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José Esteban Muñoz

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DISIDENTIFICATIONS

Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics

josé esteban muñoz

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This book is for my families
and in loving memory of

Vivana Veloso (1919–97)

and

Brian Selsky (1967–97)

Contents

Carmelita Tropicana, Rebecca Sumner-Burgos, Ana Margaret Sanchez, and Uzi Parnes. Photo by Dona Ann McAdams.

Jack's Plunger

Normalcy is the evil side of homosexuality.
—Jack Smith

The phrase "queer theater" was spectacularly inaugurated in 1978 by Stefan Brecht in his weird and resplendent book *Queer Theatre*. Brecht's participant-observer chronicle of freaky performance in New York from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies is the second volume of a nine-volume study of the New York avant-garde. It is through Brecht's accounts that I first learned of Jack Smith's legendary performance practice. Brecht's descriptions of Smith's durational performances were thick and functioned as performative writing inasmuch as the critic's prose rambled with a "moldy" excess that echoed the performer's own particular style. My own visualization of Smith's performances was enabled by the filmic documentations that existed of his work, including his own restored underground classics *Normal Love* and *Flaming Creatures* and Ela Troyano's *Bubble People*.[1] Years later, I would learn a lot more about Smith through the reminiscences of his friends Troyano and Carmelita Tropicana. The power of Smith's strange and opulent performances was conveyed to me over many meals and drinks with these friends. These conversations fostered a deep regret that I never witnessed Smith's work firsthand. The more I learned about Smith, the more I became convinced that his work was important to my understanding of the modality of performance I was theorizing as disidentification. It was my hunch that Smith's performances were especially useful for the project of unpacking and describing what I called the worldmaking power of disidentificatory performances. Smith once claimed that important acting did not change the actor but instead transformed the world.[2] Smith made worlds during his performances; he recycled schlock culture and remade it as a queer world.

As I learned more of Smith's performances, I became partly disturbed by what could be described as the orientalizing and tropicalizing aspects of the work, which is to say the way he played with over-the-top images of "exotic" Third World ethnoscapes. These reservations were significantly diminished when I looked closely at the available documentation of Smith's work. His work with images of Latin spitfires and cheesy Hollywood renditions of Scheherazade deserved more careful consideration. I began to think that Smith had little to do with actual Third World cultures and instead worked through Hollywood's fantasies of the other. The underground genius utilized these fantasies of the other in a reflective fashion. The excess affect of Maria Montez and the gaudy fantasies of harem culture were utilized to destabilize the world of "pasty normals" and help us imagine another time and place.[3] In Smith's cosmology, "exotic" was an antinormative option that resisted the overdetermination of pastiness. Hollywood's fetishized fantasies of the other were reenergized by Smith's performance. His performances of the "spitfire" and Scheherazade were inflected with disidentificatory difference that helped toxic images expand and become much more than quaint racisms. Disidentification is the process in which the artist reformulates the actual performativity of his glittering B movie archive, which is to say that the images that Smith cited were imbued with a performativity that surpassed simple fetishization. Glitter transformed hackneyed orientalisms and tropical fantasies, making them rich antinormative treasure troves of queer possibility.

My estimation of the political efficacy of Smith's performance is gleaned from my readings of Brecht's performance documentation. Yet, I take issue with his analysis of Smith's or queer theater as political project. Brecht wrote about what he perceived as the political limits of queer theater: "Since the queer artist, having no justification for it, cannot allow himself the disfigurement of care, his art is entirely dependent on energy. But since his energy is entirely dependent on an exuberance of rage, his art, an active rebellion, is prone to degenerate into good-humored comedy and unthinking repetition, and to fall apart."[4] Brecht's generalizations about queer theater are arrived at through readings of Smith, John Vaccaro, Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, John Waters's cinema, and other white performers from the 1960s and the 1970s. I disagree with this particular assessment of queer theater's politics of performance on a few counts. The comedy of Smith and many of the other playwrights and performers considered in his text cannot be reduced to "good-humored" fun. To do so would be to ignore the scathing antinormative critiques that Smith performances enacted.

Jack Smith's performance of politics often had a materialist orientation. His discourse on "landlordism," for example, was a Marxian-tinged critique of capitalist constructions of private property. Property owners were depicted as moneygrubbing lobsters in the Smith bestiary. In his performance "Irrational Landlordism of Baghdad," Smith called for a modality of artistic production that insisted on art that educated as

it entertained. The text of that performance begins by asking a flat-footed question that nonetheless haunts aesthetic philosophy: "Could art be useful?" He answered his own question with aplomb:

> Ever since the desert drifted over the burntout ruins of Plaster Lagoon thousands of artists have pondered and dreamed of such a thing, yet, art must not be used anymore as another elaborate means of fleeing from thinking because of the multiplying amount of information each person needs to process in order to come to any kind of decision on what kind of planet one wants to live on before business, religion, and government succeed in blowing it out of the solar system.[5]

The monologue is played as a taped voice-over accompanying a scene in which a scrubwoman, down on her knees, cleans the floor. At the end of the recording, she stands up triumphantly. Another woman, a "glamorous floorlady," enters the room and the worker once again drops to her knees. This performance, with all its camp and out-there glamour in place, nonetheless insisted on chronicling wage exploitation and class stratification. This performance is particularly illustrative of Smith's materialist aesthetic philosophy. Smith insisted on art that was "escapist, stunning, glamorous and NATURALISTIC."[6] "NATURALISTIC" for Smith meant that it served a politically pedagogical role, that it provided the spectator the material to resist "the Capitalism of Lobsterland," and instead disidentify with that world and perform a new one.

Smith's camp was not good-humored goofing. It insisted on social critique. Even his diva worship indexed something of a materialist ethos. Dominican-born Hollywood B movie actress Maria Montez was the principal goddess in the Church of Jack Smith. Smith had great contempt for Montez's replacement in the firmament of Hollywood stardom. Yvonne de Carlo was a competent actress where Montez was, from a conservative vantage point, a poor actress. Smith described de Carlo as a "walking career." The actress represented the loathsome corporate ethos of Hollywood. Smith's love of Montez had much to do with the way in which her performance eschewed the commercialized tenets of "good acting" and helped the performance artist imagine another mode of performing the world that was for him transformative.

I am also left to wonder what Brecht's more general conclusions about queer theater would look like if he considered the work of Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Davis, Marga Gomez, and many other queer performers of color who specialize in the interweaving of passion and comedy in intricate and self-sustaining fashions. Although they participate in the genre of comedy and satire, these performances do not lose sight of the fact that humor is a valuable pedagogical and political project. In this book, I will argue the opposite of Brecht's thesis in respect to queers of color: the work of these performers does not eventually become "good-humored," "unthinking," and it most certainly does not fall apart. Comedy does not exist independently of rage. It is my contention that rage is sustained and it is pitched as a call to ac-

tivism, a bid to take space in the social that has been colonized by the logics of white normativity and heteronormativity. These logics are embodied for artists in the form of Smith's number one targets, the "pasty normals."

J. Hoberman has translated "pasty normals" as Smith's dismissal of heterosexuals.[7] But my reconstructions of Smith's lexicon lead me to read more into this idea of the "pasty normal." Smith, as the epigraph to this preface shows, saw normalcy as the dark side of homosexuality. Normalcy is therefore not constituted as strictly endemic to heterosexuality. The rise of assimilationist gay politics and its weak request for a place at the table prove Smith's point decades later. Normalcy might be better understood as normativity. The "normal" in the "pasty normal" might then be described as "normativity," as in Michael Warner's influential neologism "heteronormativity."[8] In Warner's formulations, lesbians and gay men might very well subscribe to heteronormative thinking and politics. Lisa Duggan's recent work on "homonormativity," a theory that deciphers the ways in which conservative and assimilationist gays and lesbians contribute to the privatization of mass culture, is especially relevant when considering Smith's work.[9]

But what of the "pasty" in the "pasty normal" equation? In the Smith cosmology, *pasty* would be the opposite of exotic. *Pasty* is the negative term. Smith himself had troubles with pastiness. One of his journal entries reads: "I overcame pastiness." I want to suggest that Smith's phrase is meant to index "whiteness" or, more nearly, *white normativity.* In Smith's ingenious phrase, white normativity and heteronormativity are shown to be adjacent and mutually informing ideological formations. Furthermore, they are not linked to predetermined biological coordinates.

