attacked, giving standing ovations and often returning week after week. One night, just after the performance, a white woman comes backstage with tears in her eyes, gushing to Angelou that she has already seen the play five times and claiming that she understands and supports black people's struggles. When Angelou responds to this outpouring with suspicion rather than gratitude, however, the white woman quickly changes her tone, becoming haughty and angry. Angelou's account

suggests that white Americans during the play's 1961-4 off-Broadway run may have used the play as a means of self flagellation, finding temporary relief from white guilt in a voluntary abasement before the play's angry black actors, while refusing to accept any "uppitiness" from offstage people of color. For some black American spectators, as well, the play fell flat. Lorraine Hansberry's *Village Voice* article, "Genet, Mailer, and the New Paternalism," correctly identifies the play as "a conversation between white men about *themselves*," critiquing its lack of relevance for black American spectators and its failure to engage with the complexities of decolonization.¹⁷³ Her final play, *Les Blancs*, was written as a response to what she saw as *The Blacks'* shortcomings.¹⁷⁴

If the "wounds" *The Blacks* inflicted on its white spectators during its New York run proved to be no more than surface nicks with no transformative or lasting consequences, while the relevance of its exploration of racial imagery remained obscure to many black Americans, it is perhaps because of the radical public visibility of racism in the U.S. at this time. While, as we have seen, French racism operated under the cover of a public discourse of non-racist universalism, which proved compelling even to many of the French empire's racialized subjects, no American citizen with access to the media could fail to notice that the U.S. myth of equal opportunity applied only to white Americans. As images of peaceful black protestors violently attacked by the police

¹⁷³ Lorraine Hansberry, "Genet, Mailer, and the New Paternalism," *The Village Voice*, June 1, 1961, 10.

¹⁷⁴ See Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Random House, 1972). For an account of how *Les Blancs* responds to Genet and to French existentialists, see Cheryl Higashida, "To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry's Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2008): 899-924.

flashed across the nation's TV screens, Americans could not help but be aware of racial inequality, hatred, and fear. Rather than provoking an explosive resurgence of racial melancholia in either its black or its white audience members, then, the play may have merely been perceived as a stylized and comfortably distant European rendition of race relations that appeared far more immediate on the evening news. If this is the case, then, paradoxically, *The Blacks* might have *more* currency in the contemporary "post-racist" U.S. than it did when it first opened here in 1961. Paul Gilroy has named the guilty and defensive belief that present nations can dissociate themselves from their racist, imperial pasts while disregarding the imperial foundations of liberalism's "postimperial melancholia."¹⁷⁵ Postimperial melancholic nations relegate racism and colonialism to an abject and aberrant past, willfully blinding themselves to this past's continued life in persistent racial imaginaries as well as everyday practices of discrimination. While there is nothing "post" about contemporary U.S. imperialism, it might be argued that, insofar as the U.S. tells its history as that of a gradual overcoming of Southern practices of slavery and segregation on the way to today's society of equal opportunity, the U.S. configuration of memory and denial fits Gilroy's description of postimperial melancholia. The contemporary U.S. fictions, greatly abetted by President Obama's historic election, that racism is a thing of the past, that U.S. citizens are "color-blind," that, with hard work, any citizen, regardless of race, gender, or class origin, can succeed – fictions that coexist with a taboo on discussing the continuing effects of a history of slavery and segregation – are symptomatic of this melancholic guilty

¹⁷⁵ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 90.

conscience.

The Harlem Classical Theater's 2003 resuscitation of *The Blacks*, directed by Christopher McElroen, seeks to challenge the guilty structures of feeling of contemporary U.S. "post-racist" melancholia by turning the play's implicit interpellations of its spectators into moments of improvised confrontation and direct address. McElroen's production thoughtfully literalizes the play's implicit references to minstrelsy (the play is subtitled "A Clown Show"), by turning the theater into a literal circus tent, through which actors continually circulate. Like in a circus, audience members have to negotiate performances taking place not just on the stage, but also in front of, beside, and even behind them. Seated on swivel chairs, spectators' bodies are interpellated into movement, spinning around to watch, participate in, or perhaps ward off interactions taking place in various directions. As we have seen, Genet's original staging already sought to implicate audience members in various ways – from Archibald's identification of audience members with those other "white" spectators on high for whom the "blacks" are explicitly performing to Genet's injunction that, if ever the play should be performed before an audience made up entirely of people of color, one white guest should be specially invited and ceremoniously escorted to the front to sit with a spotlight trained on him or her during the entire performance. The Harlem Classical Theater takes these suggestions much further, interpellating individual audience members on the basis of their skin color – "[o]h, you're so pretty and white," "[w]hite people comin' in" – to improvise scenes of exaggerated racial dominance and

subordination.¹⁷⁶ In other words, while in the original staging, audience members are passive spectators of scenes of racial hierarchy with which they are nonetheless encouraged to guiltily identify, in McElroen's production, spectators are forced to participate, often unwillingly, in such scenes. Even those who, in the end, are not personally accosted must spend the entire performance under the threat of a potential confrontation. This threat is calculated to affect their awareness of themselves, their posture, and their expression as they turn, or refuse to turn, to watch new interactions taking place around them. The effects of such techniques are discomfiting, threatening, anxiety provoking, and even potentially traumatizing for white audience members. While spectators of color are able to find a certain safety in the assurance that they will not be personally attacked, they nonetheless suffer a more ambiguous form of unease. The ambivalent affects of the Asian-American, Hispanic, or Middle-Eastern audience member that is asked if s/he is white, then summarily left alone when s/he says "no," or the black spectator who is treated with an ostentatious warm camaraderie *because* s/he is black are not to be underestimated.

The moment of the highest tension for audience members, however, is towards the middle of the performance, when, in Genet's play, Village asks for a volunteer from the audience to come onstage to hold Diouf's knitting for the duration of the murder scene. In the Harlem Classical Theater production, a white audience member is made to stand, holding the knitting, while s/he is interrogated regarding his or her knowledge of black history or everyday reactions to race. In the version that I saw, put on by students

¹⁷⁶ Weber, Bruce, "Theater Review; Race Peers Out of Masks," *New York Times*, February 13, 2003.

at Duke University and modeled tightly on McElroen's production, this scene resulted in a white, female Duke student who was unable to answer any of the aggressively posed questions regarding black American history bursting into tears and sitting, red-faced and humiliated, through the rest of the performance. Audience reaction, of course, varies with every performance, but, reportedly, extreme reactions like bursting into tears and leaving the theater are fairly common occurrences. The following anecdote from Una Chaudhuri's review of the play gives a sense of one performance's effects on some of its white audience members:

On the night I saw *The Blacks*, fifteen minutes into the performance two spectators grabbed up their coats and purses and rushed out of the theatre. Okay: they were white. Okay: they were women. Ten minutes later, two others (Okay, okay: whites, women) got up and began to move towards the exit. This time a couple of the cast members confronted them, asked them if they were leaving. "Yes," they said, loudly enough that all the rest of us could hear: "This is very upsetting to us." They rushed out. We heard later that one of them was sobbing as she ran through the lobby and out into the night.¹⁷⁷

This atmosphere of high tension affects everyone in the audience. Some critics thought such a high level of tension detrimental to the play's complexity, encouraging audience members to attend to their own reactions of anxiety and discomfort rather than attempting to follow the baroque language and metatheatricality of Genet's play.

According to one reviewer, "[w]hile Genet meant for the performance to be uncomfortable, this performance is so aggressive and so confrontational that it risks alienating the audience."¹⁷⁸ In my reading of the play, however, confrontation,

¹⁷⁷ Una Chaudhuri, "Close Encounters: My *Blacks* Story," HotReview.org: Hunter on-line theater review, 2003, <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/myblacksstory.htm>. (Accessed March 7, 2008).

¹⁷⁸ Jenny Sandman, "A *CurtainUp* Review: *The Blacks: A Clown Show*," *CurtainUp*, 2003, <http://www.curtainup.com/blacks.html>. (Accessed March 7, 2008).

distraction, alienation, and aggression are all symptomatic of the "wounding" of white spectators and the exposure of the racial imaginary that Genet sought to achieve with this play. It is easy to imagine Genet's mischievous delight that, decades after its premiere, and in a foreign country at that, his play would still have the ability to offend certain spectators to such an extent that they should walk out of the theater. As Chaudhuri's perceptively responds to the women who walked out of the performance she saw,

"[u]psetting" would be one way to put it. Another way would be to note that this production [...] forces its audience to think in terms of race and color. Or rather, it forces them to recognize how much those categories remain a factor in social perceptions, no matter how much everyone might hope otherwise. It insists we drop the comfortable pretence of color-blindness that characterizes middle-class life in America today, and admit that we do notice color (and gender), all the time, and that this "noticing" has vastly different implications for and impacts on different groups.¹⁷⁹

In the contemporary U.S. context, the Harlem Classical Theater production of *The Blacks* stages a traumatic return – of colonial and enslavement-era power dynamic that we prefer to forget, of a hierarchical black/white binary that we believe we have left behind, and of abject and grotesque stereotypes that have become taboo. This return is traumatic precisely because it provokes the unwanted recognition that these dynamics, hierarchies, and stereotypes are not so foreign to us, and that they tap into our histories, psyches, and structures of feeling. By forcing a spectatorial confrontation with U.S. national racial melancholia, the Harlem Classical Theater production of *The Blacks* refigures this melancholia as a public practice with performance as its cultural

¹⁷⁹ Chaudhuri, "Close Encounters."

technology.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the public and potentially political dimensions of racial melancholia through Fanon and Genet's oblique gazes on the Négritude movement. It has argued that the affective force of forms of performance that shade into performativity might be effective in both "acting out" and "working through" the troubled psychic life of racial melancholia. By engaging a subaltern genealogy of thought on racial melancholia, I have sought to open schematized theoretical models of both melancholia and performance/performativity to lived historical complexities and to alternative, and in some cases queer, futures. Finally, I have emphasized that deinstitutionalizing racism and even acknowledging the constructedness of race itself do not necessarily suffice to eradicate racism's haunting psychic and affective life. In so doing, I have opened cultural practices that engage the problem of racial affect, such as Négritude poetry, to renewed critical inquiry. In the chapter that follows, on Genet's alliance with the Black Panther Party, however, the relation between racial affect and the political shifts. Whereas the abundant thought on racial affect during the post-World War II era has largely been dismissed for the more concrete and "political" problem of decolonization, this situation is bizarrely reversed in the case of the Black Panther Party. The historical memory of the Black Panther Party is precisely that of its bold transformation of black affect through a cultural politics of the image. Arguing that this historical memory has permitted a racist devaluation and forgetting of salient

dimensions of Black Panther politics, I will endeavor, in the chapter that follows, to reverse the emphasis and to unearth buried histories of Black Panther cultural politics.

Chapter 4. Dazzling Images, Buried Histories: Reading Genet and the Black Panther Party

What made [the Black Panther Party] stand out in white America was its black skin, its frizzy hair and, despite a kind of uniform requiring the black leather jacket, an extravagant but elegant way of dressing: they wore caps cut of multicolored fabric resting, just resting, on their springy hair, scraggly mustaches and sometimes beards, their legs held in blue, pink, or gold trousers of velvet or satin, and cut to place under the most myopic gaze a heavy manhood [une virilité lourde].¹

On February 25th, 1970, Genet was contacted in Paris by two representatives of the International Section of the Black Panther Party. Founded in Algeria to foster coalitions with socialist movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and with sympathizers in Europe, The International Section stood for the Panthers' rejection of U.S. provincialism and their will to envision their struggle as part of a global socialist revolution to come. The Panthers who contacted Genet most likely hoped that he would help publicize their struggle in Paris. Genet surprised them, however, by offering to fly to the U.S. the very next day.² Unable to acquire a U.S. visa due to his homosexuality

¹ "S'il se distinguait en Amérique blanche, c'est par son épiderme noir, ses cheveux crépelés et, malgré une sorte d'uniforme exigeant la veste de cuir noir, une très extravagante mais élégante façon de se vêtir : coiffés de casquettes taillées dans des tissus multicolores et posés, mais à peine posées, sur leur chevelure à ressorts, moustaches et quelquefois barbes négligées, les jambes prises dans des pantalons de velours ou de satin bleus, roses, dorés, coupés de façon à mettre sous les yeux du plus myope une virilité lourde." Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 291. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² As Genet tells it in a 1970 *Nouvel Observateur* interview with Michèle Manceaux, "Two members of the Black Panther Party came to see me in Paris and asked me what I could do to help them. I think that what they had in mind was that I would help them in Paris, but I said, 'The simplest thing would be to go to America.' This answer seemed to surprise them a little. They said, 'In that case, come. When do you want to leave?' I said, 'Tomorrow.' They were even more astonished, but they reacted immediately: 'Okay, we'll come by to get you.'" ("Deux membres du 'Black Panther Party' sont venus me voir à Paris et m'ont demandé ce que je pouvais faire pour les aider. Je crois que, dans leur esprit, il s'agissait de les aider à Paris mais j'ai dit : 'Le

and his suspected Communism, Genet flew to Canada on March 1st with Panthers Connie Mathews and Michael Persitz and his young lover, Jacky Maglia. Together, the three helped smuggle him across the border into the U.S.

Genet's engagement was to be a substantial one. For two months, he traveled underground with the Panthers, giving speeches on their behalf at a total of fifteen universities. During a period of crisis in which they were under a veritable siege by the police and the FBI and in which every leading Panther except Chief of Staff David Hilliard was in prison, he was instrumental in the Panthers' attempt to reach beyond their bases in the urban black ghettos. At this time of crisis, the Panthers urgently needed white, middle-class, and student support to combat the blatantly racist criminal justice system that held many leading Panthers captive and to raise funds for bail and for costly legal battles.³ One historian has suggested that, given Genet's international stature, his repeated public accusations of government-sponsored racism helped touch white America's conscience and contribute to favorable trial outcomes.⁴

Genet was forced to cut his visit short when he was summoned to appear before immigration authorities in May for illegally entering the U.S. He would, however, continue his engagement with the Panthers from abroad. Shortly after Genet's return to

plus simple c'est d'aller en Amérique.' Cette réponse m'a semblé les surprendre un peu. Ils m'ont dit : 'Mais alors, venez. Quand voulez-vous?' J'ai dit: 'Demain.' Ils étaient encore plus étonnés mais, tout de suite, ils ont réagi : 'Entendu, on viendra vous chercher.'") Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 55; Jean Genet, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 42.

³ For the historical details of Genet's engagement with the Panthers, see Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 521-6; and Robert Sandarg, "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party," *Journal of Black Studies* 16, no. 3 (March 1986): 269-282.

Paris, George Jackson was murdered in the San Quentin prison, prompting Genet to make at least fifteen statements on him on the radio, in print, or during demonstrations before the end of 1971.⁵ Having remained up-to-date on internal Panther affairs, Genet was unsurprised by Huey Newton's public denunciation of Eldridge Cleaver and the subsequent splitting of the party in April of 1971. He had, in fact, already chosen to side with Newton. In a letter to Marianne de Pury, his French translator during his stay with the Panthers, Genet described his delicate maneuvering, upon his return to Paris, to avoid doing the French dialogue for Cleaver's film and his refusal of several Panthers' entreaties to side with Cleaver.⁶ He asked her, on the other hand, to send word to Newton, Hilliard, and others that he remained their staunch ally.⁷ With Newton's expulsion of Hilliard from the party and exile to Cuba to escape criminal charges, Genet would eventually lose touch with Party affairs; nevertheless, he was able to remain in contact with his friends Angela Davis and David Hilliard for many years. His long-promised book on "the American Black nation" would eventually become *Prisoner of Love* (*Un captif amoureux*) (1986), a posthumously published memoir of Genet's political activism with both the Black Panthers and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.⁸

The epigraph to this chapter, taken from *Prisoner of Love*, gives little indication of the depth of Genet's engagement with the Panthers. Instead, it startles with its surface shimmer, lingering lovingly over each detail of Panther attire and embodiment,

⁴ Sandarg, "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party," 281.

⁵ White, *Genet*, 563-4.

⁶ *Eldridge Cleaver*, VHS, directed by William Klein (1970; Algiers, Algeria: O.N.C.I.C.).

⁷ Quoted in White, *Genet*, 561-2.

⁸ Genet writes of a promised book on "the American black nation" in his letter to Marianne de

caressing each texture of fabric and hair, until it is brought up short by the unmistakable swell of a heavy black cock under the delicate texture of satin or velour pants. In its elegant rhythms, its quasi-ethnographic scrutiny of the details of subcultural male fashion, and its coy tucking of a virile cock under the most flimsy and sensuous of fabrics, it is reminiscent of Genet's descriptions of the pimps and thieves of his first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers (Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs)* (1948). Forty years later, however, in the midst of Genet's political memoir of his activism with the Black Panthers and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, it smacks of a particularly Genetian take on the racist commonplace that a black man can be metonymically replaced by his penis. The reductionism of such a signifying practice is all the more apparent here since Genet is describing not one individual black man but rather an entire political organization, which – though one would never guess it from Genet's description – gave significant positions of power to *women* as well as men and enacted a politics, not only of style and gender, but also of revolutionary action and grassroots social transformation. One might hypothesize that, as a gay, white foreigner communicating with the Panthers primarily through translators, Genet would inevitably miss the political significance of the Black Panther Party, dazzled by their spectacular Afros, their street fashion, and their fantasized big black dicks. In fact, this was not the case. In the series of political articles and speeches that he wrote during and immediately after his time with the Panthers, Genet demonstrates a clear understanding of the Panthers' black Marxism, of their community service programs (officially termed "Survival Programs Pending

Pury, quoted in Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 562.

Revolution"), and of their struggle with ruthless and concerted police and FBI repression.⁹ Moreover, his decision to side with Newton in the 1971 split of the Party suggests that he was interested in more than just the Panthers' paramilitary glamour: while Cleaver advocated spectacular armed uprisings, Newton stood for the less photogenic expansion of the Panthers' Survival Programs, whose immediate mission of providing poor black communities with basic goods and services was envisioned as part of a program to create grassroots change from one community to the next. In *Prisoner of Love*, however, both the Panthers' cogent political theorizing and their programs for community change are eclipsed by the blinding image of a highly sexualized militant black masculinity.

On the one hand, Genet's focus on the Panthers' image in *Prisoner* could be seen as a commentary on the way in which the Party has been sensationalistically remembered as a series of dramatic, frightening, and dazzling snapshots: one thinks of the photographs of armed Panthers on the steps of the Sacramento legislature, of the poster of Huey Newton seated in a wicker chair like an African revolutionary, holding a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other, and of the shocking, or alternatively, stirring sight of two Olympic athletes giving the black power salute during the U.S. national anthem. Some of Genet's reflections on the Black Panther Party in *Prisoner* might be seen as continuing the line of critique that he first developed in his plays, *The Maids* (*Les Bonnes*) and *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon*), on the danger of a would-be social revolution

⁹ Most of Genet's political speeches and interviews are available in French in the excellent collected edition, Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*; or in English, Genet, *The Declared Enemy*.

allowing itself to be swallowed by its own image. Indeed, while the Panthers' cultural politics were both novel and effective at the time, in terms of historical memory, the Panthers seem to have been overdetermined by the startling images they were so skilled at producing.¹⁰ At the same time, Genet's elaborate meditations on Panther imagery could be seen as contributing to this historical erasure of the Black Panther Party's complexity as a social and political movement, especially given that Genet was uniquely positioned to transmit an alternative history of the Panthers. Genet's insistent *sexualization* of Panther imagery is even more troubling, reiterating exoticizing and objectifying stereotypes about black men's "savage" super-virility in the same work that affirms a commitment to their political cause.

Genet criticism, surprisingly, has routinely skipped over the riddles raised not only by Genet's representation of the Black Panthers in *Prisoner*, but also by the fantasies of race that populate his early "pre-political" works. A grand total of *two* full-length studies examine the question of race in detail in Genet's work. One praises Genet's theater in high post-structuralist style for its elaboration of "alterity" in the play of a decontextualized *différance*.¹¹ The other, Jérôme Neutre's recent study, *Genet sur les routes du Sud*, offers a breathtaking overview of Genet's writings (including several unpublished manuscripts and letters) and his political activism to argue that *Prisoner of Love* represents the culmination of Genet's lifelong infatuation with the global South and

¹⁰ See Edward Morgan, "Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Hédi Khelil, *Figures de l'altérité dans le théâtre de Jean Genet : lecture des Nègres et des Paravents* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

the men that inhabit it. While Neutre's study is both groundbreaking and thorough, its reliance on linear narratives tends to suppress the role of hesitations, hiccups, backtracking, and displaced influences within the history of Genet's political commitments and writings on race. Anything untoward about Genet's sexualized early writings on race is therefore smoothed over into the shining truth of his late activist commitment to the racialized oppressed.

In many ways, Neutres merely repeats, albeit in the context of a full-length study, the premise that seems to ground readings of Genet within politicized cultural criticism – namely, that his more troubling political statements, writings, and affects can be passed over in light of his exemplary status as *the* exceptional white European male author who actually succeeded in identifying with (and even, in some cases, *becoming*) women, the colonized, and the racialized. The lineage of this premise is as heterogeneous as it is illustrious. In her 1969 feminist classic, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet suggested that Genet "appears to be *the only* living male writer of first-class literary gifts to have transcended the sexual myths of our time," and declared that "[a]llone of our contemporary writers, Genet has taken thought of women as an oppressed group and revolutionary force, *and chosen to identify with them.*"¹² French feminist Hélène Cixous famously wrote that the *only* French twentieth-century examples of *écriture féminine* that she had ever discovered were Colette, Marguerite Duras, and, the lone male, Genet.¹³ With regards to Genet's politics of race, none other than the great critic of European

¹² Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 22, 356, my emphasis.

¹³ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, & Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 282-3.

Orientalism, Edward Said, has claimed that

Genet made the step, crossed the legal borders, that very few white men or women even attempted. He traversed the space from the metropolitan center to the colony; his unquestioned solidarity was with the very same oppressed identified and so passionately analyzed by Fanon.¹⁴

However praiseworthy and unusual Genet's solidarity with the Palestinians, Said's declaration of Genet's unambivalent *success* in his movement from metropole to colony, and his description of Genet's solidarity with the "wretched of the earth" as "unquestioned" are most striking. Kobena Mercer's "Skin Head Sex Thing," a reconsideration of his critique of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's black nudes in his earlier article, "Reading Racial Fetishism," is by far the most willing to engage with the ambivalent coexistence, in Genet's writing, of undeniable racial fetishism with politicized critique and political commitment. Mercer's assertion that Genet and Mapplethorpe both give expression to "the dark side of the political unconscious of the postcolonial world" is penetrating in its lucidity.¹⁵ His final christening of both Mapplethorpe and Genet as "niggas with attitude," however, problematically gestures towards the inclusion of two white men with fraught relationships to colonial desire within the community of resistant blackness indicated by the n-word's –as ending.¹⁶

What animates this pattern of critical attempts to claim Genet for identity categories and social movements that would seem to exclude him is that, for each of these astute cultural critics, Genet occupies the place of exceptionality and thus, of hope.

¹⁴ Edward Said, "On Jean Genet's Late Works," in *Imperialism and Theater: Essays on World Theater, Drama and Performance*. Ed. J. Ellen Gainor (London: Routledge, 1995), 239.

¹⁵ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 219.

He is the token white male who is said to be able to cross over and to comprehend fully the oppression of women and of the colonized, or, for Mercer, to expose so skillfully the erotic dilemmas of postcolonial cross-racial political commitment that he becomes an honorary member of the racialized oppressed. While there is perhaps a rhetorical utility for this position in Left theorizing, too often Genet *occupies the place* of an analysis of the possibility of a crossing of identity categories, rather than actually giving rise to this analysis in all of its necessary complexity. As a result, the troubling recurrence of racial fetishes and stereotypes, not only in Genet's early novels, but also in his fully politicized writings, is silenced, and with it, the opportunity to study the halting, imperfect, and non-linear trajectories that led Genet to ally himself with the Panthers, the inevitable zones of incomprehension that this encounter produced, and the hidden histories of discipline, dispossession, and exploitation that could, alternatively, chart a path across identity categories.

This chapter will attempt to salvage these missed opportunities for critical analysis, mining Genet's idiosyncratic engagement with the Panthers to ask what it might reveal about the possibilities and the pitfalls of political alliance across identity categories. Its first half charts the political career of a stereotype, that of the hyper-virile, uncivilized black man. While Genet's early novels uncritically reproduce this racist stereotype, his play *The Blacks* might be seen as a crucial turn, in which Genet imaginatively engages with the impact of such stereotypes on those forced to embody them. This stereotype returns, however, in Genet's fully politicized *Prisoner*, permeating

¹⁶ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 219.

Genet's reflections on the Panthers' cultural politics of the image. I contextualize Genet's reading of black virility's role in the Panthers' cultural politics by attempting to reconstitute the life of this stereotype *within* the Black Panther Party. While the Panthers' cultural politics of the gendered image was both novel and effective, I argue that the mobilization of this particularly spectacular stereotype may ultimately have been detrimental to the historical memory of the Panthers. Some of the less dazzling dimensions of Panther activism that this blinding image tends to obscure include the Panthers' cogent and original political theorizing, women's struggles for gender equality within the Party, and the alternative political vision of the Panthers' so-called "reformist" period. I argue, then, that Genet's elaboration of racialized stereotypes concerning black masculinity in *Prisoner* is ultimately less disappointing than his choice to portray the Panther's legacy as that of a cultural politics of the image. As a corrective, I attempt to tell the alternative history of the Panthers that this image obscures, but that emerges from a study of Newton's theorization of the Survival Programs and of Elaine Brown's 1974-1977 leadership of the Party.

The second part of this chapter will argue that Genet's late writings on incarceration constitute a buried connection to an oft-forgotten branch of the Panthers' radical political analyses. In sharp contrast to Genet's celebration of the affects of imprisonment in his early novels, his reflective return to the boy's penal colony of Mettray in his unpublished 1981-2 screenplay, "The Language of the Wall" ("Le Langage de la muraille"), based on Genet's original research at the Mettray archives in Tours, incisively and, at times, obsessively indicts Mettray as an exploitative institution deeply

embedded in the management of class hierarchy, internal dissent, and imperial conquest and exploitation. I trace the change in his thinking on incarceration that "Language" registers to Genet's involvement with the Panthers. In his Panther and post-Panther era writings on prison, Genet recognizes, within black American experiences of confinement, the centrality of the same kind of self-transformative carceral practices that he described in his early novels. He observes, however, that, for the Panthers, these self-transformative practices are not only individual, but also communal, and extend to their struggles to transform the broader socio-political field while producing radical analyses of the relationship between incarceration, slavery, and imperialism. I hypothesize, then, that Genet's critique of his beloved penal colony of Mettray in "Language" records the displaced impact of an aspect of Panther politics and analysis notably absent from *Prisoner*: the connection of incarceration and confinement to broader structures of external and internal colonialism. Such connections, of course, have different histories in France than in the U.S. In resituating the Panthers' analyses of the historical relationship between the U.S. penal system and slavery within a European colonial context, Genet creates, in "Language," an original analysis of Mettray's role in what Ann Stoler would call "the carceral archipelago of Empire."¹⁷ I close with a meditation on how this unwieldy and quite unfilmic "failed" screenplay, sheltered in an archive, itself registers Genet's "archive fever," marking his affective turn from a love for Mettray to a passionate denunciation of Mettray's instrumentalization of its inmates for imperialist,

¹⁷ See Ann Laura Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 105-140.

state, and capitalist uses.¹⁸

These readings are admittedly speculative: there is no "proof" that Genet was thinking of the Panthers when he wrote "Language"; in fact, Genet's deep interest in anti-colonial movements could have provided ample impetus for its writing. However, in reading "Language" together with Panthers' writings on the relation between the U.S. penal system and global capitalism, this chapter has two aims. First, it seeks to illuminate a ramified but easily forgotten node of both Genet and the Panthers' thinking, that of a "radical politics/analysis galvanizing around the culture of 'incarceration,' or more broadly 'surveillance' or discipline."¹⁹ Second, it offers an experiment in non-linear critical thinking. Rather than arguing either that troubling aspects of Genet's early writing are redeemed in his late activism, or that Genet progressively transforms from racist colonial writer into champion of the racialized oppressed, it suggests that distinct aspects of Genet's involvement with the Panthers may have impacted his writing in different ways and at different times. Rather than pointing to a single work as Genet's "true," "mature," or "culminating" statement on the Panthers, this chapter traces partial impacts, underground connections, and resistant fantasies. It argues that both *Prisoner's* meditations on the Panthers' "dazzling images" and "Language"'s inroads into "buried histories" of incarceration constitute distinct and perhaps equally fragmentary constellations of the Panthers' influence on Genet.

¹⁸ I borrow the term "archive fever" from Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Davarian Baldwin, "Introductory Comment: "Culture is a Weapon in our Struggle for Liberation": The Black Panther Party and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and

Before I begin, I should note that this chapter draws heavily from Panther autobiographies and political theories. Since the story of the gaps, the conjunctions, and the hidden histories between Genet and the Panthers cannot be told entirely in Genet's voice, I turn to Panthers' accounts to supplement Genet's, and to elaborate what he misses or omits. The memoirs and autobiographies of prominent Panthers, in particular Elaine Brown's 1992 *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, prove particularly useful in giving a sense of the culture behind the movement, the motivations behind spectacular actions and sudden changes of policy, and the connection between the quotidian activity of the Survival Programs and Newton's grand theory of "revolutionary intercommunalism." According to Edmund White, Genet at one point envisioned that his promised book on the Panthers would take the form of a collection of essays, authored primarily by Panthers, which Genet would edit.²⁰ It is both from Genet's implicit acknowledgement that his perspective on the Panthers was necessarily incomplete, and from his vision of a multivocal collection of historical writing on the Panthers that this chapter takes its inspiration.

4.1 Dazzling Images

4.1.1 The Career of a Stereotype

Genet's early writing might be thought of as a series of hagiographies, and at times, loving satires, of a series of popular and subcultural archetypes: the Saint, the Criminal, the Pimp, the Soldier, and the Queen. Within this pantheon, black men

Yohuru R. Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 305.

occupy a select position. They are the apotheosis of Genet's virile and stupid Criminals and Pimps; in a word, the pinnacle of subcultural masculinity. Genet's first play, *Deathwatch (Haute Surveillance)* (1947), can be read as a meditation on the problem of how to distinguish truly great and exemplary criminals from those who merely admire or imitate what they imagine a great criminal to be. Green Eyes, who is awaiting execution for having murdered a young woman without motivation or premeditation, is unquestionably the greatest criminal to appear physically on the stage. He is still not as great, however, as Snowball, who remains a mythic, unseen presence throughout the entire play. We never learn what Snowball's crime was or of what his greatness consists. We know only what Green Eyes tells his admirer, Maurice:

[t]he big *caïd* is [Snowball]. Go kiss the toes of his feet; he has the luck of being a savage. He has the right to kill people and even to eat them. He lives in the brush. That's his merit over me. He has his tamed panthers. I'm all alone. And too white.²¹

Green Eyes need not state Snowball's crimes or the circumstances in which they were committed; for, as a "savage" black brush-dweller with cannibal tendencies and the ability to domesticate wild panthers, the inappropriately named Snowball is necessarily superior to even the greatest of white criminals.

Genet's use of black men to signify exemplary criminality is highly discursively overdetermined. The ideal criminal of Genet's early writing is violent, hard-bodied, and hyper-masculine, yet paradoxically childlike in his amorality, his essential cowardliness,

²⁰ White, *Genet*, 544.

²¹ "Le grand caïd, c'est [Boule de Neige]. Allez lui embrasser les doigts de pied, il a la chance d'être un sauvage. Il a le droit de tuer les gens et même de les manger. Lui, il vit dans la brousse. Voilà son mérite sur moi. Il a ses panthères apprivoisées. Moi je suis tout seul. Et trop blanc,"

and his blissful empty-headedness. In his joining of raw masculinity and childlike innocence, Genet's ideal criminal mirrors the figure of "the black man" as constructed by racist discourse. If racist discourse in both Europe and the United States depicted black men as servile, childlike, empty-headed, and aware of only the present instant of either gratification or pain, this reassuring stereotype always contained the possibility of turning into its inverse, the vicious savage whose appetites were unchecked by conscience or civilization, the rapist hungry for white women, the hyper-virile male who, as Fanon put it "is penis."²² Thus, in *Our Lady of the Flowers* (*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*) (1943), Jean's cellmate, Clement Village, who is continually referred to as "the black," "the big black," and "the black murderer," is characterized, on the one hand, by "his extraordinary sexual power" and, on the other, by "[h]is forehead, as round and free of wrinkles as a child's."²³ As child on the one hand, and sexual beast on the other, it is no wonder that Clement's all-too-human moment of vulnerability is so easily forgotten by the narrator:

[h]e was sobbing. His beautiful eyes were swollen with tears that ran down to his mouth, "Aye! Aye!" Alone here, I no longer remember anything but that elastic muscle that he would thrust in without using his hand; I remember that living member to which I would like to raise a temple.²⁴

The narrator's memory of a black man's sorrow is all too easily eclipsed by that of the

Jean Genet, "Haute Surveillance," in *Oeuvres complètes, Tome IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 193.

²² "est penis," Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 137.

²³ "le nègre"; "le grand nègre"; and "l'assassin noir"; "son extraordinaire puissance sexuelle"; "Son front rond et pur de rides autant que celui d'un enfant," Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 173-5, 174, 176.