The fact that I have never seen Smith's performances does not help authorize my disagreement with Brecht. After all, what do I know? I was not there. But I have been there for a lot of queer theater performance in the "wake" of Jack Smith. For instance, I have witnessed one particular homage to Smith many times. My most recent observation of this performance was at a benefit for P.S. 122, the hub of downtown performance in Manhattan. The bill included the upscale performance art of Meredith Monk and Spalding Gray. Downtown legends The Alien Comic and the marvelous Holly Hughes rounded off the evening along with the emcee, a noted performance artist in her own right. Carmelita Tropicana barrels onto the stage. She is wearing a blue wig, a tight red plastic bodice with fringes, black leggings, and leopard-print cowboy boots. She immediately sizes up the audience. She spots a woman with a hat and, in her thick pseudo-accent, she purrs that the hat is very sexy and very becoming. The flaming spitfire gets very close to the embarrassed woman, deliberately challenging her personal space. She asks the woman not to be upset because, after all, this is her job, she is a performance artist. She then launches into her own origin as a performance artist. She moves back from the audience and walks into a spotlight. Her voice booms as she takes the pressure off the blushing woman in the hat and inquires of the entire audience: "How many of you know performance art?" She explains that a telephone call from Ela Troyano alerted Carmelita (then mild-mannered Alina Troyano) of the existence of this practice. Alina asked her sister exactly what was performance art? Ela explained that there was a five-thousand-dollar grant available for performance art. Alina dashed off an application and was awarded the grant. Thus, Carmelita Tropicana was born, a fully born *chusma* performance deity.

Tropicana then proceeds to recite her personal performance manifesto. I have heard this many times, but I nonetheless laugh as she reads four quotations on what performance art is. She quotes Laurie Anderson's line that performance art is a performance by a live artist. Carmelita agrees, emphatically adding that it would most certainly not be performance art if the artist were dead. She then quotes Hughes, who has joked that 90 percent of performance art is the costume. She gestures to her own flashy attire. Her third citation is from herself: "Performance art is not music, is not dance, is not film but can contain all of these elements."

There is one more point to her manifesto, which she identifies as the most important part, and this is what I am most interested in considering here. Tropicana explains that performance art changes one's perception of the world. She turns from the audience and walks to a large shopping bag that is positioned a few feet behind her. She reaches into the bag and pulls out a plunger. With one hand she holds the plunger up high, as if she were displaying her patriotism to the People's Republic of Performance Art. She challenges the audience: "What is this?" Meek voices in the crowd respond by saying "a plunger." Carmelita lifts an eyebrow and glares at the spectators: "A plunger! I laugh at you wildly. Ha." Carmelita confesses that she too once mistook this object for a mere plunger. Because she is a superintendent as well as a performance artist, this is an understandable mistake. But she was disabused of this misconception after seeing a performance by Jack Smith. She then launches into a recounting of this performance:

> I was in the Village in a concrete basement. It was packed, eight of us wall to wall. There is a breeze blowing through the wall created by two fans. Beautiful Scheherazade music plays and out comes an Arabian Prince Jack Smith in a diaphanous material. He is dancing. He pours gasoline in the middle of the floor to make a black lagoon. He takes out a match and throws it in. The flames grow and we think we are going to die but he chases, revolves and demi-pliés to the corner and grabs this [she brandishes the plunger] and continues his dance, putting the flames out with this. No, ladies and gentlemen, this to me, a superintendent and performance artist, has changed from a plunger to an objet d'art. I remember Jack Smith, who died of AIDS in 1989.

With this recitation over, she holds the object firmly in her fist and then bows, introducing the first performer and leaving the stage.

Charles Ludlam was quoted as saying that Jack was the father of us all. In this homage by Carmelita Tropicana we see Jack Smith as a precursor to her own performance practice. In much of Tropicana's work, traces of Jack are evidenced in her

over-the-top "exoticism," her deep investment in gaudy and toxic stereotypes of the Latina, her red feather boas, and the occasional splash of glitter that might punctuate her performances. In this performance of a performance, or a performance of memory, the student of queer theater can glimpse an alternative rendering of the queer performance of politics than the one theorized by Brecht. Queer performance from Smith to Tropicana and beyond is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance. Smith's flaming black lagoon scared his spectators, it made them think that they would perish in that small downtown basement, but they soon learned that the performance was a ritual of transformation. Smith's exotic dance, his graceful dousing of the flames, signaled a world to come and called attention to a world that was already there. It made a queer world for those eight snug spectators. Years later, Tropicana rehearses that performance and adds to the continuously disidentifying process of performing a queer world.

A plunger is remade into an art object. The subtitle of this book speaks to the performance of politics. The study itself is a contribution to the formation of a queer performance-studies lens. That lens is interested in theorizing the political force of performance and performativity by queers of all races. In this book, I will look at disidentificatory performances of politics, acts that I will describe as reformulating the world *through* the performance of politics. The Introduction looks at various performances that remake the world, prominent among them Marga Gomez's remaking of stigmatized televisual lesbian stereotypes into lush sites of erotic investment. In chapter 1, I consider Jean-Michel Basquiat's disidentification with both pop guru Andy Warhol and the practice of pop art. Chapter 2 examines Isaac Julien's cinematic performance of diasporic black queer identity through redeployment of black mourning and melancholia. Chapter 3 surveys Richard Fung's recycling of porn and ethnography as powerful autoethnographic performance. Chapter 4 chronicles Vaginal Davis's terrorist drag and its fierce disidentification with white supremacist militiamen from Idaho. The final four chapters focus on Cuban America. Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the remaking of camp performance in the work of Troyano and Tropicana. The activist performance of Pedro Zamora is the topic of chapter 6. Chapter 7 further inquires into disidentificatory performances in the public sphere by looking at the disidentity fashioned in the conceptual art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In chapter 8, Carmelita Tropicana's *Chicas 2000,* a theater production, enables me to further elaborate a discussion of queer worldmaking through the example of disidentificatory performances of Latina *chusmería.* All of these case studies are stories of transformation and political reformulation. In divergent and complicated ways, all of these cultural workers, like Smith before them, choreograph and execute their own metaphoric dances in front of the flaming black lagoon, stamping out fires with grace and political efficacy, and, in the process, building worlds.

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The "Lady" Bully is joy.

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Performing Disidentifications

Marga's Bed

There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics. Solo performance speaks to the reality of being queer at this particular moment. More than two decades into a devastating pandemic, with hate crimes and legislation aimed at queers *and* people of color institutionalized as state protocols, *the act* of performing and theatricalizing queerness *in public* takes on ever multiplying significance.

I feel this lure, this draw, when I encounter Marga Gomez's performances. *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay,* a 1992 performance by the Cuban and Puerto Rican-American artist, is a meditation on the contemporary reality of being queer in North America. Gomez's show is staged on a set that is meant to look like her bedroom. Much of her monologue is delivered from her bed. The space of a queer bedroom is thus brought into the public purview of dominant culture. Despite the *Bowers v. Hardwick* U.S. Supreme Court decision, which has efficiently dissolved the right to privacy of all gays and lesbians, in essence opening all our bedrooms to the state, Gomez willfully and defiantly performs her pretty, witty, and gay self in public. Her performance permits the spectator, often a queer who has been locked out of the halls of representation or rendered a static caricature there, to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity. The importance of such public and semipublic enactments of the hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere. Spectacles such as those that Gomez presents offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency.

Marga Gomez. Courtesy of Marga Gomez.

I want to briefly consider a powerful moment in her performances that demonstrates disidentification with mainstream representations of lesbians in the media. From the perch of her bed, Gomez reminisces about her first interaction with lesbians in the public sphere at the age of eleven. Marga hears a voice that summons her down to the living room. Marga, who at this age has already developed what she calls "homosexual hearing," catches the voice of David Susskind explaining that he will be interviewing "lady homosexuals" on this episode of his show *Open End*. Gomez recounts her televisual seduction:

> [I] sat next to my mother on the sofa. I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn't think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that fell from their lips. They were very depressed, very gloomy. You don't get that blue unless you've broken up with Martina. There were three of them. All disguised in raincoats, dark glasses, wigs. It was the wigs that made me want to be one.

She then channels the lesbian panelists:

> Mr. Susskind, I want to thank you for having the courage to present Cherene and Millie and me on your program. Cherene and Millie and me, those aren't our real names. She's not Cherene, she's not Millie, and I'm not me. Those are just our, you know, synonyms. We must cloak ourselves in a veil of secrecy or risk losing our employment as truck drivers.