²⁴ "Il pleurait. Ses beaux yeux étaient gonflés de larmes qui coulaient jusqu'à sa bouche: 'Aïe! Aïe!' Moi ici, tout seul, je ne me souviens plus que de ce muscle élastique qu'il enfonçait sans qu'il y mît la main, je me souviens de ce membre vivant auquel je voudrais élever un temple," Genet,

black man's penis. Precisely as in Fanon's critique of the sexual dimension of negrophobia, "one no longer glimpses the black, but only a member; the black is eclipsed. He has become a member. He is a member. He *is* penis."²⁵ To be fair, Genet regularly depicts his criminals, white, black, and otherwise, as incarnations of an unadulterated masculinity more than adequately summarized by their giant dicks. His use of black criminals in particular to signify the apotheosis of criminal masculinity in general, however, relies on a conscious exploitation of racist discourses concerning black men's "savage" sexuality, propensity to violence, and incapacity for "civilized" thought. Genet's writerly ability to evoke charged racist discourses is particularly apparent in one passage from *The Thief's Journal* (*Journal d'un voleur*) (1949). In a temporary lull in the narrative, the narrator enters into a reciprocal and tender relationship with a sweet young man. He cannot help but be nostalgic, however, for his ideal lover, the brute Criminal. To stay his nostalgia, he evokes the following fantasy of being fucked by Sek Gorgui, a character from *Our Lady* that the narrator invents, based on his cellmate, Clement Village:

Gently, the big black will stretch out on my back. More immense than the night, the black will cover me. All of his muscles over me will be conscious, however, of being the tributaries of a virility that converges at that single point, so hard, and so violently charged, his whole body quivering for its happiness and its well-being. We will be immobile. He will thrust in further. A sort of sleep will strike down the black, his night, in which I will be diluted bit by bit, will crush me.²⁶

Notre-Dame, 192.

²⁵ "on n'aperçoit plus le nègre, mais un membre; le nègre est éclipsé. Il est fait membre. Il *est* pénis" Fanon, *Peau Noire*, 137.

²⁶ "Doucement le grand nègre s'allongera sur mon dos. Le nègre, plus immense que la nuit, me recouvrira. Tous ses muscles sur moi auront cependant conscience d'être les affluents d'une virilité qui converge à ce point si dur, si violemment chargé, le corps entier tressaillant par ce bien

This fantasy "works" because of its ability to marshal racist discourses for the needs of the narrative. It is no accident that, at the very moment when the narrator seeks to call up the fantasy of the perfect brute male, his body a mere tributary of his penis, capable of crushing the narrator in the darkness of his unadulterated physicality, it is a black thief that he evokes.

Genet's 1956 play, *The Blacks* (*Les Nègres*), marks a turning-point in Genet's representations of black men. Unlike the perfect brutes of his earlier writing, the black characters in *The Blacks* are thinking, feeling, verbally expressive human beings who struggle under the burden of racist stereotypes rather than simply embodying them. *The Blacks* utilizes the medium of theater and the theatrical artifice of masking (while all the actors are black, the "white" characters wear white masks), to suggest that race itself is performative, as the characters struggle to enact affectively loaded and often painful scripts of racial difference. In staging black people's affective relation to white colonial society's racist fantasies of them, *The Blacks* may represent Genet's first literary effort to decolonize himself, imagining the painful effects, on the racialized, of the very racist discourses which Genet has proven himself so adept at deploying (see Chapter 3).

While *The Blacks* may mark Genet's new critical awareness of the history of racist discourses and their damaging effects on people of color, the affective pull of such discourses would prove too strong to be eradicated by a single effort at self-decolonization. Genet's path from European trafficking uncritically in racial stereotypes

to enlightened champion of the oppressed of all nations was neither smooth nor unidirectional. Rather, the phobic and stereotypical fantasy of the well-endowed, sex-obsessed black man carried over into Genet's political engagement with the Panthers and influenced his understanding of Panther politics. Genet's memories of the Panthers in *Prisoner of Love* are peppered with references to black male sexuality. He writes of "[t]he natural – and to the Whites, excessive – virility of the Negros" and observes how, "in their pants, prominently displayed, [the Black Panthers] exposed perfectly sculpted cocks and balls."²⁷ Even the three-dimensional hairstyle of the Afro, a potent symbol of black pride in the U.S., is sexualized, its kinkiness reimagined as an invasive and luxuriant outgrowth of pubic hairs²⁸:

[w]hen they received the Afro hairs of the Panthers in their eyes, their ears, their nostrils, and their throats, under their tongues, and beneath their fingers, the Whites were seized with panic. How to defend themselves against such a vegetation in the metro, on the bus, at the office, and in the elevator – springy extensions, not of their hair, but of their pubes, electric and elastic as they? On their heads, laughing, the Panthers carried a thick and hirsute genital.²⁹

Given the significance of the Afro for Black Pride, this passage seems to suggest that

mes épaules terrassera le nègre, sa nuit m'écrasant où peu à peu je me diluerai," Jean Genet, *Journal d'un voleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 267.

²⁷ "[L]a naturelle – et pour les Blancs excessive – virilité des Noirs"; "bien en évidence, dans le pantalon, [les Panthères Noires] exposent zob et couilles parfaitement sculptés," Genet, *Un Captif*, 351-2, 351.

²⁸ Kobena Mercer writes that, "[w]ith the help of a pick or Afro-comb the hair was encouraged to grow upwards and outward into its characteristic rounded shape. The three-dimensionality of its shape formed the signifying link with its status as a sign of Black Pride." Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair / Style Politics" in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 106.

²⁹ "Quand ils récurrent dans l'oeil, dans l'oreille, la narine, dans le cou, sous leurs langues, sous leurs doigts, la chevelure afro des Panthères, les Blancs furent pris de panique. Comment se défendre dans le métro, l'autobus, le bureau, l'ascenseur, d'une telle végétation, cheveux à ressorts, prolongements non de cheveux mais de poils du pubis, électriques – élastiques comme eux ? Les Panthères portaient en riant, sur leur tête un sexe velu, serré," Genet, *Un Captif*, 297.

Black Pride, like the Afro, was ultimately a matter of sexual expression. This implication is developed in a later passage when Genet belittles the Party as "the creation of young teenage Negroes impelled as much – more – by a crazed sexuality than by the ideas that they emitted."³⁰ It is not simply that Genet cannot help but think of big black dicks or kinky black pubic hair when he remembers the Black Panthers, but that he reduces *the Party itself* to the expression of black men's stereotypically crazed sexuality. At one point, catching himself as he elaborates yet another sexualized image of the Black Panther Party, Genet pauses to reflect on why such images keep coming to mind:

[i]n the beginning of the 70s, the Party still had the suppleness and the stiffness evoked by a male genital – to elections they preferred its erection. *If sexual images keep returning, it is because they impose themselves, and because the sexual signification of the Party – erectile – seems obvious enough.* Not because it was composed of young men, studs [*baiseurs*] who ejaculated with their women night as well as day, but rather because their ideas, even if they seemed cursory, were that many lusty rapes disquieting a very old, faded, and subdued, yet tenacious Victorian morality.³¹

Here, Genet troubles himself to articulate something he sees as self evident: that the Party's signification was sexual, and specifically, *erectile*. Panther politics, it would seem, was a display of black male sexual prowess, not in the mundane sense of nonstop fucking, but in the symbolic realm of images and ideas. Just as the Panthers' Afros are proud, electric pubic hairs which rise up to invade white physical space, their ideas are

³⁰ "le fait de jeunes Noirs adolescents travaillés autant – plus – par une sexualité folle, que par les idées qu'ils émettaient," Genet, *Un Captif*, 350.

³¹ "Encore au début de 70, le Parti avait souplesse et raideur qui évoquaient un sexe mâle – aux élections ils préféraient son érection. *Si les images sexuelles reviennent, c'est qu'elles s'imposent, et que la signification sexuelle du Parti – erectile – paraît assez évidente.* Ce n'est pas qu'il ait été composé d'hommes jeunes, baiseurs qui déchargeaient avec leurs femmes aussi bien le jour que la nuit, c'est plutôt que, même si elles paraissaient sommaires, les idées étaient autant de viols gaillards mettant à mal une très vieille, déteinte, effacée mais tenace morale victorienne," Genet, *Un Captif*,

lusty "rapes" of white American morality. But what does it mean to read every aspect of Panther politics as having the same signification, that of black male sexual prowess? And, how are we to read Genet's troubling conflation of the political significance of Black Panther Party with the stereotype – with whose colonial history Genet was quite familiar – of a hyper-sexual black masculinity? Is Genet's sexualized reading of Panther politics any different from the passage of *Journal* in which the narrator, confronted with the memory of a black cellmate's sorrow, cannot help thinking of his penis instead?

To be sure, Genet was not the only one to observe black militant movements and think of black male sexuality. As black feminist Michelle Wallace asserted in her controversial *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*,

[t]o most of us Black Power meant wooly heads, big black fists and stern black faces, gargantuan omnipotent black male organs, big black rifles and foot-long combat boots, tight pants over young muscular asses, dashikis, and broad brown chests; black men looting and rioting in the streets, taking over the country by brute force, arrogant lawlessness and an unquestionable sexual authority granted them as the victims of four hundred years of racism and abuse. The media emphasized this definition.³²

In this interpretation of Black Power, which Wallace suggests was the dominant one constructed by the mass media, sexualized images of black virility alternate with and seem equivalent to violent images of armed uprising. Wallace understands such manifestations of both black male sexuality and black militancy as compensations for

351, my emphasis.

³² Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1990), 36. The controversy that *Black Macho* stirred up can be gleaned from Wallace's 1990 preface, "How I Saw It Then, How I See it Now," which seeks to defend and contextualize her arguments in the wake of bitter critiques. She affirms that she wrote this book as an impassioned response to the historical erasure of the contribution of black women to black militant movements because of the way in which these movements envisioned themselves and recollected their histories.

"four hundred years of racism and abuse." Like Genet, Wallace reads militant black movements as the expression of an irritated black virility that would remain limp no longer. In both authors' representations, the inner dynamic of black militancy is that of a proud, virile, and even "erectile" rising out of humiliation and shame. According to Genet, whereas, during his first visit to the U.S. in 1968, black people were practically invisible, "in 1970, they lived, head raised, hairs electric. The true and, in fact, profound action of the Panthers was almost finished [...] an immense wind passed over the ghetto, carrying away a four-hundred year-old shame, invisibility, and humiliation. In this passage, the "erectile" imagery of the raised head and the "electric" Afro is made to signify the Party's "true" action – its metamorphosis of black shame, invisibility, and humility into a pride and a vitality that Genet most often translates into phallic imagery.³³ Since the true action of the Party, according to Genet, was its metamorphosis of black consciousness and of the affects of racialization in the U.S., its true weapon could only be "poetry":

[t]he Panthers thus moved into madness, toward the metamorphosis of the black community, into death, or into prison. The result of the enterprise was all of the above, but metamorphosis was what prevailed, by far, over the rest; and that is why we can say that the Panthers won, thanks to poetry.³⁴

The *material* of this poetry, according to Genet, was precisely those details of dress, carriage, and hairstyle over which *Prisoner* so obsessively lingers:

³³ "En 1970, ils vivaient tous la tête levée, le poil électrique. L'action réelle, et en somme profonde, des Panthères était presque terminée [...] un vent immense passait sur le ghetto qui emportait la honte, l'invisibilité, l'humilité quatre fois centenaire," Genet, *Un Captif*, 64.

³⁴ "Les Panthères allaient donc soit dans la folie, soit vers la métamorphose de la communauté noire, soit dans la mort ou en prison. Le résultat de l'entreprise fut tout cela, mais c'est la métamorphose qui l'emporta, de loin, sur le reste, et c'est pour ça qu'on peut dire que les

[i]t's almost certain, the Panthers had just won, and by a means that seems derisory; with the help of silks, of velvet, of wild hairs, of images which metamorphosized the Negro and changed him.³⁵

Genet defends his interest with the Panthers' imagery by asserting that their subterranean transformation of the affect of the U.S. black community was the direct product of their "poetry," or what we might call their *cultural politics*, of the image.

4.1.2 A Cultural Politics of the Gendered Image

It may be that Genet's susceptibility to the stereotype of hyper-virile black masculinity heightened his awareness of the Panthers' cultural politics of the gendered image. Scholars have argued that the reclamation of the prerogatives of the patriarchal privilege which black men were historically denied animated Black Power movements.³⁶ The Black Panthers gave their take on Black Power a particularly potent twist by backing up their insistence on the black community's right to self-defense by openly carrying rifles. The image of proud black warriors with guns, which the Panthers consciously deployed as a recruitment device among urban black youth and as a key self-representation, galvanized the black urban community.³⁷ "A Black Panther Song,"

Panthères ont vaincu grâce à la poésie," Genet, *Un Captif*, 119.

³⁵ "C'est presque certain, les Panthères venaient de vaincre et par un moyen qui paraît dérisoire ; par le secours de soieries, de velours, de cheveux sauvages, d'images qui ont métamorphosé le Noir et l'ont changé," Genet, *Captif amoureux*, 118.

³⁶ Rolland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1990).

³⁷ In his autobiography, Newton explains that, "[t]he weapons were a recruiting device" (Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 109. See also 1. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Swimming with the Masses: The Black Panthers, Lumpenism, and Revolutionary Culture," in *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 93-122. In "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties," Angela Davis writes that she needed black cultural nationalism's transformation in her

printed in *The Black Panther*, the Panthers' newspaper in 1969, begins,

Have you ever stood
In the darkness of night
screaming silently you're a man,

and triumphantly concludes, "[w]e'll just have to get guns and be men."³⁸ The fact that this song was written by Elaine Brown, a woman, is suggestive of the wide appeal of this image of a reclaimed and militant black masculinity. The shame of the black man, cut off from his masculine prerogative by racist white society, was routinely imagined as the shame of the black community as a whole, so that his reclaimed manhood could then signify the fulfilled aspirations of black women and children, as well as men. The extent to which the problem of black male disenfranchisement animated the politics of the Black Panther Party is suggested by Huey Newton's 1967 essay, "Fear and Doubt," on the "problem" of the poor black man's exclusion from the privileges of American manhood. "As a man," Newton notes, the poor black man "finds himself void of those things that bring respect and a feeling of worthiness," including material possessions, marketable skills, a job, and the ability to provide for and protect his family.³⁹ Most grave, however, is his failure to accede to masculine independence, presumably a

"structures of feeling," "at least as much as I would later need the appeal of the image of the leather-jacketed, black-bereted warriors standing with guns at the entrance of the California legislature," though she later saw both as problematic. Angela Davis, "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader (Blackwell Readers)*, ed. Joy James (Blackwell Publishing Professional, 1998), 290. Davis' reflection is suggestive of how such images of "Black Power" were effective at the transformation of racialized "structures of feeling" that, for many, set the groundwork for political activism on behalf of the black community.

³⁸ Elaine Brown, "A Black Panther Song," in *The Black Panthers Speak*. Ed. Philip Sheldon Foner (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 31.

³⁹ Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People; the Writings of Huey P. Newton*, (New York: Random House, 1972), 79.

universal male right. Newton depicts the poor black man as dependent not only on white men, but also on his wife, who has an easier time finding work than him, echoing the Moynihan report's 1965 pathologization of the "matriarchal" black family.⁴⁰ "Who is he?" Newton asks, "IS he a very old adolescent or is he the slave he used to be?"⁴¹ If black male disenfranchisement was one of the major problems animating the founding of the Black Panther Party, then the Party's success might be measured by David Hilliard's triumphant assertion that "we have become the standard for black manhood, making guys feel like they're no longer less than men and telling sisters that if their men can't measure up to Brother Huey, than they had better get out of the bed."⁴² Indeed, the major autobiographies authored by Panther men take the form of politicized coming of age stories, in which the narrators, denied entry into the position of patriarchal maturity defined by the ability to provide for a household through meaningful labor, take an alternate route, forging a newly empowered masculinity through militant activism.⁴³ The Black Panthers' newly empowered masculinity was neither precisely that of the white patriarch nor that, promulgated by many cultural nationalists of the time, of the African patriarch, but that of the angry and resistant street tough.⁴⁴ The Panthers were

⁴⁰ For an analysis of the influence of the Moynihan Report on thinking within the Black Panther Party, see Tracye Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

⁴¹ Newton, *To Die*, 81.

⁴² David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 161.

⁴³ This assertion is based on the following autobiographies: Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory*; Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); and Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York: Times Books, 1978).