Gomez luxuriates in the seemingly homophobic image of the truck-driving closeted diesel dykes. In this parodic rendering of pre-Stonewall stereotypes of lesbians, she performs her disidentificatory desire for this once toxic representation. The phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture. Gomez's public performance of memory is a powerful disidentification with the history of lesbian stereotyping in the public sphere. The images of these lesbian stereotypes are rendered in all their abjection, yet Gomez rehabilitates these images, calling attention to the mysterious erotic that interpellated her as a lesbian. Gomez's mother was apparently oblivious to this interpellation, as a later moment in the performance text makes patent. Gomez's voice deepens as she goes into bulldagger mode again, mimicking the lesbian who is known as "me and not me":

> Mr. Susskind. When you are in the life, such as we, it's better to live in Greenwich Village or not live at all! At this time we want to say "hello" to a new friend who is watching this at home with her mom on WNEW-TV in Massapequa, Long Island. Marga Gomez? Marga Gomez, welcome to the club, *cara mía.*

Despite the fact that the lesbian flicks her tongue at Marga on the screen, her mother, trapped in the realm of deep denial, does not get it. Of course, it is probably a

good thing that she did not get it. The fact that Marga was able to hear the lesbian's call while her mother tuned out, that she was capable of recognizing the *cara* being discussed as her own face, contributed, in no small part, to her survival as a lesbian. Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. In this instance, Marga's disidentification with these damaged stereotypes recycled them as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation. It was, after all, the wigs that made her want to be one.

I possess my own hazy memories of Susskind's show and others like it. I remember being equally mesmerized by other talk-show deviants who would appear long after I was supposed to be asleep in my South Florida home. Those shows were, as Gomez described them, smoky and seedy spectacles. After all, this was during my own childhood in the 1970s, before the flood of freaks that now appear on *Oprah* and her countless clones. I remember, for instance, seeing an amazingly queeny Truman Capote describe the work of fellow writer Jack Kerouac as not writing but, instead, typing. I am certain that my pre-out consciousness was completely terrified by the swishy spectacle of Capote's performance. But I also remember feeling a deep pleasure in hearing Capote make language, in "getting" the fantastic bitchiness of his quip. Like Gomez, I can locate that experience of suburban spectatorship as having a disidentificatory impact on me. Capote's performance was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. This memory was powerfully reactivated for me when I first saw *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay.* Her performance, one that elicited disidentificatory spectatorship, transported me to a different place and time. Her performance did the work of prying open memory for me and elucidating one important episode of self-formation.

In writing this Introduction, I went back to check my sources to determine exactly when and on which show Capote first made this statement. I was surprised to discover, while flipping through a Capote biography, that while the writer did indeed make this cutting remark on the *David Susskind Show,* that remark aired during a 1959 episode dedicated to the Beats in which established writers Capote, Norman Mailer, and Dorothy Parker were evaluating the worth of the then younger generation of writers. Capote's quip was in response to Mailer's assertion that Kerouac was the best writer of his generation. The original broadcast, which was the same year as the Cuban Revolution, aired eight years before my own birth and six years before my parents emigrated to Miami. I mention all of this not to set the record straight but to gesture to the revisionary aspects of my own disidentificatory memory of Capote's performance. Perhaps I read about Capote's comment, or I may have seen a rerun of that broadcast twelve or thirteen years later. But I do know this: my memory and subjectivity reformatted that memory, letting it work within my own internal narratives of subject formation. Gomez's performance helped and even instructed this remembering, enabling me to somehow understand the power and shame of queerness. Now, looking through the dark glass of adulthood, I am beginning to understand why I needed that broadcast and memory of that performance, which I may or may not have actually seen, to be part of my self.

The theoretical conceptualizations and figurations that flesh out this book are indebted to the theoretical/practical work of Gomez's performance. For me there would be no theory, no *Disidentifications,* without the cultural work of people such as Gomez. Such performances constitute the political and conceptual center of this study. I want to note that, for me, the making of theory only transpires *after* the artists' performance of counterpublicity is realized for my own disidentificatory eyes.

It is also important to note at the beginning of this book that disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously. The remainder of this Introduction will elaborate disidentification through a survey of different theoretical paradigms.

Dissing Identity

The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification. Within late capitalism, all subject citizens are formed by what Néstor García Canclini has called "hybrid transformations generated by the horizontal coexistence of a number of symbolic systems."[1] Yet, the story of identity formation predicated on "hybrid transformations" that this text is interested in telling concerns subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny—cultural logics that I will suggest work to undergird state power. The disidentificatory performances that are documented and discussed here circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres.

This study is informed by the belief that the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted. Clearly, neither story is complete, but the way in which these understandings of the self have come to be aligned with each other as counternarratives is now a standard protocol of theory-

The processes of crafting and performing the self that I examine here are not best explained by recourse to linear accounts of identification. As critics who work on and with identity politics well know, identification is not about simple mimesis, but, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us in the introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet,* "always includes multiple processes of identifying with. It also involves identification as against; but even did it not, the relations implicit in identifying with are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal."[7] Identification, then, as Sedgwick explains, is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world.

Although the various processes of identification are fraught, those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component have an especially arduous time of it. Subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres encounter obstacles in enacting identifications. Minority identifications are often neglectful or antagonistic to other minoritarian positionalities. This is as true of different theoretical paradigms as it is of everyday ideologies. The next section delineates the biases and turf-war thinking that make an identity construct such as "queer of color" difficult to inhabit.

Race Myopias/Queer Blind Spots: Disidentifying with "Theory"

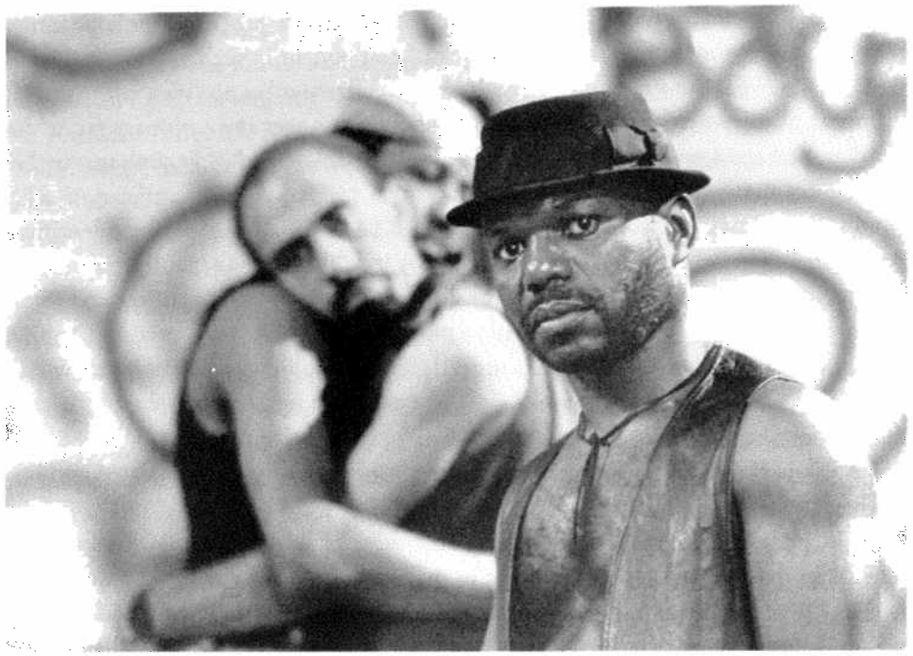
Disidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. Cultural studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality are highly segregated. The optic that I wish to fashion is meant to be, to borrow a phrase from critical legal theorist Kimberle William Crenshaw, *intersectional.*[8] Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to as monocausal paradigms that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa. These monocausal protocols are established through the reproduction of normative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness.

These normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities. We see these ideological barriers to multiple identifications in a foundational cultural studies text such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks,* the great twentieth-century treatise on the colonized mind. In a footnote, Fanon wrote what is for any contemporary antihomophobic reader an inflammatory utterance: "Let me observe at once that I had no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique. This must be viewed as the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The

schema of homosexuality is well enough known."[9] In his chapter on colonial identity, Fanon dismisses the possibility of a homosexual component in such an identic formation. This move is not uncommon; it is basically understood as an "it's a white thing" dismissal of queerness. Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from the Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his writing on the colonized woman. What process can keep an identification with Fanon, his politics, his work possible for this woman? In such a case, a disidentification with Fanon might be one of the only ways in which she is capable of reformatting the powerful theorist for her own project, one that might be as queer and feminist as it is anticolonial. Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics.