⁴⁴ Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party to respond to the needs of "the

able to distinguish themselves from other black organizations of the time to make an indelible imprint on the U.S. cultural imaginary by projecting back to white racists their own worst fears about angry, violent, uncivilized black men turning against them. In a critical vein, ex-Panther Hugh Pearson wrote that:

the line may be blurred between the proud black imagery that Huey Newton provided, when black America needed such imagery, and his role in providing, along with the rest of the Black Panthers, *an image that could have been not a racist's worst nightmare but a racist's ultimate dream.*⁴⁵

This, however, was precisely the Panthers' historical novelty. While Civil Rights leaders asked humbly for full citizenship and Nation of Islam and Black Power separatists promoted the ideals of a noble African civilization, Black Panthers sought to convert the most abject racist stereotypes of black masculinity into positions of political power and cultural resistance.⁴⁶

We might see *Prisoner*, then, as a reflection of the Panthers' ability to fascinate and terrorize white observers through their projection of the historically dense stereotype of violent black masculinity. In *Prisoner*, this stereotype is so powerful and compelling as to appear to self-sufficiently explain both the origins and the goals of the Panthers' political struggle. While the Panthers' cultural politics of the gendered image was generative of both their appeal to their supporters and the fear they induced in their enemies, the reduction of the Panthers to this image obscures significant dimensions of the Panthers' history and political analysis. The following sections will consider what

brothers on the block." Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*; and Seale, *Lonely Rage*.

⁴⁵ Hugh Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1994), 340, my emphasis.

⁴⁶ See Ogbar, "Swimming with the Masses."

the Panthers' image meant for their political struggles "on the ground," for their attempts to communicate their political vision, and for the struggles of women within the Party.

4.1.3 Image and Ground I: "Armed Goons"

As we have seen, in many passages, *Prisoner* plays into the dominant portrayal of the Panthers as a politically unsubstantial group of young black thugs long on injured pride, violent urges, and "black macho," and short on actual political analyses and the methods to implement them.⁴⁷ Both for the mass media and for competing Left organizations, an exclusive focus on the Panthers' dramatic armed actions has historically worked to erase and to domesticate their radical political analyses. This may, however, only be the effect of an outsiders' interpretation of the Panthers' performative cultural politics, which, when contextualized within the Panthers' "interpretative community" of the black urban poor, acquires another significance entirely.

The Panthers' status as one of very few activist organizations in the U.S. to publicly exercise the right to armed self-defense was repeatedly used, even by other Left organizations of the time, to categorize them as mere soldiers to be used as others saw fit. One such attempt to neutralize the Panthers by assimilating them to the status of an army is at play in an anecdote that Bobby Seale recounts, in which members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) invited the Panthers to speak about the *military* aspects of black liberation struggle at a memorial rally for Malcolm X, while RAM were

⁴⁷ I borrow the term "black macho" from Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1990).

to lecture about the *political* aspects of this struggle. Huey Newton refused, on the grounds that the Panthers saw the military and political aspects as "one and the same," and that they could not speak about one without speaking about the other.⁴⁸ But then again, at least RAM invited the Panthers to speak. The organizers of one Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) convention invited the Panthers to attend, not as speakers on *any* aspect of black liberation struggle, military or otherwise, but rather, as the convention's silent army. As one activist remembers,

[t]here was a CORE convention in the San Francisco Bay Area and they had all these nationalist figures who came to speak. And they didn't invite the Panthers to speak as a political organization or party... but they invited them to do security! But Huey told them to get fucked! [...] They weren't going to be reduced to being the 'armed goons' for a bunch of reformist assholes basically.⁴⁹

Black nationalist and Left organizations who saw the Panthers as competitors for new recruits or who had political differences with the Panthers could always strategically belittle them as an organization by treating them as politically naïve warriors.

Within the mass media this tendency to depict the Panthers as a gang of armed goons was even more pronounced. In a survey of all articles on the Panthers printed in major national magazines between 1966 and 1976, historian Edward Morgan did not find a single article focusing primarily on community building, which was the Panthers' principle focus from 1967 onwards. He speculates that the "performative" character of the Panthers' more dramatic actions – such as their armed patrols of the police, or their armed protest of an anti-gun bill at the Sacramento Legislature – encouraged the media

⁴⁸ Seale, *Lonely Rage*, 160-1.

⁴⁹ Quoted in J. L. Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), xix.

to focus on the Panthers' violent imagery rather than on the political arguments or community actions that sustained it. "The cumulative effect of leafing through such material is overwhelming," he underlines, "the Panthers are reduced to a single, dominant essence – they are about violence and criminality, period."⁵⁰ For a major magazine, focusing on the Panthers' political goals and community service was not only less photogenic and attention-grabbing than dramatizing their gun-toting image, it was also far more politically risky. It is not clear to what extent the incomplete and biased reporting that Morgan studied was influenced by J. Edgar Hoover's 1967 FBI directive, which ordered agents to combat "the gaining of movement credibility" among what he termed "Black Nationalist Hate Groups."⁵¹

One could argue that, regardless, the Panthers' political message was not lost on the poor urban black communities with whom they most wanted to communicate. In her recent book on the history of the Black Panther Party in the media, Jane Rhodes notes that:

Scholars, media observers, and government officials have consistently argued that the Black Panthers were a "'media-made' movement," suggesting the organization was all style and little substance and that their growth was based largely on their phenomenal exposure.⁵²

She goes on to argue, however, that such interpretations ignore the dialogical relationship between the movement and its media representations. This reading of the

⁵⁰ Edward Morgan, "Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 331.

⁵¹ U. S. Congress, *Book III: Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* (Washington D.C.: S.R. No. 94-755, 94th Congress, 2d Sess., 1976).

⁵² Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: The

Panthers as photogenic "media-made" stars fails to account for the Panthers' attempt to exploit the media to publicize charged visual images that would transmit their political message to their black audiences. As Davarian Baldwin writes, the Panthers' originality consisted of "their ability to create an imagined community of blackness, an anticolonial solidarity, that could speak to the everyday experiences of the urbanizing globally oppressed."⁵³ The Panthers' message to inhabitants of U.S. ghettos was not simply to pick up the gun and fight their oppressors, but also that ghettos, like decolonizing nations, were sites of imperial exploitation and, thus, of potential armed resistance and anti-imperial solidarity. The Panthers communicated this complex message through a performative cultural politics that drew on the mainstream media to speak to the black inhabitants of urban ghettos. For example, in his explanation of the Panthers' armed patrols of the police, as reported by Elaine Brown, Newton indicates that their purpose was as performative and pedagogical as it was practical, and demonstrates a clear understanding of how the black urban poor would interpret these patrols:

originally, when we carried our guns openly, it was a tactic to introduce our people to an idea... The only government most black people had ever seen *was* the police – an armed force which [the BPP] called an "occupying army." For black people, the police were all three prongs of the U.S. government, right out on the streets – legislative, judicial, and mostly executive. [...] Since the people viewed their primary relationship to the system's oppression on the street, we had to introduce dealing with the 'system' on the street. And that's one idea the people have gotten, I think.⁵⁴

The armed patrols were a pedagogy which took into account black ghetto dwellers understanding of the police as hostile representatives of the government, or the

New Press, 2007), 307.

"system," that oppressed them. They were also a brilliant method of exposing to black ghetto dwellers that, as the "occupying army" of an enemy government, the police could be actively resisted, not simply by individual law-breakers, but by a disciplined, paramilitary organization much like those then resisting colonial rule in the decolonizing world. As Baldwin notes, the Panthers communicated this message of anti-imperial solidarity through a nexus of cultural signs, including dress, movement, and speech:

[t]heir self-presentation of black clothing and paramilitary formations, combined with a vernacular intellectual style of address ("Power to the People," "Off the Pigs"), helped materialize their larger "white mother country/black internal colony" metaphor of social difference.⁵⁵

Funneled through the mass media, however, these same cultural signs communicated to white America only that it was under attack by armed black hoodlums.

4.1.4 Figure and Ground II: Women

From reading certain passages of *Prisoner*, one would imagine that the Black Panther Party was made up entirely of men and was primarily "about" black male sexuality. Certainly, one would never guess that, in Bobby Seale's estimate, the Party was 60% female by 1969 or that, in 1974, a woman, Elaine Brown, would become the Party's absolute leader.⁵⁶ One of the Black Panther Party's major contradictions was that, while it worked in the interests of all poor and working-class black people and was largely dependent on the labor of women, its leadership and public image were

⁵³ Baldwin, "Culture is a Weapon," 298.

⁵⁴ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 247.

⁵⁵ Baldwin, "Culture is a Weapon," 299.

predominantly male. When taken at face value, the Panthers' masculine public image obscures recognition not just of women's contribution to the Party, but also of their active struggles for gender equality within the Party, and of the burgeoning black feminist consciousness that these struggles helped animate.

Initially, the Black Panther Party *was* entirely male; it only made it clear that it would welcome female members when a woman presented herself at a Panther recruitment office.⁵⁷ Though the Panthers agreed that women should be able to join, there was little consensus on what a woman's role within the Party should be. In some party chapters, women were expected to perform traditional women's work, such as preparing meals, serving them, and cleaning, while men were left free to discuss important Party business.⁵⁸ In others, women held important leadership positions, and men below them were expected to respect and obey them. Given the incoherence in gender expectations within the Party, sex between male and female Panthers was a particularly fraught domain⁵⁹. The Panthers' revolutionary ideals emphasized members'

⁵⁶ Seale, *Lonely Rage*, 177.

⁵⁷ As Bobby Seale remembers it, "our few members brought other dudes and one day, one sister came. Of course we had to make it clear, when asked, that sisters could join the Black Panther Party. We would welcome them," Seale, *Lonely Rage*, 158.

⁵⁸ As Bobby Seale observed during a visit to the Chicago chapter, "[n]ow a sister fills up a plate with the product of her labor and she brings it in, says, 'Here you are, brother.' Then the brother starts eating and he looks up and says, 'Bring me the hot sauce,'" Seale, *Lonely Rage*, 178. Elaine Brown notes a similar incident during a visit to the North California Chapter of the Party. Brown, *Taste of Power*, 189-191.

⁵⁹ Newton's position piece "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements: August 15, 1970," which Genet influenced him to write upon complaining of the Panthers' use of homophobic language, advocates forging alliances with the predominantly white Gay Liberation movement. However, nowhere does it mention the possibility that a gay man or woman might *also* be a Panther, much less offer any guidelines as to how to deal with homosexuality within the Party. In an exception to the deafening silence concerning homosexuality within the Party, Jeffrey Ogbar reports that there was one well-respected openly gay Panther in the Jamaica,

sexual freedom and their right to engage in sexual relations outside of the "ownership" of traditional relationships.⁶⁰ While many women in the Party took full advantage of this ethos to exercise a self-determining sexuality, others found themselves labeled counter-revolutionary upon refusing the advances of male party members.⁶¹ Eldridge Cleaver's infamous popularization of the concept of "pussy power," by which female members were thought to have the "power" to reward revolutionary men with sex while refusing sex to less revolutionary members, only served to convince some Panther men that it was their right to expect sexual compliance from any "truly" revolutionary Panther woman.⁶² The eventual creation of Panther Point of Attention number seven,

Queens chapter. When a new recruit insulted him, he put the recruit in his place by soundly trouncing him in a fistfight. Reportedly, homophobic remarks were never again heard at this office. This anecdote illuminates the Panther culture of masculinity; demonstrating that an openly gay Panther could be respected, but only if he was able to prove that his homosexuality did not inhibit his manliness. One wonders how less feminine men or masculine women would have fared in the Black Panther Party. Huey Newton, "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements: August 15, 1970," in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, A Seven St. edition. (Seven Stories Press, 2002); Ogbar, "Swimming with the Masses," 103.

⁶⁰ Elaine Brown writes, "[t]he party's position about [sexual] relationships was being revolutionized. Indeed, it was Huey who was promoting a line that the primary relationship between men and women in the party was as comrades. That included love and sex. To define another party member as one's own - 'my' man, 'my' woman - was not merely taking a step backward, clinging to a bourgeois socialization. It was taking a step in the wrong direction, to support the most fundamental principle of capitalism, the private possession of property; and worse, it was to liken people to property, chattel. That socialization had to be rooted out of us, as did all the other old ways, if we were to follow a revolutionary road." Brown, *Taste of Power*, 258-9.

⁶¹ In 1968, Regina Jennings complained to the Central Committee that, having repeatedly refused the advances of her captain, he made her life unbearable by continually harassing her. "The all-male panel agreed that I should not behave as a bourgeois woman and bring such values to the Party. They believed that my attitude of sexual abstinence was both foolish and counter-revolutionary." Regina Jennings, "Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 262-3.

⁶² In an October 1968 speech delivered at Sanford University, Cleaver told women that, "you have the power to bring a squeaking halt to a lot of things that are going on, and we call that pussy power. We say that political power, revolutionary power grows out the lips of a pussy,"

"[d]o not take liberties with women" was the outcome of the continuing struggle of Panther women to change sexist practices and attitudes within the Party.⁶³

The spectacularized representation of the Party as a violent expression of black male sexuality implies that it was necessarily a misogynist, sexist organization. This assumption, however, flattens out the complexity of the Party as a social movement and erases the struggles of Panther women to carve out positions of agency within it. It is too often forgotten that some of Newton's and Cleaver's official pronouncements on gender were among the most progressive of *any* Left organization, black or white, male or female, of the time.⁶⁴ The promotion of an official party-line on gender equality, however, was the expression neither of male leaders' feminism nor of rank-and-file practices. Rather, it was the fruit of Panther women's everyday efforts to increase the internal dialogue on gender and to confront men in the Party concerning sexist practices and expectations. In her groundbreaking article on gender politics within the Black

thus coining the phrase, "pussy power" which was to become immensely popular within the Black Panther Party. Eldridge Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 142-3. Elaine Brown recounts that Panther Earl Anthony used the excuse of revolution to get her to have sex with him. "He had actually told me that a true Sister would be happy to sleep with a revolutionary Brother." Brown, *Taste of Power*, 115.

⁶³ Quoted in Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 6.

⁶⁴ In "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements," Newton recognized misogyny and homophobia as systemic forms of oppression and as potential bases for radical political alliances. Huey Newton, "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements: August 15, 1970," in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, A Seven St. edition. (Seven Stories Press, 2002), 157-9. Eldridge Cleaver's "Message to Sister Erica Huggins of the Black Panther Party: Excerpt from Tape of Eldridge Breaking His Silence from Somewhere in the Third World" offers a far more progressive view on gender equality than anything else he ever wrote or said. He states that, "[t]he incarceration and the suffering of Sister Erica should be a stinging rebuke to all manifestations of male chauvinism within our ranks" that, "we must too recognize that a woman can be just as revolutionary as a man and that she has equal stature," and even that, "the liberation of women is one of the most important issues facing the world today." Philip Sheldon Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip Sheldon Foner. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 98-

Panther Party, Trayce Matthews emphasizes that "[t]he stories of the BPP cannot be reduced to a monolithic party line on 'the woman question,' or a linear progression from an overtly and overwhelmingly sexist organization to a pro-Black feminist/womanist one."⁶⁵ Instead, Matthews argues that gender equality was a matter of quotidian struggle throughout the lifetime of the Party. Women's significant contributions to the Party and their daily struggles with misogyny within it are both belittled when the Black Panther Party is remembered merely as a macho, male organization. The image of the Black Panther Party as a product of black hypermasculinity also risks implying that there was something exceptional or exceptionally intense about sexism within the Black Panther Party. Without belittling the existence of sexism within the Panther Party, it is worth underlining that the Panthers were neither *the only* nor *the most* sexist organization of the time. To the contrary, in spite of her criticism of the way in which women were forced to battle for respect within the Party, Assata Shakur emphasizes that the Black Panther Party promoted "*the most positive images*" of women, and was "*the most progressive organization*" at a time in which most Leftist organizations were "so sexist [...]" to the extreme."⁶⁶ While it may not have been ideal, she concludes that, "[f]or me joining the BPP was one of the best options at the time."⁶⁷

Women's experiences with the Black Panther Party may, in addition, have helped germinate a distinctive black feminism. According to Elaine Brown, most Panther

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⁶⁵ Trayce Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 270.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks,'" 294.

women thought of the women's liberation movement as a "white girl's thing."⁶⁸ Unlike the women's liberation feminists, Panther women refused to put gender oppression before the problems of racism, poverty, and police repression that, they saw, affected the entire black community. As Brown puts it,

[u]nlike the new feminists, we were not going to take a position against men. Our men did not have to 'change or die,' as the most radical of the feminists were saying. Black men were our Brothers in the struggle for black liberation. We had no intention, however, of allowing Panther men to assign us an inferior role in the revolution.⁶⁹

Panther women may not have self-identified as feminists or joined the women's liberation movement, but they did fight, within the Party, to create a space for empowered revolutionary women. Brown recounts that she and some other Panther women formed an incipient black feminist collective which they called "the clique," banding together to fight male chauvinism within the Party and to support one another's struggles as revolutionary women.⁷⁰ Such struggles for gender equality within the Party contributed to the formation of a feminist, anti-racist activist ethos that would animate black feminism in the U.S. In "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) the Cobahee River Collective credits black women's experience and disillusionment with the U.S. Women's Movement, the Civil Rights movements, black nationalism, and the Black Panther Party with convincing some black women of "the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men," thereby contributing to the formation of U.S. black feminist organizations

⁶⁷ Quoted in Matthews, "No One Ever Asks," 294.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 192.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 192.

and collectives.⁷¹ This connection between the Black Panther Party and U.S. black feminism is buried when the Party is assimilated to its mediatized image as a macho male organization.