The phenomenon of "the queer is a white thing" fantasy is strangely reflected in reverse by the normativity of whiteness in mainstream North American gay culture. Marlon Riggs made this argument with critical fierceness in his groundbreaking video *Tongues Untied* (1989), where he discussed being lost in a sea of vanilla once he came out and moved to San Francisco. A segment in the video begins a slow close-up on a high-school yearbook image of a blond white boy. The image is accompanied by a voice-over narration that discusses this boy, this first love, as both a blessing and, finally, a curse. The narrative then shifts to scenes of what seems to be a euphoric Castro district in San Francisco where semiclad white bodies flood the streets of the famous gay neighborhood. Riggs's voice-over performance offers a testimony that functions as shrewd analysis of the force of whiteness in queer culture:

> In California I learned the touch and taste of snow. Cruising white boys, I played out adolescent dreams deferred. Patterns of black upon white upon black upon white mesmerized me. I focused hard, concentrated deep. Maybe from time to time a brother glanced my way. I never noticed. I was immersed in vanilla. I savored the single flavor, one deliberately not my own. I avoided the question "Why?" Pretended not to notice the absence of black images in this new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, my own fantasies. I tried not to notice the few images of blacks that were most popular: joke, fetish, cartoon caricature, or disco diva adored from a distance. Something in Oz, in me, was amiss, but I tried not to notice. I was intent on the search for love, affirmation, my reflection in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I found something I didn't expect, something decades of determined assimilation could not blind me to: in this great gay mecca I was an invisible man; still, I had no shadow, no substance. No history, no place. No reflection. I was alien, unseen, and seen, unwanted. Here, as in Hepzibah, I was a nigga, still. I quit—the Castro was no longer my home, my mecca (never was, in fact), and I went in search of something better.



Marlon Riggs in *Tongues Untied*. Courtesy of Frameline.

This anecdotal reading of queer culture's whiteness is a critique that touches various strata of queer culture. *Tongues Untied* has been grossly misread as being a "vilification" of white people and the S/M community in general. Consider John Champagne's apologist defense of the mainstream gay community's racism as a standard maneuver by embattled white gay men when their account of victimization is undercut by reference to racial privilege.[10]

A survey of the vast majority of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in print shows the same absence of colored images as does the powerful performance in *Tongues Untied.* Most of the cornerstones of queer theory that are taught, cited, and canonized in gay and lesbian studies classrooms, publications, and conferences are decidedly directed toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men. The lack of inclusion is most certainly not the main problem with the treatment of race. A soft multicultural *inclusion* of race and ethnicity does not, on its own, lead to a progressive identity discourse. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has made the valuable point that "[t]he lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms the belief that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race, which in turn reaffirms the belief that it is necessary to talk about race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and their text."[11] When race is discussed by most white queer theorists, it is usually a contained reading of an artist of color that does not factor questions of race into the entirety of their project. Once again taking up my analogy

with Riggs's monologue, I want to argue that if the Castro was Oz for some gay men who joined a great queer western migration, the field of scholarship that is emerging today as gay and lesbian studies is also another realm that is over the rainbow. The field of queer theory, like the Castro that Riggs portrays, is—and I write from experience—a place where a scholar of color can easily be lost in an immersion of vanilla while her or his critical faculties can be frozen by an avalanche of snow. The powerful queer feminist theorist/activists that are most often cited—Lorde, Barbara Smith, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, among others—are barely ever critically engaged and instead are, like the disco divas that Riggs mentions, merely adored from a distance. The fact that the vast majority of publications and conferences that fill out the discipline of queer theory continue to treat race as an addendum, if at all, indicates that there is something amiss in this Oz, too.

The Pêcheuxian Paradigm

The theory of disidentification that I am offering is meant to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields. The French linguist Michel Pêcheux extrapolated a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's influential theory of subject formation and interpellation. Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" was among the first articulations of the role of ideology in theorizing subject formation. For Althusser, ideology is an inescapable realm in which subjects are called into being or "hailed," a process he calls interpellation. Ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always within an *apparatus* and its practice or practices, such as the state apparatus.[12]

Pêcheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices. In this schema, the first mode is understood as "identification," where a "Good Subject" chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. "Bad Subjects" resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to "counteridentify" and turn against this symbolic system. The danger that Pêcheux sees in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of "counterdetermination." Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.[13] Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact

permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.

Judith Butler gestures toward the uses of disidentification when discussing the failure of identification. She parries with Slavoj Žižek, who understands disidentification as a breaking down of political possibility, "a fictionalization to the point of political immobilization."[14] She counters Žižek by asking the following question of his formulations: "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" Butler answers: "it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference."[15] Both Butler's and Pêcheux's accounts of disidentification put forward an understanding of identification as never being as seamless or unilateral as the Freudian account would suggest.[16] Both theorists construct the subject as *inside* ideology. Their models permit one to examine theories of a subject who is neither the "Good Subject," who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, or the "Bad Subject," who imagines herself outside of ideology. Instead, they pave the way to an understanding of a "disidentificatory subject" who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form.

As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. Sedgwick, in her work on the affect, shame, and its role in queer performativity, has explained:

> The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process in which identity is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *trans*figuration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure.[17]

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.

Disidentifications is, to some degree, an argument with psychoanalytic orthodoxies within cultural studies. It does not represent a wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis. Indeed, one's own relationship with psychoanalysis can be disidentificatory. Rather than reject psychoanalytic accounts of identification, the next section engages

work on identification and desire being done in the psychoanalytic wing of queer theory.

Identification beyond and with Psychoanalysis

The homophobic and racist vicissitudes of psychoanalysis's version of identification have been explored by various critics. Diana Fuss, for instance, has shown the ways in which Freud constructed a false dichotomy between desire and identification. Desire is the way in which "proper" object choices are made and identification is a term used to explicate the pathological investment that people make with bad object choices.[18] Fuss proposes a new theory of identification based on a vampiric understanding of subjectivity formation:

> Vampirism works more like an inverted form of identification—identification pulled inside out—where the subject, in the act of interiorizing the other, simultaneously reproduces externally in the other. Vampirism is both other-incorporating and self-reproducing; it delimits a more ambiguous space where desire and identification appear less opposed than coterminous, where the desire to be the other (identification) draws its very sustenance from the desire to have the other.[19]

The incorporation of the other in this account is in stark opposition to Freud's version, in which identification is distributed along stages, all teleologically calibrated toward (compulsory) heterosexuality. Fuss's revisionary approach to psychoanalysis insists on desire's coterminous relationship with identification.

Fuss's groundbreaking work on identification has been met with great skepticism by Teresa de Lauretis, who discounts this theory on the grounds that it will further blur the lines between specifically lesbian sexuality and subjectivity and feminist takes on female sexuality and subjectivity.[20] De Lauretis's approach, also revisionary, takes the tack of substituting desire for identification in the narrative of psychoanalysis. For de Lauretis, lesbian desire is not predicated by or implicated within any structure of identification (much less cross-identifications). Her approach to desire is to expand it and let it cover and replace what she sees as a far too ambiguous notion of identification. On this point, I side with Fuss and other queer theorists who share the same revisionary impulse as de Lauretis but who are not as concerned with ordering the lines of proper, reciprocal desire against what she views as oblique cross-identifications. A substantial section of chapter 1, "Famous and Dandy like B. 'n' Andy," is concerned with the power of cross-identifications between two artists, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, who do not match along the lines of race, sexuality, class, or generation. This strategy of reading the two artists together and in reaction to each other is informed by a politics of coalition antithetical to the politics of separatism that I see as a foundational premise of de Lauretis's project. The political agenda suggested here does not uniformly reject separatism either; more nearly, it is wary of separatism because it is not always a feasible option for subjects who are not

empowered by white privilege or class status. People of color, queers of color, white queers, and other minorities occasionally and understandably long for separatist enclaves outside of the dominant culture. Such enclaves, however, are often politically disadvantageous when one stops to consider the ways in which the social script depends on minority factionalism and isolationism to maintain the status of the dominant order.

Disidentification works like the remaking of identification that Fuss advocates. Counteridentification, the attempt at dissolving or abolishing entrenched cultural formations, corresponds to de Lauretis's substitution of desire for identification. In *Identification Papers,* her book on Freud, psychoanalysis, and identification, Fuss succinctly historicizes the long-standing confusion between the terms *desire* and *identification.* She puts pressure on the distinction between wanting the other and wanting to be the other. Fuss marks the distinction between these terms as "precarious" at best.[21]

Valentín, a documentary subject in Augie Robles's groundbreaking short documentary *Cholo Joto* (1993), comes to recognize an early communal identification with Che Guevara as being, on both a subjective and a communal level, about desiring El Che. Robles's video interviews three young Chicano men in their early twenties. The documentary subjects expound on the quotidian dimensions of queer Chicano life in *el barrio* and the white gay ghetto. *Cholo Joto*'s final sequence features a performance by Valentín. Valentín, hair slicked back and lips reddened with a dark lipstick, turns in a captivating performance for the video camera. He sits in a chair throughout his monologue, yet the wit and charm of his performed persona defy the conventions of "talking head"; which is to say that he is not so much the talking head as he is a performer in collaboration with the video artist. After reflecting on the "tiredness" of Chicano nationalism's sexism and homophobia, he tells an early childhood story that disidentifies with the script of Chicano nationalism.

> And I grew up in Logan Heights. We had murals, Chicano park was tremendous. Now that I'm not there I know what it is. But at the time you would walk through and see these huge murals. There was a mural of Che Guevara, that is still there, with the quote "A true rebel is guided by deep feelings of love." I remember reading that as a little kid and thinking, what the fuck does that mean? Then I realized, yeah, that's right. That I'm not going to fight out of anger but because I love myself and I love my community.

For Valentín, this remembering serves as a striking reinvention of Che Guevara. By working through his queer child's curiosity from the positionality of a gay Chicano man, Valentín unearths a powerful yet elusive queer kernel in revolutionary/liberationist identity. Guevara, as both cultural icon and revolutionary thinker, had a significant influence on the early Chicano movement, as he did on all Third World movements. In this video performance, Guevara stands in for all that was promising and utopian about the Chicano movement. He also represents the entrenched misogyny and homophobia of masculinist liberation ideologies. Valentín's

locution, his performance of memory, reads that queer valence that has always subliminally charged such early nationalist thought. His performance does not simply undermine nationalism but instead hopes to rearticulate such discourses within terms that are politically progressive.

Indeed, Valentín knows something that Fuss and other queer and feminist commentators on Freud know: that the story we are often fed, our prescribed "public" scripts of identification and our private and motivating desires, are not exactly indistinguishable but blurred. The point, then, is not to drop either desire or identification from the equation. Rather, it is to understand the sometimes interlocking and coterminous, separate and mutually exclusive nature of both psychic structures.

Ideology for de Lauretis seems to be an afterword to desire. In this book, I will be teasing out the ways in which desire and identification can be tempered and rewritten (not dismissed or banished) through ideology. Queers are not always "properly" interpellated by the dominant public sphere's heterosexist mandates because desire for a bad object offsets that process of reactionary ideological indoctrination. In a somewhat analogous fashion, queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted by an ideological component that tells us that such modalities of desire and desiring are too self-compromising. We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but desire it with a difference. The negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification.

Disidentification's Work

My thinking about the power and poignancy of crisscrossed identificatory and desiring circuits is as indebted to the work of writers such as James Baldwin as it is to psychoanalytic theorists such as Fuss or de Lauretis. For instance, Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work,* a book-length essay, discusses young Baldwin's suffering under a father's physical and verbal abuse and how he found a refuge in a powerful identification with a white starlet at a Saturday afternoon matinee screening. Baldwin writes:

> So here, now, was Bette Davis, on the Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my father not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For here, before me, after all, was a movie star: white: and if she was white and a movie star, she was rich: and she was ugly. . . . Out of bewilderment, out of loyalty to my mother, probably, and also because I sensed something menacing and unhealthy (for me, certainly) in the face on the screen, I gave Davis's skin the dead white greenish cast of something crawling from under a rock, but I was held, just the same, by the tense intelligence of the forehead, the disaster of the lips: and when she moved, she moved just like a nigger.[22]

The cross-identification that Baldwin vividly describes here is echoed in other wistful narratives of childhood described later in this Introduction. What is suggestive about

Valentín in Augie Robles's *Cholo Joto*. Courtesy of Augie Robles.

Baldwin's account is the way in which Davis signifies something both liberatory and horrible. A black and queer belle-lettres queen such as Baldwin finds something useful in the image; a certain survival strategy is made possible via this visual disidentification with Bette Davis and her freakish beauty. Although *The Devil Finds Work* goes on to discuss Baldwin's powerful identifications with Hollywood's small group of black actors, this mediated and vexed identification with Davis is one of the most compelling examples of the process and effects that I discuss here as disidentification.

The example of Baldwin's relationship with Davis is a disidentification insofar as the African-American writer transforms the raw material of identification (the linear match that leads toward interpellation) while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star. For Baldwin, disidentification is more than simply an interpretative turn or a psychic maneuver; it is, most crucially, a survival strategy.

If the terms *identification* and *counteridentification* are replaced with their rough corollaries *assimilation* and *anti-assimilation,* a position such as disidentification is open to the charge that it is merely an apolitical sidestepping, trying to avoid the trap of assimilating or adhering to different separatist or nationalist ideologies. The debate can be historicized as the early twentieth-century debate in African-American letters: the famous clashes between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington, a writer, national race leader, and the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, proposed a program for black selfhood that by today's post–civil-rights standards and polemics would be seen as assimilationist. Washington proposed that blacks must prove their equality by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and achieving success in the arenas of economic development and education before they were allotted civil rights. Du Bois was the founder of the Niagara Movement, a civil-rights protest organization that arose in response to Washington's conciliatory posture accommodating and justifying white racism. Du Bois's separatist politics advocated voluntary black segregation during the Depression to consolidate black-community power bases, and eventually led to his loss of influence in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization he helped found in 1910. Washington's and Du Bois's careers came to embody assimilation and anti-assimilation positions. In Chicano letters, Richard Rodriguez's autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1982), came to represent an assimilationist position similar to the one proposed in Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). Some of the first interventions in contemporary Chicano cultural studies and literary theory were critiques of Rodriguez's antibilingualism tract.[23]

Disidentification is not an apolitical middle ground between the positions espoused by intellectuals such as Washington and Du Bois. Its political agenda is clearly indebted to antiassimilationist thought. It departs from the antiassimilationist rhetoric for reasons that are both strategic and methodological. Michel Foucault explains the paradox of power's working in relation to discourse in *The History of Sexuality,* volume 1:

> [I]t is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. . . . Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.[24]

The Foucauldian theory of the polyvalence of discourse informs the theory of disidentification being put forth here inasmuch as disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse. Disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power. It understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse.

Listening to Disidentification

The Devil Finds Work received considerable praise and helped revitalize what was, at the time, Baldwin's somewhat faltering career. It was released right before the author commenced what he called his "second life" as an educator. David Leeming's biography cites an interview with Baldwin in which he discusses what he imagines to be the link between *The Devil Finds Work* and the text that followed it, Baldwin's final and longest novel, *Just Above My Head*:

> He told Mary Blume that the book "demanded a certain confession of myself," a confession of his loneliness as a celebrity left behind by assassinated comrades, a confession of compassion and hope even as he was being criticized for being passé, a confession of his fascination with the American fantasy, epitomized by Hollywood, even as he condemned it. It was "a rehearsal for something I'll deal with later." That something, *Just Above My Head,* would be the major work of his later years.[25]

For Baldwin, nonfiction, or, more nearly, autobiography, is a rehearsal for fiction. Stepping back from the autobiographer's statement, we might also come to understand the writer's disidentificatory practice to extend to the ideological and structural grids that we come to understand as genre. Baldwin's fiction did not indulge the project of camouflaging an authorial surrogate. Instead, he produced a fiction that

abounded with stand-ins. *Just Above My Head* includes the central character of Arthur, who is representative of a familiar thematic in the author's work, the trope of the bluesboy who is a bluesman in process. Arthur is a black gay man whose intense relationship with his brother David clearly mirrors the author's close tie with his own brother, David Baldwin. But there is also a Jimmy in the novel, who is also a black gay man, and represents a younger version of the author. Jimmy has a sister, Julia, who, like Baldwin, was a renowned child preacher, famous throughout the black church community of Harlem.

With this posited, we begin to glimpse an understanding of fiction as "a technology of the self." This self is a disidentificatory self whose relation to the social is not overdetermined by universalizing rhetorics of selfhood. The "real self" who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction. Binaries finally begin to falter and fiction becomes the real; which is to say that the truth effect of ideological grids is broken down through Baldwin's disidentification with the notion of fiction—and it does not stop here: fiction then becomes a contested field of self-production.