4.1.5 Figure and Ground III: The "Reformist" Period

Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* is perhaps most provocative in its suggestion that the dominant historicization of the Party and the understanding of Panther politics that this historicization implies are themselves gendered. The Panthers are often understood to have moved from a "revolutionary" period emphasizing armed self-defense and the power of the gun to a "reformist" period marked by the expulsion of Cleaver and other Panthers advocating armed revolution, the calling of all Panthers back to Party headquarters in Oakland, Panther participation in electoral politics, and the expansion of the Survival Programs.⁷² It is telling that in such historicizations, Brown's tenure as Chairperson, during which an unprecedented number of women held leadership positions, stands at the apex of the "reform" period.⁷³

In *A Taste of Power*, Brown reports a 1970 conversation with Newton that contradicts such historicizations. In Brown's account of the conversation, Newton

⁷⁰ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 201.

⁷¹ Cohahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 64.

⁷² For an example of this historicization of the Black Panther Party, see Ollie A. Johnson, III, "Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factions," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 391-414; and Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2007).

⁷³ Alkebulan makes this presumed link between reformism and women particularly clear, writing that "[f]rom 1971 to 1980 the Black Panther Party tried to change its public persona from being

explains that the Party's early armed patrols of the police and armed protest of a gun control bill at the Sacramento legislature were efforts to politicize black people with an understanding of the necessity of armed struggle against state institutions that oppressed them rather than defending their interests. As a result of a police and FBI offensive, however, this emphasis on the gun was proving suicidal to the Party. Newton therefore argues that the Survival Programs should move to the center of the Panthers' revolutionary agenda. As he tells Brown, the people "have to understand that what the programs – Survival Programs – do is expose the contradictions *beyond* pigs with guns. The Survival Programs are a vehicle to move the people to a higher level," forcing the people to ask "why the party can do so much with so little, and the capitalists so little with so much."⁷⁴ He concludes that "the programs are another tactic for revolution."⁷⁵ The concentration on the development of Survival Programs in the Panthers' Oakland base would ensure the "survival" of the Oakland black community pending revolution, garner broad support for the Panthers within the black community, and create a working local example of what socialism in action could accomplish.

More interesting still is a conversation that Brown records in which Newton predicts *the end* of the Black Panther Party, complaining that he is tired of being the head of a centralized, authoritarian, paramilitary organization. In Brown's rendition of this conversation, rather than seeing the Black Panther Party as the sole vanguard of an armed people's revolution in the U.S., Newton envisions it dissolving into "a mass,

revolutionaries to being a political reform organization. Women stepped to the fore at this time and led many of the survival programs," Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 98.

⁷⁴ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 248-9.

multiracial organization" that would help "clear a common ground where the interests of black people can coexist with those of the great majority of people in America suffering under capitalism."⁷⁶ In his own 1973 autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton suggests that the creation of Survival Programs within distinct ethnic communities could constitute the seeds of such a mass multiracial anticapitalist revolution. Arguing that institutions in black communities should be organized, not as capitalist businesses for profit, but as socialist cooperatives, which would return all profits to the people just as the Survival Programs redistribute goods, food, knowledge, and transportation for the benefit of poor black communities, he envisions poor ethnic enclaves each creating programs to serve their communities' specific needs. "Beyond this," he writes, "our ultimate aim is to have various ethnic communities co-operating in a spirit of mutual aid, rather than competing."⁷⁷ Thus, another vision of revolution emerges, that of distinct communities winning control over and socializing their own institutions, then cooperating together in a broader movement against capitalist exploitation. In this vision, the Survival Programs are neither the Party's reformist arm nor their benevolent mask; they are the very building blocks of what Newton would later call "revolutionary intercommunalism."

Newton initially envisioned the Survival Programs as "aimed at one goal: complete control of the institutions in the community."⁷⁸ By 1970, however, this ideal of self-determination – a central tenant of black nationalism – began to ring hollow to

⁷⁵ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 249.

⁷⁶ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 399.

⁷⁷ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 167.

Newton, an astute observer of post-colonial shifts in the global economy. Newton outlined the Panthers' ideological shift from black nationalism to internationalist socialism to what he terms "revolutionary intercommunalism" in a key 1970 speech at Boston College. In this speech, Newton notes that the term "internationalism" presumes the existence of self-sufficient sovereign nations. In the era of decolonization, however, he observes that the colonial world-order is being replaced, not by a series of independent sovereign nations, but rather by a neo-imperialist world-order characterized by the global consolidation of ruling interests across national boundaries and by the exploitation of peoples and territories both in the "Third World" and in the urban wastelands of the United States. Concluding that "internationalism" is therefore a misnomer, Newton reasons that "since no nation exists, and since the United States is in fact an empire, it is impossible for us to be Internationalists."⁷⁹ To counter "reactionary intercommunalism," the consolidation of transnational networks of domination and hegemony across national boundaries, he calls for "revolutionary intercommunalism," the cooperation of oppressed communities in a global redistribution of the world's riches. Though this speech does not discuss the Survival Programs in detail, it is clear that its vision of the socialist cooperation of exploited communities both within and outside of the U.S. is an extension of that, outlined in *Revolutionary Suicide*, of socialist revolution through an interethnic network of Survival Programs.

The Survival Programs were therefore neither simply a means of winning the

⁷⁸ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 167.

⁷⁹ Newton, *To Die*, 32.

support of the black community nor the "reformist" branch of Panther politics.⁸⁰ They were central both to the Panthers' radical political vision of global intercommunal revolution and to their concrete program for implementing it in a local setting. Brown enables us to see the erasure of their political significance as, in part, the result of a gendered interpretation of a period characterized by strong female leadership and by a greater emphasis on the development of the Survival Programs than on armed revolution.

4.1.6 Conclusion: The Power of a Myth

Genet was well aware of how the terrifying mythology of the Black Panther Party threatened to act as an obstacle to the transmission of its political vision, particularly to a white audience. In a speech at the University of Connecticut, he berated his predominantly white audience for refusing to recognize "the political worth of the Black Panther Party," rhetorically asking them, "[m]ust we continue to fear the Black Panther Party *as a mythology*, at once terrifying and puerile, *whose image paralyzes us?*"⁸¹ Going out of his way to deflect attention away from racist myths concerning black sexuality, he emphasizes, instead, *the structural* problem of socio-economic racial inequalities. As he reminds his audience,

[w]e should not let ourselves be distracted by the sexual myths which are said to be the origin of racism. The origins of racism are socio-economic. We need to be very precisely aware of this, for it is the point of departure for our solidarity with

⁸⁰ For this interpretation of the Survival Programs as, ultimately, merely instrumental to the survival of the Black Panther Party, see Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*.

⁸¹ "la valeur politique du Black Panther Party"; "Faut-il continuer de redouter le Black Panther Party *comme mythologie*, à la fois terrible et puérile, *dont l'image nous paralyse?*" Genet *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 44, 45.

Negros and with the Black Panther Party.⁸²

In a 1970 *Nouvel Observateur* article that introduces the struggle of the Black Panthers to a French audience, Genet again attempts to combat the counterproductive effects of the Panthers' spectacular image. "We can already see that the mythological image of the Black Panthers, at once glorious and terrifying, is subtended by very prosaic activities whose purpose is to keep the party alive," he writes, deflating the Panthers' dazzling mythology by turning to the concrete, quotidian activities of the Survival Programs.⁸³

But if, in his political speeches and articles of the seventies, Genet repeatedly went out of his way to warn his audience against taking the dominant mythology of the Panthers at face value, why did he change his strategy so dramatically in *Prisoner*, which makes no mention of the Survival Programs, and which dismisses the Panthers' political analyses to focus almost exclusively on their image? Written in the eighties, *Prisoner* seems to reflect a mood of political disenchantment with the Panthers. By then, the Party had come to its ignominious end, and both its socialist vision and its anti-imperial critique seemed to have lost their hold on black communities. While the Panthers' political vision appeared to have vanished without a trace, the impact of the Party's cultural politics of the image on both black masculinity and racial structures of feeling in the U.S. continued to resonate. Genet's focus on the Panthers' image in *Prisoner* might,

⁸² "Nous ne devrions pas nous laisser distraire par les mythes sexuels qu'on dit être à l'origine du racisme. L'origine du racisme est socio-économique. Nous devons en avoir bien précisément conscience car là est le point de départ de notre solidarité avec les Noirs et le parti des Black Panthers," Genet *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 45.

⁸³ "On peut déjà voir que l'image mythologique, à la fois glorieuse et effrayante, des Black Panthers est sous-tendue par une activité très prosaïque destinée à faire vivre le parti," Genet *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 74.

then, reflect his effort to come to terms with what appeared to him to be the Panthers' true legacy. Furthermore, positioning himself as a reader of the Panthers' gendered image allowed Genet to tap into a reservoir of racial discourses with which he was all too familiar, and which may have animated his initial affective pull toward the Panthers. Genet's elaboration of racial stereotypes in *Prisoner* is ultimately less disappointing, however, than the evaluation of their historical legacy that it implies. Rather than seeking to counter the way in which public memory had written the Panthers' legacy as that of a particularly dramatic and dazzling image, and elaborating, as he did in his political tracts and articles, the substrata of ideas, analyses, actions, and programs that grounded this image, Genet capitulated to the dominant consensus and used his writerly skills to amplify the power of a myth.

4.2 Buried Histories: Incarceration

Prisoner of Love, the posthumously published memoir that Genet left, unedited, upon his death in 1986, is often regarded as the *only* significant work of prose that Genet completed after the 1949 publication of *The Thief's Journal*.⁸⁴ This designation makes it tempting to see *Prisoner* as Genet's final word on political activism in general, and on the

⁸⁴ Simon Critchley writes, for instance, that *Prisoner* "represented the only published piece of extended prose by Genet in the period following the publication of *The Thief's Journal* in 1949," asking, "[w]hy did he break this silence?" and reflecting, "[a]nd was there indeed a silence to be broken?" Simon Critchley, "Writing the Revolution: The Politics of Truth in Genet's *Prisoner of Love*," in *ethics-politics-subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999), 31. While Critchley's last question points to his awareness of the body of plays, essays, speeches, and articles that Genet wrote during this time, his invocation, nevertheless, of the "silence" of more than thirty years which *Prisoner* was reputed to have broken, is indicative of the pull of this way of conceiving authorship.

Black Panther Party in particular.⁸⁵ Such chronologies, however, are dependent both on the ideals of an author's inevitable temporal progression towards an ever greater maturity and an ever more complete vision, and of an extended work of published prose as a form of writing that somehow "counts" more than any other. What this triumphal chronology of authorship leaves out are performance-based works for which publication, if it occurs at all, is secondary (Genet's five plays and numerous political speeches), short works of published prose (his philosophical essays on art and his political articles), and unpublished and never filmed film scripts, ("La nuit venue," "Le langage de la muraille"). Within this chronology, the last category is, perhaps, the most debased. Even if Genet's film scripts had been *both* published *and* filmed, as performance-based works, they would *still* not "count" within this chronology. The fact that Genet, a well-known author, would forego either publishing or attempting to realize a script inevitably suggests that it was a failure, the abandoned progeny of an author who would not regain his literary vision and expressive powers until his triumphal "return" to writing in *Prisoner*.

Although, as we shall see, "The Language of the Wall" may indeed be an artistic failure, the category of "artistic failure" may not be an adequate measure of its significance. "Language" manifests a major turning-point in Genet's thinking on

⁸⁵ For Jérôme Neutres, *Prisoner* is not only Genet's final statement on political activism, but also the mature culmination of his authorship and his life, his *chef d'oeuvre*. It is worth noting that, with this designation, Neutres attempts to drum up interest in his reading of *Prisoner*, given that, as a large, complex, and meandering piece of prose, it has elicited surprisingly little critical commentary. While this project is certainly worthwhile, I would like to question the need to defend it by creating a sense of mystique around *Prisoner* both as Genet's final work and as his "return" to a certain type of writing. Jérôme Neutres, *Genet sur les routes du Sud* (Fayard, 2002).

incarceration, critically reevaluating his incarceration at the boys' penal colony of Mettray, long an animating center of his work. While "Language" was written in 1981 and 1982, the changes in Genet's thinking on incarceration that it registers date from the start of Genet's involvement with the Panthers, and extend even into parts of *Prisoner*. "Language," then, records the impact of Genet's involvement with the Panthers, albeit *on a different stratum* than *Prisoner's* major passages on the Panthers. If *Prisoner* riffs brilliantly on the Panthers' image and contains some of Genet's most striking, and most strikingly problematic statements on the Panthers, "Language" excavates buried institutional histories and, as I will argue, constitutes the buried legacy of Genet's engagement with the Panthers. If we are willing to look beyond Genet's focus, in *Prisoner*, on the Panthers' dazzling imagery to trace, instead, the seismic shifts in his post-Panther writings on prison, we might unearth the more muted, but also more ramified history of a "radical politics/analysis galvanizing around the culture of 'incarceration,' or more broadly 'surveillance' or discipline."⁸⁶ This political analysis, which crosses between key Panther leaders and Genet himself, forges an imagined anti-imperial community joining inmates of prisons and penal colonies, the impoverished classes in Europe and the U.S., and exploited communities in the "Third World" around a shared resistance to policing, incarceration, and economic exploitation.

4.2.1 Politicizing *Lumpen* Culture

Genet's an ex-inmate himself, a rebel and homosexual; although I don't understand a word he

⁸⁶ Baldwin mentions Henri Lefebvre, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and the prison aesthetic of 90s hip-hop culture as constituting part of this "radical politics/analysis." Baldwin, "Culture is a Weapon," 305.

says – and he claims not to know English – I feel we are completely and easily accepted by him, that this world-famous writer is a comrade in arms.⁸⁷

Incarceration constitutes both the strongest and the most obvious link between Genet and the Panthers. It is worth remembering that the principle purpose of Genet's trip to the U.S. was to help get Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and the Panther 21 out of prison. Even after leaving the U.S., Genet would continue to seek the liberation of incarcerated Panthers and those associated with them, alerting the French public about Angela Davis's incarceration, and, upon invitation, penning the introduction to *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*.⁸⁸ David Hilliard's intuition, in the exergue above, that the Panthers could trust Genet and that Genet understood the Panthers in spite of their differences of nationality, race, and language, as well as a significant generation gap, seems to have been founded largely on his sense that Genet, like so many Panthers, intimately understood the experiences of incarceration and of social difference. Hilliard (who would himself be arrested in Genet's presence for reading a note in court) knew that, unlike many of the idealistic white Leftists who attempted to help the Panthers, Genet's experiences of police repression, social opprobrium, and incarceration were the result of ignominious criminality rather than high-minded social protest, and that Genet was therefore a member of the *lumpen* class with which the Panthers identified and for whom they practiced their politics.⁸⁹ Genet's Panther and

⁸⁷ Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory*, 260.

⁸⁸ See Jean Genet, "Angela et ses frères," in *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 71-80; and Jean Genet, "Angela Davis est entre vos pattes," in *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 81-2; and as well as Genet's preface to George Jackson, *Soledad Brother; the Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970).

⁸⁹ For Genet's account of the incident during which Hilliard was arrested, see Genet, *L'Ennemi*

post-Panther era writings suggest that part of his complex attraction to the Panthers was based on their shared subjectification by carceral cultures. Genet saw the Panthers as shaped, and indeed, subjectified by the cultures of incarceration and criminality of which he had already written so extensively. Moreover, like the characters of his novels, he saw them as converting the disciplinary technologies of the prison into forms of resistance and resubjectification.

To Genet, the Panthers seemed to represent the organized revolt of *the same* criminal subcultures that had so long fascinated him, albeit transposed to the black ghettos of the United States. Part of the Black Panther Party's historical originality was its extraordinary bid to inspire and politicize the culture of the ghetto, much of which floated in and out of criminality as well as prison. The Panthers won street credibility and backed up their claim to be the political representative of the *lumpen* class by recruiting from and politicizing former gang members from the Chicago Black Stone Rangers and the Los Angeles Slausons, along with the Slausons' well-respected leader, Bunchy Carter.⁹⁰ The Panthers were also successful at organizing prisoners, politicizing and giving hope to what George Jackson called "the desperate man" – the inmate with nothing to live for and nothing to lose.⁹¹

Recruiting from what Marx called the *lumpen proletariat* – the subproletariat of the unemployed and those surviving through criminalized activity – created a unique

déclaré, 48. For an excellent account of the *lumpen* culture and political values of the Black Panther Party, see Ogbar, "Swimming with the Masses."

⁹⁰ For an account of the Black Panther Party's influence by street gang culture and recruitment of members of street gangs, see Brown, *Taste of Power*; and Ogbar, "Swimming with the Masses."