Let me attempt to illustrate this point by substituting the word *fiction* used thus far with the word *song.* Furthermore, I want to draw a connecting line between fiction/song and ideology in a similar fashion. With this notion of the song in place, I want to consider an elegant passage near the end of *Just Above My Head.* Up to this point, the novel has been narrated by Hall, Arthur's brother. The narrative breaks down after Arthur passes away on the floor of a London pub. At this pressured moment, the narrative voice and authority are passed on to Jimmy, Arthur's last lover. The baton is passed from Hall to Jimmy through a moment of performative writing that simultaneously marks Arthur's passing and Hall's reluctance to give up command over the fiction of Arthur, his brother:

> Ah. What is he doing on the floor in a basement of the historical city? That city built on the principle that he would have the grace to live, and, certainly, to die somewhere outside the gates?
>
> Perhaps I must do now what I most feared to do: surrender my brother to Jimmy, give Jimmy's piano the ultimate solo: which must also now, be taken as the bridge.[26]

Jimmy, who is certainly another manifestation of the ghost of Jimmy Baldwin, is given his solo. It is a queer lover's solitary and mournful song. The queer solo is a lament that does not collapse into nostalgia but instead takes flight:

> The song does not belong to the singer. The singer is found by the song. Ain't no singer, anywhere, ever *made up* a song—that is not possible. He *hears* something. I really believe, at the bottom of my balls, baby, that something hears him, something says, come here! and jumps on him just how you jump on a piano or a sax or a violin or a drum and you make it sing the song you hear: and you love it, and you take care of it, better than you take care of yourself, can you dig it? but you don't have no mercy on it. You can't. You can't have mercy! That sound you hear, that pound you try to pitch with the utmost precision—and did you hear me? Wow!—is the sound of millions and millions and, who knows, now, listening, where life is, where is death?[27]

The singer is the subject who stands inside—and, in the most important ways, outside—of fiction, ideology, "the real." He is not its author and never has been. He hears a call and we remember not only the "hey, you" of Althusser's ideology cop but also the little white girl in Fanon who cries out "Look, a Negro." But something also *hears* this singer who is not the author of the song. He is heard by something that is a shared impulse, a drive toward justice, retribution, emancipation—which permits him to disidentify with the song. He works on the song with fierce intensity and *the utmost precision.* This utmost precision is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that mastering plot. It is needed to make a self—to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer. Another vibe is cultivated. Thus, we hear and sing disidentification. The relations between the two are so interlaced and crisscrossed—reception and performance, interpretation and praxis—that it seems foolish to straighten out this knot.

Baldwin believed that *Just Above My Head* was his greatest novel, but he also experienced it as a failure. In a letter to his brother David, he wrote: "I wanted it to be a great song, instead it's just a lyric."[28] It was ultimately a lyric that mattered. It was a necessary fiction, one like the poetry that was not a luxury for Audre Lorde. It was a lyric that dreamed, strove, and agitated to disorder the real and wedge open a space in the social where the necessary fictions of blackness and queerness could ascend to something that was and was not fiction, but was, nonetheless, utterly heard.

Marginal Eyes: The Radical Feminist of Color Underpinnings of Disidentification

When histories of the hermeneutic called queer theory are recounted, one text is left out of most origin narratives. Many would agree that Foucault's discourse analysis or Roland Barthes's stylized semiology are important foundational texts for the queer theory project. Monique Wittig's materialist readings of the straight mind are invoked in some genealogies. Many writers have traced a line to queer theory from both Anglo-American feminism and the French feminism that dominated feminist discourse in the 1980s. But other theory projects have enabled many scholars to imagine queer critique today. This book is influenced, to various degrees, by all of those theoretical forerunners, yet it is important to mark a text and a tradition of feminist scholarship that most influence and organize my thinking. I am thinking of work that, like Foucault's and Barthes's projects, help us unpack the ruses and signs of normativity; I am calling on a body of theory that, like Wittig's critiques, indexes class as well as the materialist dimensions of the straight mind; I am invoking a mode of scholarship that also emerged from the larger body of feminist discourse. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings*

by Radical Women of Color is too often ignored or underplayed in genealogies of queer theory.[29] *Bridge* represented a crucial break in gender studies discourse in which any naive positioning of gender as the primary and singular node of difference within feminist theory and politics was irrevocably challenged. Today, feminists who insist on a unified feminist subject not organized around race, class, and sexuality do so at their own risk, or, more succinctly, do so in opposition to work such as *Bridge.* The contributors to that volume set out to disrupt the standardized protocols of gender studies and activism; and, although the advancements of white feminists in integrating multiple sites of difference in their analytic approaches have not, in many cases, been significant, the anthology has proved invaluable to many feminists, lesbians, and gay male writers of color.

This Bridge Called My Back serves as a valuable example of disidentification as a political strategy. Alarcón, a contributor to that volume, suggested in a later article that *This Bridge Called My Back* served as a document that broke with previous feminist strategies of identification and counteridentification.[30] She carefully describes the ways in which the first wave of feminist discourse called for a collective *identification* with the female subject. That female subject was never identified with any racial or class identity and was essentially a desexualized being; thus, by default, she was the middle-class straight white woman. Alarcón described the next stage of evolution for pre-*Bridge* feminist discourse as a moment of *counteridentification.* She turns to Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* and proposes that de Beauvoir "may even be responsible for the creation of Anglo-American feminist theory's 'episteme': a highly self-conscious ruling-class white Western female subject locked in a struggle to the death with 'Man.'"[31] This endless struggle with "man" is indicative of a stage in feminist discourse in which counteridentification with men is the only way in which one became a woman. Alarcón identifies the weakness of this strategy as its inability to speak to lesbians and women of color who must negotiate multiple antagonisms within the social, including antagonisms posed by white women. Queers of color experience the same problems in that as white normativity is as much a site of antagonism as is heteronormativity. If queer discourse is to supersede the limits of feminism, it must be able to calculate multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender, and race, as well as sexuality.

Alarcón argues that *Bridge* has enabled the discourse of gender studies to move beyond politics of identification and counteridentification, helping us arrive at a politics of disidentification. I agree with her on this point, and in this book, begun almost seventeen years after the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back,* I will consider the critical, cultural, and political legacy of *This Bridge Called My Back.*

Although this book tours a cultural legacy that I understand as post-*Bridge,* I want briefly to consider a text that I think of as a beautiful addendum to that project. The video work of Osa Hidalgo has always dared to visualize the politics of disidentification that *This Bridge Called My Back* so bravely outlined. Hidalgo's most recent

tape infuses humor into the fierce political legacy of that classic anthology. Her sensual lens injects the work with a defiant political imagination that moves us from activist manifesto to the expansive space of political humor and satire.

Osa Hidalgo's 1996 video *Marginal Eyes* or *Mujería Fantasy I* presents a farcical and utopian fantasy of a remade California in which Chicanas, Native women, and other women of color, like the women who populated the *Bridge,* have ascended to positions of power. The video tells the story of Dr. Hidalgo dela Riva Morena Gonzalez, a fictional Chicana archaeologist who discovers the matrilinial origins to Western culture in the form of small red clay figurines that she unearths during a dig. The discovery serves to boost what is an already remade state of California. In Hidalgo's fantasy play, the Chicana scientist is celebrated by the entire state. The celebration includes a press conference attended by the mayor of Los Angeles, another Latina, and the governor of California, a dark-skinned mestiza named Royal Eagle Bear. (The governor is played by the director.) This emphasis on work has alienated the protagonist's lover—a woman who has felt neglected during her partner's rise to fame and prominence.

The video's first scene is found footage of an early educational film that chronicles the discovery of the Olmec civilization. The film stock is scratchy 8 mm and its appearance reminds the U.S.-based ethnic subject of the national primary education project that force-fed them Eurocentric history and culture. The video shifts from grainy images of the dig to a new archaeological quest led by Dr. Hidalgo dela Riva Morena Gonzalez. Her entire team is composed of Latinas and Latinos. The video cuts back to the educational footage, and one witnesses the discovery of tiny figurines that connote the patriarchal origins of Western culture. This is followed by a sequence in which the Chicana team discovers its own statuettes. These artifacts have breasts and, within the video's camp logic, cast a picture of a utopian matriarchal past.

The video offers a public and a private description of the archaeologist's life. The private world represented is an intimate sphere of Latina love and passion that calls attention to the quotidian pressures that besiege Chicana dykes who must negotiate the task of being public intellectuals and private subjects. The video's final scene concludes with the two lovers finally finding time to make love and reconnect, as they have sex in a candlelit room full of red roses while the educational film plays on the television set. The film represents the "real world" of masculinist archaeology that is being disidentified with. In this instance, disidentification is a remaking and rewriting of a dominant script. The characters can ignore this realm and symbolically recreate it through their sex act. This final scene offers a powerful utopian proposition: it is through the transformative powers of queer sex and sexuality that a queerworld is made.