⁹¹ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 321-2.

set of challenges for the organization. One historian has followed the classic Marxian denigration of the *lumpen proletariat* to argue that "lumpenization," or the adoption of *lumpen* culture, constituted the Panthers' major "critical error":

the criminal element within the lumpen developed a modus operandi that created a sociocultural milieu inimicable to a stable political organization. The modus operandi of the lumpen (or lumpenism) entailed the adoption of values and behavior of the hustler/criminal element of society which included misogyny, undisciplined and illegal behavior, weak political loyalties, and a proclivity toward intimidation and violence.⁹²

In *A Taste of Power*, Elaine Brown shows how the survival of gang mentalities within the Panthers produced certain problems, including loyalties to former gang leaders rather than to Party ideals, the instrumentalization of the Party for personal vengeance, an inordinate reliance on corporal punishment and physical force, and an exclusive boy's club mentality. Historian Davarian Baldwin adds that displays of coolness, virility, and aggression, along with cussing, fighting, and drinking, were all expressions of the disenfranchised *lumpen* black masculinity that the Black Panther Party not only tolerated, but actually encouraged. However, both Brown and Baldwin also demonstrate that to term lumpenization an "error" is both insulting and senseless. The Black Panther Party was not simply a socio-culturally neutral political organization which made the mistake of recruiting from the lumpen proletariat and absorbing some of its values. It was nothing if not a *politicization of the culture of the ghetto*, much of which belonged to the lumpen proletariat, which in the Panthers' expanded definition, included not only criminals, hustlers, and the unemployed, but also the racialized

⁹² Cris Booker, "Lumpenization: A Critical Error of The Black Panther Party," in *The Black Panther*

subproletariat of sharecroppers and domestic and service workers.

As Brown fascinatingly documents, the Panthers' distinction from both Civil Rights and black cultural nationalist movements was cultural as well as ideological. In one passage, Brown links her incomprehension of Civil Rights as a teenager to her socialization in the violent ghettos of North Philadelphia:

I had been unable to fathom, much less find acceptable to North Philly-trained responses, the nonviolent philosophy of Martin Luther King. It was incomprehensible to me that King's followers would, for the sake of realizing rights guaranteed by the Constitution, nonviolently withstand dog bites and being spat upon and being viciously hosed – as I had seen on the televised new reports – by those who were supposed to protect those rights.⁹³

This connection between a rejection of the non-violence of Civil Rights activists and the fact of growing up in urban ghettos is, in fact, ubiquitous in Black Panther autobiographies.⁹⁴ Brown also describes her experience with the Us Organization in Los Angeles as one of class-based alienation. She likens this black nationalist organization to the middle-class fraternities who used to look down on her and other girls from the North Philly ghettos, and recounts bonding in solidarity with another woman from an urban ghetto to resist the patronization of the Us members.⁹⁵ Brown's attraction to the Black Panther Party was largely due to the fact that rather than patronized or seeking to "clean up" ghetto blacks like herself, it actually put them, their culture, and their knowledge at the center of a revolutionary political program. In their autobiographies, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the co-founders of the Black Panther Party, each locate

Party (Reconsidered), ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 338.

⁹³ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 80.

⁹⁴ In addition to Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power*, see Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory*; Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*; and Seale, *Lonely Rage*.

the Party's origin in their disillusionment with the black campus organizations, which they saw as primarily intellectual, with no concrete plan of action, and middle-class, with no initiative to reach working class and underclass black communities.⁹⁶ While the Black Panther Party did attract students and middle-class activists, it recruited primarily from urban ghettos, where it also, significantly, chose to locate most of its offices. More importantly, both its overall culture and its commitment to a program that would concretely benefit poor black people in the U.S. were significantly shaped by its self-identification as a politicization of the ghetto. As Brown explains, the Panthers founded their decision to make themselves the Party of the black *lumpen proletariat* on their analysis of this group's revolutionary potential:

The black *lumpen proletariat*, unlike Marx's working class, had absolutely no stake in industrial America. They existed at the bottom level of society in America, outside the capitalist system that was the basis for the oppression of black people. They were the millions of black domestics and porters, nurses' aides and maintenance men, laundresses and cooks, sharecroppers, unpropertied ghetto dwellers, welfare mothers, and street hustlers. At their lowest level, at the core, they were the gang members and the gangsters, the pimps and the prostitutes, the drug users and dealers, the common thieves and murderers.

The recent riots – and those in the early decades of the century – had demonstrated not only their rage but their readiness. Carried out by the hard core, those rebellions, from Harlem to Watts, had been endorsed by the entire black underclass, shouting "Hallelujah." The party intended to educate and politicize that mass of energy, creating vanguard soldiers from the hard core and a mass of black people ready for revolution.⁹⁷

It may be true that, as Baldwin argues, the Panthers' unwillingness to be critical of certain aspects of *lumpen* culture led to class rifts, indiscipline, and the lionization of

⁹⁵ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 108-110.

⁹⁶ See Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*; and Seale, *Lonely Rage*.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Taste of Power*, 136.

lower-class black masculinity within the Party. It is certain, however, that the culture, priorities, and frameworks of interpretation of the black underclass were not an excisable part of the Black Panther Party; they permeated its political program, its everyday culture, and its performative brand of politics.⁹⁸

4.2.2 Prison Ascesis and Carceral Liberty

As I argued in Chapter 2, Genet's early novels describe the practices by which society's refuse elaborate alternative forms of subjectivation out of the state of social abjection. Following Foucault's later work, I referred to such self-transformative practices as modes of *ascesis*.⁹⁹ One complex passage in *Prisoner* likens the practice of prison ascesis to the "liberty" practiced by black Americans living in the implicitly carceral space of the ghetto:

[t]he prisoner who wants to be an outlaw, because they have made him one, is less sulky than he is proud. If he wants liberty, he also loves prison, because he has learned how to arrange [*aménager*] his liberty. Liberty in freedom, liberty in constraint: the first is accorded, the second is torn out of oneself. Since one gravitates toward the path of the least resistance – ascesis is grueling – one desires the liberty that is accorded, but one loves – secretly or not – *the exclusion that make one discover carceral liberty within oneself*. The opening of the gates is also a rending. The ghetto is loved. Loved-hated, certainly. The Negroes, excluded from the white world, have learned how – to arrange [*aménager*] their misery is too little – to discover, to unearth, to erect a liberty that confuses itself with pride.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ For an excellent article on the Panther's connection of the culture of the ghetto to a culture of decolonization, see Davarian Baldwin, "Introductory Comment: 'Culture is a Weapon in our Struggle for Liberation': The Black Panther Party and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁹⁹ See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), and *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

¹⁰⁰ "Le prisonnier qui se veut hors la loi, parce qu'on l'y a mis est moins boudeur qu'orgueilleux. S'il veut la liberté, il aime aussi la prison parce qu'il a su aménager sa liberté. Liberté en liberté,

Genet begins this passage by putting his finger on something peculiarly precious, "carceral liberty," that mode of liberty that is not simply given to enjoy, but that is painfully and laboriously torn out of oneself under extraordinarily constrained conditions. If initially, "carceral liberty" refers, appropriately enough, to the liberty the prisoner discovers within himself or herself while incarcerated, by the end of the passage, it has come to describe the liberty that black Americans painstakingly erect in the ghetto, a liberty that, confusing itself with pride, compels them to love the ghetto, as much as they might also hate it. Genet suggests that both forms of carceral liberty are the product of labor, describing them as something *torn out of oneself, brought to light, and erected*. Wrought out of extraordinary constrained conditions, carceral liberty is loved because it is the fruit of an exhausting and transformative work on one's situation which Genet, in this passage, names ascesis. This passage's turn to the American ghetto brings Genet's early writing on ascesis into transformative contact with the Panthers' efforts to "raise to a revolutionary level" the spirit of the ghetto, which the passage implicitly likens to a prison.¹⁰¹

Genet's first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, contains Genet's most detailed

liberté dans la contrainte, la première est accordée, arrachée de soi-même la seconde. Comme on va au plus facile – l'ascèse est éreintante – on désire la liberté accordée mais on aime – secrètement ou non – l'exclusion qui fit découvrir en soi-même *la liberté carcérale*. La levée d'écrou c'est aussi un arrachement. Le ghetto est aimé. Aimé-haï, certainement. Les Noirs, exclus du monde blanc, ont su, aménager sa misère c'est peu, mais découvrir, mettre au jour, ériger, une liberté qui se confond avec la fierté," Genet, *Un Captif*, 295, my emphasis.

¹⁰¹ I take the idea that the Panthers sought to "raise to a revolutionary level" the spirit of the ghetto from a passage of Brown's description of Bunchy Carter, the L.A. gang leader cum Panther, "[h]e was the Crump brothers and all the other Brothers from the Avenue and Norris Street and Camac and Diamond, style transformed, rage directed, *spirit defined by the ghetto streets*

description of the systematic exercise of prison ascesis. In it, the narrator describes his attempt to separate himself entirely from "the true world," that is, the world outside of prison. "More and more," the narrator writes, "I cut, I prune my existence of all the acts, especially the most negligible, those that could most quickly remind me that the true world is spread out twenty meters from here, just at the foot of the prison walls."¹⁰² He accomplishes this, first, by excising every habit that would have utility in the outside world, but which does not serve a purpose in prison, such as tying his shoes with double-knots, or buttoning his fly. Secondly, he acquires new habits, such as singing prison songs and reading Paul Féval's popular adventure novels, activities which he would *never* engage in outside of prison. But more than just changing his habitual actions, he attempts to transform his habits of thought, speaking only in prison slang and attempting to believe himself incarcerated for life, as well as his desires, not desiring to be handsome, attempting to desire "something else."¹⁰³ We might surmise it is precisely such exercises that lead to the carceral liberty of which Genet writes in *Prisoner*, a liberty wrought painstakingly out of the constrained conditions of imprisonment.

The writings of two prominent Panthers, Huey Newton and George Jackson, describe the labor of carceral ascesis in terms similar to those of *Our Lady*. They go beyond this early novel, however, both in their reflections on how the disciplinary space of the prison is tied to the normalizing apparatus of the capitalist state, and in their will

and raised to a revolutionary level," Brown, *Taste of Power*, 119, my emphasis.

¹⁰² "De plus en plus, je coupe, j'élague cette existence de tous les faits, surtout les plus minimes, ceux qui pourraient le plus rapidement me rappeler que le vrai monde est étalé à vingt mètres d'ici, tout aux pieds des murailles," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 204.

¹⁰³ "autre chose," Genet, *Notre-Dame*, 205.

to carry the carceral liberty they have constructed in prison forward to their eventual "liberation" within this very *unfree* capitalist state.

The pivotal passage of Huey Newton's autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*, delineates his invention of practices of asceticism under carceral conditions of extreme duress. Newton describes being locked naked, for months, in what prisoners called the "soul breaker" – a tiny cell with no light, a shallow hole in the floor rather than a toilet, and very little food or drink. The "soul breaker" was, as its title implied, meant to break down prisoners' will and to force them to submit, out a desire for the better conditions of the ordinary cell, to the posture of subservient, unquestioning obedience that the prison system demanded. Ordinarily, within only a few days of imprisonment in the soul breaker, the prisoner would begin to scream and to beg to be released during the guard's daily visit. Newton's challenge, then, like that of the narrator of *Our Lady*, was *to not desire* to leave his conditions of imprisonment, refusing to scream to be let out. Unlike for Genet's narrator, this meant passing the far more difficult test of not permitting himself to go crazy while locked continuously in the dark, lying in his own excrement. To accomplish this, he had to learn a whole new series of habitual actions. In order to not fill the cell with excrement during the two week interval between cleanings, he learned "to take little sips of nourishment, just enough to keep up one's strength, but never enough to have to defecate until the fifteen days were up."¹⁰⁴ To not beg the guard to be moved, he did calisthenics during the guard's daily visits. To not go crazy in the dark, he learned to control his thoughts, calling up only the most pleasant memories to

keep him company. He discovered, however, that controlling the *content* of one's thoughts was not sufficient. Newton writes,

[i]f you are not disciplined, a strange thing happens. The pleasant thought comes, and then another and another, like quick cuts flashing vividly across a movie screen. At first they are organized. Then they start to pick up speed, pushing in on top of one another, going faster, faster, faster, faster. The pleasant thoughts are not so pleasant now; they are horrible and grotesque caricatures, whirling around in your head. [...] Over a span of time – I do not know how long it took – I mastered my thoughts. I could start them and stop them; I could slow them down and speed them up. It was a very conscious exercise.¹⁰⁵

Having learned to control his body, the content of his thoughts, and even their rhythm through deliberate ascetic practices, Newton achieves a version of carceral liberty.

Unlike Genet's narrator, however, he also makes a cognitive leap, understanding carceral liberty as implying a "higher freedom" from the desires and aspirations of capitalist "free" citizenry.¹⁰⁶ "No longer dependent on the things of the world," Newton writes, "I felt really free for the first time in my life. In the past I had been like my jailers; I had pursued the goals of capitalistic America. Now I had a higher freedom." Having learned, within prison, to transform his mental, physical, and emotional being, Newton envisions carrying these practices outside of the prison gates in order to resist those instilled habits of mind, body, and feeling that produce normalized and disciplined citizens and consumers.

While Genet may or may not have been familiar with Newton's thoughts on carceral freedom, he knew George Jackson's prison letters quite well, having written the preface to *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970). In his preface,

¹⁰⁴ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 102.

Genet finds his right to comment on Jackson's prison letters on the evocation of his sensual recognition of the experience of incarceration behind Jackson's writing. Genet writes that he recognizes in these letters "the special odor and texture of what was written in a cell, behind walls, guards, envenomed by hatred."¹⁰⁷ This same sense of carceral recognition drives the authoritative tone behind his observation that "[o]ne cannot endure a penalty so monstrous as the lack of freedom without demanding of one's mind and body a labor at once delicate and brutal, a labor capable of 'warping' [*gauchir*] the prisoner in a direction which takes him ever farther from the social world."¹⁰⁸ Genet's tone of authoritative recognition suggests that carceral asceticism was one aspect of Jackson's prison experience that Genet understood intimately, and his reference to the "work" that incarceration imposes on the prisoner clearly draws from his early thinking on carceral *asceticism*. In Genet's original French, he writes of a labor "capable de '*gauchir*' le prisonnier vers une direction qui l'éloigne toujours plus du monde social."¹⁰⁹ Genet's pun on "gauchir" – which means "to spoil," but contains in it the word "gauche," or "Left" – crosses between the old and the new, borrowing from Genet's early writing the sense that prison cell can spoil or corrupt the prisoner, turning him away from normative society, and taking from his engagement with the Panthers the sense that the direction in which it turns the prisoner might, in fact, be the far Left of politicized social critique.

¹⁰⁵ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 102.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Genet, "Preface," in *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. George Jackson (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970). The pages of Genet's preface are not enumerated.

¹⁰⁸ Genet, "Preface."

Genet's punning, moreover, does justice to the novel political direction in which Jackson takes prison *ascesis*. In Jackson's prison letters, *ascesis* begins, once again, with learning to control one's body, emotions, and thoughts. On May 9, 1967, Jackson writes, "[m]y mind is fast becoming clear and I am slowly harnessing my emotions, I can go days without speaking a word. With the pursuit of food and shelter relegated to the state, I have been able to channel all my thoughts to important things, significant things."¹¹⁰ His July 15, 1967 letter gives insight into Jackson's efforts to retrain his thoughts and emotions:

in these last couple of years, I have completely retrained myself and my thinking to the point now that I think and dream of one thing only, 24 hours of each day. I have no habits, no ego, no name, no face. I feel no love, no tenderness, for anyone who does not think as I do. There can be no ties of blood or kinship strong enough to move me from my course. I'll never, never trade my self-determination for a car, cheap mass-produced clothes, clapboard house, or a couple of nights a week at the go-go. *Control over the circumstances that surround my existence is of the first importance to me.*¹¹¹

This letter makes it clear that Jackson effectively converted his stay in prison into an ascetic meditation on the foundational Panther principle of self-determination. Self-determination, for Jackson, begins with an ascetic labor on the only "freedom" left to him in prison, his liberty of thoughts and feelings. It passes through a "gauchissement" of his desires, which are spoiled, insofar as they are no longer desires for the small consumer pleasures available to a member of the poor or working class, but spoiled to the Left, in that their object is the ability to control the circumstances of his existence. The horizon of carceral *ascesis* for Jackson is not prison, which the narrator of *Our Lady* trains himself

¹⁰⁹ Genet *Ennemi déclaré*, 65, my emphasis.

to love as an end in itself; it is the social and political world outside prison gates. To seek to change this world, as the Panthers did, meant first, to resubjectify oneself, training oneself to desire to inhabit this world differently, not as a normative lower-class capitalist subject, shackled to one's labor by the desire for a house, a car, new clothes, and a weekend out on the town, but as a revolutionary, whose principle object of desire was self-determination for the entire black community.

While the *methods* of carceral ascesis, for Newton and Jackson, were similar to those described in Genet's early novels, their *object* was different. As Genet notes in his preface to *Soledad Brother*, Jackson's version of prison ascesis gestured towards a broader political and social critique. As he suggests in *Prisoner*, the carceral space within which the Panthers erected their carceral liberty was not merely that of the prison cell, it was also, significantly, that of the impoverished and hyper-policed urban ghetto. For Newton and Jackson, carceral liberty had to reach outside of the prison, extending to a control over the circumstances of existence for inhabitants of urban ghettos. The Panthers therefore sought to create programs through which, rather than dreaming of riches outside of the ghetto, the urban poor could exercise self-determination *within* the ghetto. As Genet intuits, such an objective necessitated a collective practice of ascesis by which the shameful and devalued carceral space of the ghetto could be rebuilt into a space of freedom and self-determination, not out of nothing, but out of the culture of the ghetto itself. By thinking both the ghetto and the larger capitalist state as carceral

¹¹⁰ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 112.

¹¹¹ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 122, my emphasis.

spaces, the Panthers marked them as the political horizon of the carceral liberty learned within the prison cell.

4.2.3 "A penal institution and a colonized situation": The Panthers on Prison

The experience of imprisonment, moreover, was a common one for Panthers. The notoriously racist Oakland Police Department perceived the very existence of the Black Panther Party as a challenge to them, and their campaign against the Panthers received federal assistance when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared the Black Panther Party "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" in the fall of 1968.¹¹² More than a simple danger of being a Panther, however, incarceration was formative both of the Panthers' political theory and of their understanding of the role of the carceral spaces of the prison and the ghetto within the imperialist U.S. nation. The Panthers tirelessly drew attention to the disproportionate number of black inmates in U.S. prisons, the inordinate length of their sentences, the frequent violence of their arrests, the constant policing of black neighborhoods that facilitated these arrests, and the injustice of the courts toward black defendants.¹¹³ They also sought to strengthen black communities' bonds with prisoners through their busing-to-prisons program, which organized rides to transport the families of prisoners to local prisons during

¹¹² For a good account of the racist culture of the Oakland police department and their initial reactions to the Black Panther Party, see David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993). J. Edgar Hoover's FBI directive against the Black Panther Party can be found in U. S. Congress, *Book III: Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* (Washington D.C.: S.R. No. 94-755, 94th Congress, 2d Sess., 1976), 188.

¹¹³ For a fascinating account of the Panthers' early activism around imprisonment and police

visitation days. This attempt to foster unity between black communities and black prisoners experientially demonstrated the Panthers' argument that incarceration was only the outer limit of a greater disciplinary penetration of poor black neighborhoods.

In her autobiography, Assata Shakur, who was briefly a Panther before joining the Black Liberation Army, recounts how, during a sentence in a women's prison, her "crazy" friend Eva told her, "[y]ou'll be in jail wherever you go."¹¹⁴ Shakur responded,

i'd rather be in a minimum security prison or on the streets than in the maximum security prison in here. The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don't have the faintest idea how it feels to be free.¹¹⁵

Likewise, *Soledad Brother* opens with George Jackson's staggering thesis:

[b]lackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations. Being born a slave in a captive society and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively traumatic misfortune that led so many blackmen to the prison gate. I was prepared for prison. It required only minor psychic adjustments.¹¹⁶

Shakur's assertion that the difference between the unfreedom of black neighborhoods and that of prisons is only one of degree and Jackson's reflection on black American men's sense of near-constant captivity both inside and outside of prison constitute the backdrop of Newton and Jackson's desire to bring the art of carceral freedom to the black ghetto.

brutality., see Brown, *Taste of Power*.

¹¹⁴ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Zed Books, 1987), 59.

¹¹⁵ Shakur, *Assata*, 60.

¹¹⁶ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother; the Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 4.

Shakur and Jackson's statements also, however, connect the prison and the ghetto to the broader socioeconomic and geopolitical contours of hegemony in the United States. Jackson's powerful evocation of the sense of "[b]eing born a slave in a captive society" was more than a rhetorical call to action.¹¹⁷ Panther theorizing linked the imprisonment of black people in the U.S. to the legacies of both slavery and colonialism. Newton powerfully described the California Men's Colony in which he was once incarcerated, known to inmates as the "California Penal Colony," as nothing less than "a penal institution and a colonized situation."¹¹⁸ His stay in this "penal colony" prompted him to reflect on the relationship between slavery and imprisonment in the U.S.:

I have often pondered the similarity between prison experience and the slave experience of Black people. Both systems involve exploitation: the slave received no compensation for the wealth he produced, and the prisoner is expected to produce marketable goods for what amounts to no compensation. Slavery and prison life share a complete lack of movement. The power of those in authority is total, and they expect deference from those under their domination. Just as in the days of slavery, constant surveillance and observation are part of prison experience, and if inmates develop meaningful and revolutionary friendships among themselves, these ties are broken by institutional transfers, just as the slavemaster broke up families.¹¹⁹

Further research revealed to Newton that this link between prison and slavery was more than a simple analogy. The thirteenth amendment states that "[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States," writing both the abolition of slavery and its continuation, in the form of criminal justice, into the constitution in a single stroke.

¹¹⁷ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 4.

During Reconstruction, this constitutional right, taken quite seriously in the South, to perpetuate slavery *in and through* the penal system was actualized through the alliance of private entrepreneurs with state criminal justice systems that spawned both the "convict leasing" system and the creation of highly profitable plantation-like prison farms.¹²⁰ Moreover, as Angela Davis reminds us, black imprisonment and the convict leasing system were only the most extreme of a series of strategies, including sharecropping, tenant farming, and the scrip system, for maintaining total control of a theoretically "emancipated" black labor force in the South.¹²¹

The immediate effect of Newton's intuition of the historical link between prison and slavery was to give him the fortitude to refuse to work while in prison, thereby helping him resist one of the modern prison system's primary objectives – the instillation of the desire to perform manual labor in its usually working and poverty class inmates. This, in turn, led him to see the underpaid labor available to him outside of prison as yet another form of racialized labor exploitation, compelling him to choose, like Genet, to win his livelihood through petty crime.¹²² Later, Newton was able to connect his early intuition of the prison system's status as a "colonized situation" and a continuation of

¹¹⁸ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 251.

¹¹⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 258.

¹²⁰ For a thorough account of the convict leasing system in the South and a history of Parchman Farm, the infamous Mississippi plantation prison, see David Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Lichtenstein brilliantly analyzes the relation of convict labor to both slavery and to Southern industrialization in Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996).

¹²¹ Angela Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 78.

slavery to U.S. imperialist actions abroad. In the pivotal 1970 speech in which he first defined intercommunalism, Newton also remarked on the striking similarity of the U.S. government's treatment of the Vietnam War and of the Detroit riots of 1967. He argued that, for the ruling circle, the distinction between riots within the U.S. and resistance movements outside of its boundaries was insignificant. He noted, "[t]he ruling circle no longer even acknowledges wars; they call them 'police actions.' They call the riots of the Vietnamese people 'domestic disturbance'."¹²³ Remarking that the police used tanks to put down the Detroit riots, he concluded that "[t]he 'police' are everywhere and they all wear the same uniform and use the same tools, and have the same purpose: the protection of the ruling circle here in North America."¹²⁴ In this speech, Newton attempted to make *resistance to police actions* a key point of identification between black communities under siege in the U.S. and Vietnamese citizens at war with the U.S. abroad. In so doing, he sought to forge an imagined anti-imperial community that would join poor ethnic enclaves in the U.S. to guerillas fighting American and European imperialism abroad around a shared resistance to the triumvirate of violent "police" action, incarceration, and economic exploitation.

4.2.4 "The Carceral Archipelago of Empire"¹²⁵

Panthers' efforts to create a truly transnational community of resistance to police action, incarceration, and economic exploitation may cast their alliance with Genet in a

¹²² See Newton's account of his early criminal activity in Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*.

¹²³ Newton, *To Die*, 36.

¹²⁴ Newton, *To Die*, 36.

¹²⁵ I borrow the expression "the carceral archipelago of Empire" from Stoler, "Developing

different light, allowing us to perceive him less as a white European benefactor and more as a participant in the Panthers' transnational community of resistance. In turn, Genet's institutional trajectory of foster care, imprisonment, and colonial military service provides the opportunity to rethink the Panthers' connections between imperialism, incarceration, and racialization within a specifically European colonial framework.

Genet's personal history clearly outlines one common institutional trajectory within the French "carceral archipelago of Empire."¹²⁶ Genet was the subject of an interconnected system of state institutions whose objective was to both neutralize and utilize the most disorderly of French lower-class urban youth as colonialists abroad. Born an urban orphan, Genet was marked as a potential problem subject to be tracked and placed by state institutions throughout his life. In line with Third Republic-era concerns about industrialization, the loss of "traditional" rural French values, and the crime and corruption wrought by the city, the French Assistance publique "rented" Genet out to foster parents in the French countryside as a child.¹²⁷ When, like many wards of the Assistance publique, Genet failed to conform himself to the humble station in life for which he was being groomed, he underwent, and resisted, a series of placements before ultimately being sentenced to the boy's penal colony of Mettray at the

Historical Negatives."

¹²⁶ Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives."

¹²⁷ Foster parents received a stipend from the French Assistance publique for taking in a foster child. Genet's foster parents, the Regniers, took him in to replace the stipend they had been receiving for Lucie Wirtz, their twelve-year-old foster child who was leaving to become a farm worker. While recent critics have made much of the fact that, in contrast to his mythologization of his childhood unhappiness, he was allegedly loved and doted upon by his foster mother, this does not change the special *economic* relation between him and his foster parents. White, *Genet*, 11.

age of sixteen.¹²⁸ Mettray was something of a cross between a military school and an agricultural colony. It was situated on hundreds of acres of farmland, which its inmates were forced to work. At the same time, according to Genet, Mettray's inmates slept like sailors in hammocks and practiced naval drills on a landlocked ship in the courtyard.¹²⁹ As he would succinctly put it much later, "Mettray was used to train sailors."¹³⁰ Indeed, the military preparation provided at Mettray was not in vain. The presence of a recruitment office on site at Mettray won the army its position as the second major employer of Mettray inmates, and a series of incentives ensured that the majority of Mettray enlistees would volunteer to serve in French territories abroad.¹³¹ Genet took full advantage of these incentives when he enlisted in the army at Mettray's recruitment office in 1929. As a ward of the state volunteering to serve in Syria, he was able to leave Mettray *two years* before the end of his sentence and to collect an additional supplement of 20 francs *per month*.¹³² Reflecting on this situation in *Prisoner*, Genet refers to himself as "the colonialist's janissary," suggesting that, like the Christian janissaries under the Ottoman Empire, he was a member of an alien insurgent class simultaneously pacified

¹²⁸ Before being sent to Mettray, Genet was sent into apprenticeship as a typographer at the École d'Alembert, was transferred to the Hospice for Welfare Children in Paris, was placed in the home of the blind composer René de Buxeuil, underwent neuro-psychiatric treatment at Le Patronage de l'Enfance et de l'Adolescence, was held at the Petite-Roquette Prison, was paroled on a farm in the Somme region, and was held at a jail in Meaux. White, *Genet*, xxii-xxiii.

¹²⁹ Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

¹³⁰ Mettray servait à former des marins," Genet, *L'ennemi déclaré*, 299.

¹³¹ White, *Genet*, 84.

¹³² According to White, inmates sentenced to stay at Mettray until age 21 could leave early if they volunteered to go to Africa as soldiers or settlers, and when Genet joined the army in 1929, wards of the state were offered an additional supplement of 20 francs per month if they volunteered to serve as soldiers in Morocco and Syria. See White, *Genet*, 72, 85.

and granted power by being given a stake in military conquest and rule.¹³³ Genet would, however, resist this offer of power and respectability. He later portrayed himself as a bad colonial soldier, playing cards with Syrian citizens whenever possible, taking a Syrian barber as his lover, and building a military tower that collapsed during its inauguration ceremony.¹³⁴ Neither Genet's poor soldiering nor his eventual desertion of the army for a life of tramping and petty crime, however, could free him from institutional surveillance and control. Genet would only desert the army to come under the auspices of the adult prison.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault refers to Mettray as "the most famous of a whole series of institutions which, well beyond the frontiers of criminal law, constituted what one might call the carceral archipelago."¹³⁵ The term "carceral archipelago" names the system of detentions, "pedagogical" and reformatory institutions, and military and work camps that, while outside of the penal system proper, constitute, with it, a strategically interconnected institutional network of discipline and surveillance. Foucault's exclusive focus on the French mainland in *Discipline and Punish*, however, too narrowly delimits the reach of the carceral archipelago, obscuring its concrete extension to the French overseas territories. Ann Stoler's revision of Foucault's term "carceral archipelago" to "carceral archipelago of empire," on the other hand, underlines the significance of imperial rule and settlement in the historical ontology of mainland

¹³³ "le janissaire du colon," Genet, *Un captif*, 449.

¹³⁴ Genet, *Un captif*, 451-3.

¹³⁵ "la plus célèbre de toute une série d'institutions qui bien au-delà des frontières du droit criminel ont constitué ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'archipel carcéral," Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 347.

disciplinary institutions. Stoler documents how institutions for the "education" and reform of poor Europeans, poor and mixed-race colonial settlers, and, in some cases, the colonized, were often modeled on one another. She argues that a plethora of both realized projects and utopian schemes sought simultaneously to reform orphans, petty delinquents, and the urban poor, and to solve the socio-economic problems of colonial settlement and pacification by deporting these potential mainland insurgents abroad in the guise of colonial soldiers and settlers.¹³⁶ As Stoler reflects,

[h]ow many of those from Mettray were included within the intensive deportation-cum-colonization project is hard to say. But what this amalgamation of colonizing projects underscores is the extent to which *colonies agricoles*, *colonies penitentiaires*, and European colonial settlement were conceptually and politically tethered projects. This was a carceral archipelago of confinements, detentions, and cordoned-off space that cut across the imperial globe.¹³⁷

In the Reconstruction South, the penal system was used as a way to modernize Antebellum traditions of racialized class hierarchy, confinement, and forced labor and within an industrialized "New South."¹³⁸ In the European colonial context, on the other

¹³⁶ Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," 131-2. These interconnectedness of these projects is particularly striking in the Comte A. de Toudonnet's 1854 plan, which "envisioned 'preparatory colonies' of young orphan children who would then be transferred to 'colonies of transition' for those aged 12-14, where an adolescent would be 'bronzed by the sun in Provence, Roussillon or Languedoc' and finally transported to the 'colonies of application' in Algeria where those aged 14-21 would learn proper cultivation of the soil and of the self. Out of this progression of children's agricultural colonies would be the future colonists of North Africa's French homesteads," Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," 132. For some examples of projects to turn mainland delinquents into colonizers, see Le Comte A. de Toudonnet, *Essais sur l'éducation des enfants pauvres: des colonies agricoles d'éducation, Volume I*. (Paris: P. Brunet, 1862); Alphonse Cerfberr de Medlsheim and J. H. Detrimont. *Projet de colonisation d'une partie de l'Algérie par les condamnés libérés, les pauvres et les orphelins* (Paris: Plon, 1846); and *Société de bienfaisance pour l'extinction du paupérisme en France par la colonisation de l'Algérie*. (Alger: Rey-Delavigne, 1850); I thank Ann Stoler for the first reference and for generously allowing me to read the manuscript of "Developing Historical Negatives."

¹³⁷ Stoler, "Developing Historical Negatives," 132.

¹³⁸ See Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*.

hand, reformatories like Mettray served simultaneously to maintain class hierarchies *within* Europe and to offer their poverty- and working-class inmates the opportunity to stand atop new racialized hierarchies while ruling and enriching colonial territories *outside* of Europe.

Absent from Genet's early novels, which explore the carceral cultures of Mettray and of certain adult French prisons, is *any* analysis of the imperial valences of French carceral institutions. Rather, as I have argued (see Chapter 2), Genet's writings on Mettray seek to haunt through the elaboration of those queer affects, relationalities, and memories excluded from public discourses on the boy's penal colonies. In 1981, however, a solid decade after his engagement with the Panthers, Genet abruptly returned to the topic of Mettray, but with startling changes in genre, tone, and affect. If, previously, Genet resisted the urge to condemn the abusive conditions at Mettray to focus on the queer intimacies that flourished there, in his unpublished 1981-2 film manuscript, "The Language of the Wall," he accusatively and obsessively documents the institution's complicity, over almost a century and under a series of monarchs, emperors, and republican leaders, with the joint objectives of social control, economic profit, and colonial exploitation and rule. This manuscript marks the first time that Genet not only acknowledges, but actually *prosecutes* Mettray's role within the carceral archipelago of empire. I would argue that Genet's change of attitude toward his beloved Mettray is inseparable from the analysis of the penal system to which he was exposed by the Panthers' inclusion of him within their imagined community of resistance to policing, incarceration, and economic exploitation.