The public component helps one imagine a remade public sphere in which the minoritarian subject's eyes are no longer marginal. In the fantasy ethnoscape, the world has been rewritten through disidentificatory desire. The new world of Hidalgo's

Marginal Eyes. Courtesy of Osa Hidalgo.

video is a utopian possibility; it is here where we begin to glimpse the importance of utopianism for the project of disidentification. Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even *risk* utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld.

Hidalgo's project also remakes utopianism into something different. Her utopianism is infused with humor and progressive camp sensibilities. In chapter 5, I discuss the way in which Ela Troyano and Carmelita Tropicana disidentify with camp, a predominantly gay white male project, and recast it as a view to a fabulous and funky Latina life-world. Hidalgo offers a camp utopianism that rejects the utopianism of somber prophecies of liberation and instead reimagines a radical future replete with humor and desire.

Her utopianism looks into the past to critique the present and helps imagine the future. The past that is represented in the video is the imagined past of Mesoamerican antiquity; the present that the film critiques is the current climate of immigrant scapegoating that targets Latinas and other women and men of color; and the future that the film imagines is a queer world that is as brown as it is bent. Theodor Adorno once commented that "utopia is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points, at the same time, to what should be."[32] Hidalgo's project points to the "should be" with elegance, humor, and political ferocity.

Hidalgo's project and my own owe a tremendous debt to the writing of radical women of color that emerged in the 1970s. It is in those essays, rants, poems, and manifestos that we first glimpsed what a queer world might look like. The bridge to a queer world is, among other things, paved by *This Bridge Called My Back*.

Performing Disidentifications

Throughout this book, I refer to disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. Stuart Hall has proposed a theory of encoding/decoding that has been highly influential in media and cultural studies. He postulates an understanding of broadcast television as yielding an encoded meaning that is both denotative and connotative of different ideological messages that reinforce the status quo of the majority culture. These codes are likely to seem natural to a member of a language community who has grown up in such a system. For Hall, there are three different options on the level of decoding. The first position for decoding is the dominant-hegemonic position where a "viewer takes the connoted from, say, a television newscast, full and

straight and decodes its message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say the viewer is operating within the dominant code."[33] The second vantage point from which to decode is the negotiated position that, to some degree, acknowledges the constructed nature of discourse but does not, within its interpretative project, challenge its authorization. As Hall puts it: "Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal logics of power."[34] The third and final position that Hall touches on is the oppositional one. This mode of reading resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture. Meanings are unpacked in an effort to dismantle dominant codes. As an approach to the dominant culture, disidentification is analogous to the paradigm of oppositional reception that Hall constructs within his essay.

The mode of cultural production that I am calling disidentification is indebted to earlier theories of revisionary identification. These foundational theories emerged from fields of film theory, gay and lesbian studies, and critical race theory. Although these different fields do not often branch into one another's boundaries, they have often attempted to negotiate similar methodological and theoretical concerns. The term "revisionary identification" is a loose construct that is intended to hold various accounts of tactical identification together. "Revisionary" is meant to signal different strategies of viewing, reading, and locating "self" within representational systems and disparate life-worlds that aim to displace or occlude a minority subject. The string that binds such different categories is a precariously thin one and it is important to specify the influence of different critical traditions on my own formulations by surveying some of the contributions they make to this project.

Film theory has used a psychological apparatus to figure identification in the cinematic text. Although the story of disidentification is decidedly *not* aligned with the orthodoxies of psychoanalysis in the same way that different branches of literary and film theory are, it does share with the psychoanalytic project an impulse to discern the ways in which subjectivity is formed in modern culture. Christian Metz, a French pioneer in psychoanalytic approaches to cinema, elaborated an influential theory of cinematic identification in the early seventies.[35] Drawing heavily from the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage, Metz outlines two different registers of filmic identification. Primary cinematic identification is identification with the "look" of the technical apparatus (camera, projector). The spectator, like the child positioned in front of the mirror constructing an imaginary ideal of a unified body, imagines an illusionary wholeness and mastery. Secondary identification, for Metz, is with a person who might be a star, actor, or character. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey posed a substantial challenge to Metz's formulation by inquiring as to the gender coordinates of the "bearer-of-the-look" and the object of the look.[36] Mulvey described standardized patterns of fascination in classical narrative cinema structure that placed the female spectator in the masochistic position of identifying with the female subject, who is

either a scopophilic fetish in the narrative or a brutalized character on the screen. The other remaining option for Mulvey's female spectator is a cross-identification with the male protagonist who is, by the gender coding of the cinematic apparatus, placed in the dominant position of control. Implicit in Mulvey's argument is an understanding of any identification across gender as pathologically masochistic. Mulvey's and Metz's theories, when considered together, offer a convincing model of spectatorship and its working. Their models fall short insofar as they unduly valorize some very limited circuits of identification.[37]

Mulvey later refined her argument by once again returning to Freud and further specifying the nature of female desire along the lines pioneered by the founder of psychoanalysis. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" argues that the female spectator undergoes a certain regression that returns her to the transsexed site of her childhood identification that every young girl passes through.[38] The identification here is clearly encoded in the terminology of transvestism, a brand of degayed[39] transvestism that is positioned to disallow the possibility of reading a homosexual spectator. Psychoanalytic theorizations of cross-gender identification such as Mulvey's never challenge the normativity of dominant gender constructions.

Miriam Hansen, in her impressive study of early cinema and emergent practices of spectatorship, calls for a reworking of the Mulveyan paradigm to figure various oscillations in spectatorship between masculine and feminine.[40] In her chapter on Rudolph Valentino and "scenarios" of identification, Hansen writes:

> If we can isolate an instance of "primary" identification at all—which is dubious on theoretical grounds—Valentino's films challenge the assumption of perceptual mastery implied in such a concept both on account of the star system and because of the particular organization of the gaze. The star not only promotes a dissociation of scopic and narrative registers, but also complicates the imaginary self-identity of the viewing subject with an exhibitionist and collective dimension. . . . The Valentino films undermine the notion of unified position of scopic mastery by foregrounding the reciprocity and ambivalence of the gaze as an erotic medium, a gaze that fascinates precisely because it transcends the socially imposed subject-object hierarchy of sexual difference.[41]

Hansen moves away from the monolithic and stable spectator that was first posited by Metz and then gendered as masculine by Mulvey. The gaze itself is the site of identification in Hansen's study, and that gaze is never fixed but instead always vacillating and potentially transformative in its possibilities. Hansen also moves beyond Mulvey's theorizations of the female spectator as having the dismal options of either finding her lost early masculine identification or taking on a masochistic identification. Hansen's work, along with that of other film theorists in the 1980s, took the notion of spectatorial identification in more complicated and nuanced directions where the problem of identification was now figured in terms of instability, mobility,

oscillation, and multiplicity.[42] Disidentification is, at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or "masterfully" fixed mode of identification. Disidentification, like Hansen's description of identification, is a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator (the female spectator of the early twentieth century in Hansen's study) to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification.

Scholars of color and gay and lesbian scholars also brought important and transformative urgencies to questions of spectatorship and identification. Manthia Diawara, for example, offered the historically relevant corrective to Mulvey's foundational theory:

> Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator. However, as a black male spectator I wish to argue, in addition, that the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female). To illustrate this point, one may note how Black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to Whites either by White domestication of Black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by the stories in which Blacks are depicted playing by the rules of White society and losing.[43]

Contributions such as Diawara's made it clear that difference has many shades and any narrative of identification that does not account for the variables of race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, is incomplete.[44] Queer film theory has also made crucial challenges to the understanding of identification. Chris Straayer outlines the reciprocity of identification in queer spectatorship, the active play of elaborating new identifications that were not visible on the surface. Straayer's "hypothetical lesbian heroine" is just such a disidentificatory construct: "The lesbian heroine in film must be conceived of as a viewer construction, short-circuiting the very networks that forbid her energy. She is constructed from the contradictions within the text and between text and viewer, who insists on assertive, even transgressive, identification and seeing."[45] The process Straayer narrates, of reading between the dominant text's lines, identifying as the classical text while actively resisting its encoded directives to watch and identify as a heterosexual, can be understood as the survival tactic that queers use when navigating dominant media. Such a process can be understood as disidentificatory in that it is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within. The disidentification, in this instance, is the construction of a lesbian heroine that changes the way in which the object is inhabited by the subject.