4.2.5 "The Language of the Wall": Genealogical Passions

"The Language of the Wall" was Genet's third film script to never be realized.¹³⁹

He went so far as to sign a contract in 1981 before drawing back in 1982, just after the shooting schedule had been set. Unlike his other film scripts, however, "Language" is also an historical project based on Genet's original research at the Mettray archives in Tours. Nor is this the "historical research" of the scenarist intent on striking the right period notes for a lush historical fiction. On the contrary, the degree to which the principle attraction of the "Language" project was its foundation in archival research is evident from the wording of the distributor's contract with Genet:

[w]e have duly noted your desire to base your literary work on documents from unassailable sources. The discovery of these documents is one of the motivations that led you to propose this screenplay to us, and that led us to accept this project with the greatest interest.¹⁴⁰

The research documents collected at the Genet archives at IMEC indicate that he consulted a varied set of historical texts, including histories of the correction houses ("maisons de redressement") for minors, letters from Mettray's founders to private entrepreneurs as well as luminaries such as the poet and philanthropist Alphonse de Lamartine, formal administrative reports, and even Medlsheim's and Détrimont's 1846 *Projet de colonisation d'une partie de l'Algérie par les condamnés libérés, les pauvres et les*

¹³⁹ Genet's film scripts for *The Penal Colony* (*Le Bagne*) and "Nightfall" ("La nuit venue"), like "The Language of the Wall," were abandoned before they could be produced as films.

¹⁴⁰ "Nous avons pris bonne note de votre désir de baser vos travaux littéraires sur des documents provenant de sources inattaquables. La découverte de ces documents est une des motivations qui vous a conduit à nous proposer ce scénario et nous a amené nous-mêmes, alors, à accepter ce projet avec le plus grand intérêt," "Accords Artistiques," from the preparatory documents for Jean Genet, "Le langage de la muraille," film manuscript, 1981-2, Jean Genet Archive, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine.

orphelins (*Project for the Colonization of Part of Algeria by Liberated Prisoners, Paupers, and Orphans*).¹⁴¹ The manuscript itself seeks to produce a certain reality-effect by employing generic markers of scholarly writing. Each introduction of a new historical character, for instance, refers the reader to a footnote giving the character's full name, dates of birth and death, and profession. Similarly, certain segments of dialogue are accompanied by footnotes naming historical documents that allegedly corroborate factual information within the dialogue. In addition to such textual markers of nonfiction writing, the script's content is, at times, almost painfully documentary. The film begins, for instance, with Mettray's opening ceremony, during which its founder, Frédéric Auguste Demetz, reads Mettray's *twenty-three* formal regulations ("articles du règlement") in their tedious entirety. Such an unabridged and unadorned transmission of an administrative document presumes, from spectators, both the meticulous interest and the interpretative abilities of scholars.

In a departure from his early works' focus on inmates' carceral cultures, Genet asserts, in a letter to Bernard Tavernier, that his intention is to demonstrate the relation between the "underground world" of Mettray's carceral cultures, the "luminous history" of monarchs and republican leaders, and the inexorable machinations of commerce.¹⁴² Indeed, the majority of the 452-page script is dedicated to the repetitive exposure of

¹⁴¹ See the preparatory documents for Jean Genet, "Le langage de la muraille," film manuscript, 1981-2, Jean Genet Archive, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine; and Alphonse Cerfberr de Medlsheim and J. H. Detrimont. *Projet de colonisation d'une partie de l'Algérie par les condamnés libérés, les pauvres et les orphelins*. Paris: Plon, 1846.

¹⁴² "monde souterrain"; "histoire éclatante," Jean Genet, Letter to Bernard Tavernier, preparatory documents for "Le langage de la muraille," film manuscript, 1981-2, Jean Genet Archive, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine.

what Genet refers to as Mettray's "secret purpose":

[t]he secret purpose, which I discovered in documents of which you shall have all the photocopies, was the cultivation of six hundred hectares of land by an unpaid workforce; the transformation of somewhat unruly youth into troops habituated to discipline, already prepared for military authority and for bold and risky military strikes in the colonies (in Algeria, first of all), and throughout the world, whether as sailors, as soldiers, or as farmers.¹⁴³

In this letter, Genet goes on to claim that his research demonstrates Mettray's complicity in a series of European colonial projects. He asserts that a steady human circulation bound Mettray to the French overseas territories, that colonels from the regiments responsible for the conquest of Algeria came to Mettray to recruit farmers for this new territory, and that Mettray inmates even "volunteered" for the conquest of Mexico.¹⁴⁴ Even as he argues that Mettray inmates provided the human fuel behind European colonial projects, Genet intriguingly compares prison inmates within France to exploited communities and to colonized territories abroad. At one moment, he draws a parallel close to the heart of Newton's analysis of intercommunalism, noting that the use of French prisoners to manufacture cheap goods for department stores had recently been superseded by that of Chinese and Korean factory workers. While neither French prisons nor Chinese or Korean factories constitute colonies per se, if, following Newton, we shift the axis of analysis from metropole/colony to exploited communities/global profiteers, then both French prisons and Chinese and Korean factories producing cheap

¹⁴³ "Le but caché, que j'ai découvert dans les documents dont vous aurez toutes les photocopies, était la culture de six cents hectares de terre par une main-d'oeuvre jamais payée; la transformation d'une jeunesse un peu anarchique en escadrons rompus à la discipline, déjà préparés pour l'autorité militaire, pour les coups d'éclat aux Colonies (en Algérie d'abord), à travers le monde, soit comme marins, fantassins, cultivateurs," Genet, Letter to Bernard Tavernier.

goods for French retailers can be reimagined as joined in intercommunal exploitation. Genet notes, furthermore, that the multiplication of independence movements in the European colonies was paralleled, within France, by a surge in prisoners' riots and strikes, writing that Mettray followed the "the decline of France," which lost control of its subjects and saw the hypocrisy of its paternalistic ideals of education and uplift exposed at one and the same time in its mainland carceral institutions and in its overseas territories.¹⁴⁵ As in Newton's analysis of revolutionary intercommunalism, Genet seems to imply that carceral spaces within the nation and colonized territories abroad, similarly exploited by the large-scale economic interests that powered French imperialism, might also be similarly linked in resistance.

Consonant with Genet's stated intentions is the manuscript itself, a 452-page, carefully footnoted monstrosity, whose subtitle, "A Hundred Years, Day after Day" ("Cent ans, jour après jour"), gives fair warning of its tediousness and lack of focus. Generically uncategorizable, it lies somewhere between a historical fiction, staging the intrigues of the powerful, a historical documentary, dramatizing archival documents, and a biting political satire along the lines of Genet's plays, intercut with glimpses of the lyrical carceral dramas typical of Genet's early novels. The dearth of indications regarding how scenes should be either acted or shot and the heavy reliance on dialogue rather than on images or actions render the manuscript anything but filmic. While difficult to imagine as a film, the manuscript does obsessively and repetitively hammer

¹⁴⁴ Genet, Letter to Bernard Tavernier, IMEC.

¹⁴⁵ "la courbe descendante de la France," Genet, Letter to Bernard Tavernier, IMEC.

home the theses outlined in Genet's letter to Tavernier.

"Language"'s first point is straightforward: under every political regime over the century of Mettray's existence, regardless of whether a monarch, an emperor, or a republican was in power, the demand for the effective socioeconomic population management that Mettray offered remained constant. It shows how Mettray's promise to turn orphans, vagabonds, and potentially anarchic young delinquents into productive farmers and disposable soldiers through the institution of moralizing labor met with approval and with generous financial support from heads of state and wealthy entrepreneurs right up to Mettray's decline after Demetz's death in 1905.

Secondly, "Language" explores the tangle of semantic and political resonances between the colonizer, the colonized, the settler, and the inmate of a penal "colony." In French, the latter two terms have the same name: *colon*, and "Language" shows that, in fact, Mettray's *colons* (inmates) all too often become *colons* (settlers) if not *colonisateurs* (colonizers) once freed. After promising Demetz financial support, the Empress Eugénie therefore commands, "make us sailors, soldiers, and naval officers. We need all that for Cochinchina."¹⁴⁶ One passage suggests that, in fact, Mettray and the Algerian colonial regiments served the same strategic purpose, that of rendering productive the anarchic energy of young French troublemakers. According to Captain Richard, the script's principle ex-inmate turned colonizer, the youngest agitators of the revolutionary July Days are sent to Mettray. and the rest become soldiers in the colonial regiments of

¹⁴⁶ "faites-nous des marins, des zouaves, des marsouins. Nous avons besoin de tout cela pour la Cochinchine," Jean Genet, "Le langage de la muraille," film manuscript, 1981-2, Jean Genet Archive, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine.

Algeria. Captain Richard's own presence in Algeria, however, suggests that this is not an either/or situation, and that the young troublemakers who are sent to Mettray may "graduate" to serve in Algeria or in some other colonial territory.

Insofar as they are made to perform forced labor for almost no pay while confined on something called a "colony," however, the situation of Mettray's inmates is closer to that of the *colonisé* (the colonized) than to that of the *colon*. This rapprochement is sharply exposed in the scene immediately following Mettray's opening ceremony, which cuts between the departing carriages in which the invited ambassadors and philanthropists are discussing Mettray. In one carriage, Lamartine enthusiastically lauds, in the language of high liberal humanism, Mettray's noble aims of paternalistic reform. The Ambassador of Great Britain responds, blasé, "[w]e have the same colonies in Great Britain and in South Africa," and calculates, "they bring in less than our blacks, though!"¹⁴⁷ The penal "colony," whether in the mainland or in the colonies proper, serves the same economic purpose as colonialism – albeit, as the Ambassador suggests, somewhat less successfully – that of the economic exploitation of a subject people. Further blurring the line between *colon* and *colonisé*, "Language" suggests that, from a governmental perspective, the *colon* settling Algeria, like the *colon* at Mettray, is only a body to be managed and rendered productive. One particularly dramatic scene depicts a colonel's search for *colons* to work as farmers in Algeria through the iconography of the slave market. In this scene, thirty of Mettray's *colons* are made to strip before the colonel

¹⁴⁷ "Nous avons les mêmes colonies en Grande-Bretagne et en Sud-Africa"; "celà rapporte moins que nos nègres cependant!" Genet, "Le langage de la muraille."

so that he can test their muscles, open their mouths to inspect their teeth, and even scrutinize their genitals for signs of venereal disease. Through its use of such powerful iconography, this scene implies that both Mettray's *colons* and the colonial farmers in Algeria that many of them will become are little more than human chattel: a series of bodies to be inspected, selected, placed, and put to work.¹⁴⁸

The contradictory position of the *colon/colonisateur/colonisé* that Mettray produced is clearest in the story of Blanchard and Leroy, two ex-Mettray inmates who serve in the French army during the seizure of Hanoi. One scene shows them discussing the merits of their position as soldiers in Indochina, which, they agree, is certainly better than being at Mettray. As colonial soldiers, not only can they get away with ignoring their superiors, but they even have Annamite servants to polish their shoes and wash their shirts. The very comparison with Mettray, however, suggests that, ultimately, Blanchard and Leroy did not consider the boy's penal colony and the French colonial army incommensurate institutions. In the end, the military training Blanchard and Leroy received at Mettray, the slightly greater freedom they are able to enjoy in the colonial army, and the added bonus of another people's servitude achieve their intended effects: in spite of their occasional indiscipline, the two former inmates become model colonial soldiers. In the next scene, their captain sends a congratulatory telegram to the director of Mettray, reporting that he is nominating both former inmates for the prestigious Colonial Medal. The next day, the same captain, "unmoved" upon receiving

¹⁴⁸ Not all of the *colons* submit to this dehumanizing treatment. In a show of heroic masculine independence, the *caïd*, Calvaire, refuses to let the colonel touch his penis.

word that Blanchard and Leroy have been discovered decapitated, sends a telegram of condolences to the director of Mettray, who orders their names inscribed on the Tablet of Honor for their heroic deaths in military service.¹⁴⁹ The hapless inmates cum colonial soldiers are revealed to be little more than disposable killing machines, exchanging their lives for an inscription on a penal colony's tablet of honor.

Reading the long, overburdened, and didactic manuscript of "The Language of the Wall," one has the impression that Genet wanted to put everything that he discovered in his research – every moralizing discourse, every debate on penology and profitability, every one of the colony's financial contributors, every negotiation with a head of state, every colonial war, and every historical event that occurred during Mettray's existence – into his film. The result is a script that seems intent on proving the same points over and over again, "day after day," as its subtitle indicates, and in excruciating detail. As a result, "Language" has little of the affective power of Genet's other works. If it does not succeed in moving its readers, however, it does give the impression of being, *in itself*, the record of a passion. Its every scene seems infused with a newfound passion for meticulous research, for maniacal documentation, and for indignant denunciation. This strange document, itself sheltered in an archive, survives as the trace of Genet's passionate affair with the archive. Through it, one glimpses Genet, possessed by the archive, producing an unwieldy and unfilmic dramatization of the archive. This passion certainly was not the product of any tardy discovery that the penal colonies were unhumanitarian, a discourse against which Genet pitted his early

¹⁴⁹ "pas ému," Genet, "Le langage de la muraille."

novels (see Chapter 2). Rather, it was born of Genet's discovery of how Mettray fit into a vast governmental-colonial-military-economic network of administration and exploitation. In his research at the Mettray archives, Genet discovered, not the *abuse* of Mettray's inmates, which Genet had trained himself to love, but rather their *use*, which he could not pardon.

4.2.6 Conclusion

"Language" may not make for good film, but it *is* a fascinating historical document. It registers, I would argue, the extended repercussion of Genet's involvement with the Panthers, demonstrating that their acceptance of him within their transnational imagined community of resistance transformed not only his political analyses, but also his very "structures of feeling" concerning carceral cultures.¹⁵⁰ Genet's engagement with the Panthers helped him shift his optic from the level of the inmate's experience to that of the penal colony's function within a series of interconnected strategies of population management, economic exploitation, and colonial expansion. "Language" should, then, be read as the buried counterpart to *Prisoner of Love*. In *Prisoner*, Genet's portrayal of the Panthers' legacy as that of a spectacular gendered image, though not incorrect, erases more prosaic aspects of Panther politics and is all too easily consumed by a racist colonial imaginary. During roughly the same time period, however, Genet's encounter with the significant *differences* in the Panthers' experiences and political analyses of prison leads him onto the path of ethical self-scrutiny... and to the creation of a largely

¹⁵⁰ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 126-7.

inconsumable artistic failure. Genet's discovery, while in the U.S., of the U.S. prison system's stunning perpetuation of racialized inequalities encouraged him to scrutinize the institution that he had always considered, if not his birthplace, then at least the site of his founding myth. Whereas, previously, Genet had been able to see himself as the quintessential menace to society, after having witnessed several racist incidents in the U.S. in which black people proximate to him were harassed, searched, and arrested, while he was left alone, Genet was forced to conclude, "they didn't touch me because I'm white and I don't endanger American society."¹⁵¹ Such transparent utilizations of the U.S. criminal justice system to perpetuate deeply rooted racialized inequalities, when reinforced by the Panthers' analyses of prison's connection to both slavery and imperialism, must have pushed Genet to question Mettray's role in the French empire. The combination of the burden of "proving" such underground connections, over a long historical period and across several continents, with Genet's "archive fever" resulted in the production of an overburdened, *inconsumable*, and decidedly *unspectacular* aborted screenplay.¹⁵²

If there is an ethical kernel in the story of Genet's alliance with the Panthers, it is that rather than providing the occasion for the imposition of Genet's own political or social theories onto the Panthers, it impelled him to relentlessly scrutinize his own founding myth. In this sense, "Language" participates in the ethical project of genealogy: a form of historical inquiry whose objective is to unsettle and to put into

¹⁵¹ "on ne m'a pas touché parce que je suis Blanc et que je ne fais courir aucun danger à la société américaine," Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, 48.

¹⁵² I borrow the term "archive fever" from Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 335

question contemporary categories, such as that of the anti-social ex-inmate, that are experienced as self-evident and true. As *Prisoner* reminds us, however, this ethical kernel, buried in an archive in the tiny French town of Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, is neither chronologically Genet's "last word" on the Panthers nor the version of Panther politics that Genet will transmit to a general readership. This chapter has sought to highlight it not as the culminating redemption of Genet's life's work, but as an ethically significant *by-product* of a political engagement which took many forms. An eccentric fragment of the Panthers' impact on Genet, "Language" does not join *Prisoner* to form an organic whole. It might, however, constitute an alternative to the spectacular and mythologized public memory of the Panthers that *Prisoner* helps perpetuate.

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Biography

Born in Texas of a Malaysian Muslim father and a Puerto Rican Catholic mother (who met in Australia), Kadji Amin has been described as "the global subject, Exhibit A."

Perhaps that is why her work in the field of French literature continually stretches outward to touch other critical traditions and geographic regions. In her spare time, Kadji enjoys playing trumpet and harmonica in her band, *Humble Tripe*, navigating alternative relationalities with her queer family, and trying to imagine what colors she will paint her walls when she finally settles down.