My thinking on disidentification has also been strongly informed by the work of critical race theorists, who have asked important questions about the workings of identification for minority subjects within dominant media. Michele Wallace has described the process of identification as one that is "constantly in motion."[46] The flux that characterizes identification for Hansen when considering female spectatorship

and identification is equally true of the African-American spectator in Wallace's article. Wallace offers testimony to her own position as a spectator:

> It was always said among Black women that Joan Crawford was part Black, and as I watch these films again today, looking at Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* or Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* I keep thinking "she is so beautiful, she looks Black." Such a statement makes no sense in current feminist film criticism. What I am trying to suggest is that there was a way in which these films were *possessed* by Black female viewers. The process may have been about problematizing and expanding one's racial identity *instead* of abandoning it. It seems important here to view spectatorship as not only potentially bisexual but also multiracial and multiethnic. Even as "The Law of the Father" may impose its premature closure on the filmic "gaze" in the coordination of suture and classical narrative, disparate factions in the audience, not equally well indoctrinated in the dominant discourse, may have their way, now and then, with interpretation.[47]

The wistful statement that is central to Wallace's experience of identification, "she is so beautiful, she looks Black," is a poignant example of the transformative power of disidentification. White supremacist aesthetics is rearranged and put in the service of historically maligned black beauty standards. In this rumination, the Eurocentric conceit of whiteness and beauty as being naturally aligned (hence, straight hair is "good hair" in some African-American vernaculars) is turned on its head. Disidentification, like the subjective experience Wallace describes, is about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component. Black female viewers are not merely passive subjects who are possessed by the well-worn paradigms of identification that the classical narrative produces; rather, they are active participant spectators who can mutate and restructure stale patterns within dominant media.

In the same way that Wallace's writing irrevocably changes the ways in which we consume forties films, the work of novelist and literary theorist Toni Morrison offers a much-needed reassessment of the canon of American literature. Morrison has described "a great, ornamental, prescribed absence in American literature,"[48] which is the expurgated African-American presence from the North American imaginary. Morrison proposes and executes strategies to reread the American canon with an aim to resuscitate the African presence that was eclipsed by the machinations of an escapist variant of white supremacist thought that is intent on displacing nonwhite presence. The act of locating African presence in canonical white literature is an example of disidentification employed for a focused political process. The mobile tactic (disidentification) refuses to follow the texts' grain insofar as these contours suggest that a reader play along with the game of African (or, for that matter, Asian, Latino, Arab, Native American) elision. Instead, the disidentificatory optic is turned to shadows and fissures within the text, where racialized presences can be liberated from the protective custody of the white literary imagination.

One of queer theory's major contributions to the critical discourse on identification is the important work that has been done on cross-identification. Sedgwick, for example, has contributed to this understanding of decidedly queer chains of connection by discussing the way in which lesbian writer Willa Cather was able to, on the one hand, disavow Oscar Wilde for his "grotesque" homosexuality while at the same moment uniquely invest in and identify with her gay male fictional creations: "If Cather, in this story, does something to cleanse her own sexual body of the carrion stench of Wilde's victimization, it is thus (unexpectedly) by identifying with what seems to be Paul's sexuality not in spite of but through its saving reabsorption in a gender liminal (and a very specifically classed) artifice that represents at once a particular subcultural and cultural self."[49] This is only one example of many within Sedgwick's oeuvre that narrates the nonlinear and nonnormative modes of identification with which queers predicate their self-fashioning. Judith Butler has amended Sedgwick's reading of Cather's cross-identification by insisting that such a passage across identity markers, a passage that she understands as being a "dangerous crossing," is not about being *beyond* gender and sexuality.[50] Butler sounds a warning that the crossing of identity may signal erasure of the "dangerous" or, to use Sedgwick's word when discussing the retention of the shameful, "toxic." For Butler, the danger exists in abandoning the lesbian or female in Cather when reading the homosexual and the male. The cautionary point that Butler would like to make is meant to ward off reductive fantasies of cross-identification that figure it as fully achieved or finally reached at the expense of the points from which it emanates. Although Sedgwick's theorizations about cross-identification and narrative crossing are never as final as Butler suggests, the issues that Butler outlines should be heeded when the precarious activity of cross-identification is discussed. The tensions that exist between cross-identification as it is theorized in Sedgwick's essay and Butler's response is one of the important spaces in queer theory that has been, in my estimation, insufficiently addressed. The theory of disidentification that I am putting forward responds to the call of that schism. Disidentification, as a mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force, would always foreground that lost object of identification; it would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification.

Operating within a very subjective register, Wayne Koestenbaum, in his moving study of opera divas and gay male opera culture, discusses the ways in which gay males can cross-identify with the cultural icon of the opera diva. Koestenbaum writes about the identificatory pleasure he enjoys when reading the prose of an opera diva's autobiographies:

> I am affirmed and "divined"—made porous, open, awake, glistening—by a diva's sentences of self-defense and self-creation.
>
> I don't intend to prove any historical facts; instead I want to trace connections between the iconography of "diva" as it emerges in certain publicized lives, and a collective gay subcultural imagination—a source of hope, joke, and dish. Gossip, hardly trivial, is as central to gay culture as it is to female cultures. From skeins of hearsay, I weave an inner life, I build queerness from banal and uplifting stories of the conduct of famous and fiery women.[51]

A diva's strategies of self-creation and self-defense, through the crisscrossed circuitry of cross-identification, do the work of enacting self for the gay male opera queen. The gay male subculture that Koestenbaum represents in his prose is by no means the totality of queer culture, but for this particular variant of a gay male life-world, such identifications are the very stuff on which queer identity is founded. Koestenbaum's memoir explains the ways in which opera divas were crucial identificatory loci in the public sphere before the Stonewall rebellion, which marked the advent of the contemporary lesbian and gay rights movement. Koestenbaum suggests that before a homosexual civil-rights movement, opera queens were the sole pedagogical example of truly grand-scale queer behavior. The opera queen's code of conduct was crucial to the closeted gay male before gay liberation. Again, such a practice of *transfiguring* an identificatory site that was not meant to accommodate male identities is to a queer subject an important identity-consolidating hub, an affirmative yet temporary utopia. Koestenbaum's disidentification with the opera diva does not erase the fiery females that fuel his identity-making machinery; rather, it lovingly retains their lost presence through imitation, repetition, and admiration.

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

Hybrid Lives/Migrant Souls

The cultural work I engage here is hybridized insofar as it is cultivated from the dominant culture but meant to expose and critique its conventions. It is no coincidence that the cultural workers who produce these texts all identify as subjects whose experience of identity is fractured and split. The type of fragmentation they share is something more than the general sense of postmodern fragmentation and decenteredness.[52] *Hybridity* in this study, like the term *disidentification,* is meant to have an indexical use in that it captures, collects, and brings into play various theories of fragmentation in relation to minority identity practices. Identity markers such as *queer* (from the German *quer* meaning "transverse") or *mestizo* (Spanish for "mixed") are terms that defy notions of uniform identity or origins. *Hybrid* catches the fragmentary subject

formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications.

Queers of color is a term that begins to describe most of the cultural performers/makers in every chapter of *Disidentifications.* These subjects' different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested that migrant urban public culture, by its very premise, hybridizes identity.[53] A theory of migrancy can potentially help one better understand the negotiation of these fragmentary existences. The negotiations that lead to hybrid identity formation are a traveling back and forth from different identity vectors.

Arturo Islas's second novel, *Migrant Souls,* provides an opportunity to consider the idea of migrancy. The novel tells of two "black sheep" cousins in a large Chicano family. The female cousin's divorce, disrespect for the church, and sexually emancipated attitude alienate her from the family. But it is the male cousin, Miguel Chico, who is of especial interest in this project. Miguel, like the Richard Rodriguez of *Hunger of Memory,* is the scholarship boy who gets out of the barrio because of his academic excellence. Unlike Rodriguez, Miguel is at least partially out about his homosexuality.[54] Miguel's trip home, from his out existence as an academic Chicano to the semicloseted familial space of identity formation, exemplifies the kind of shuttling I describe. Of course, this movement is not only a by-product of Miguel's status as queer son; all of the family, in some way, experience migrancy. The text explains as much when it articulates the family ethos: "They were migrant, not immigrant, souls. They simply and naturally went from one bloody side of the river to the other and into a land that just a few decades earlier had been Mexico. They became border Mexicans with American citizenship."[55] I want to identify a deconstructive kernel in these three sentences by Islas. The idea of a border is scrutinized in this locution. The migrant status can be characterized by its need to move back and forth, to occupy at least two spaces at once. (This is doubly true for the queer Latino son.) The very nature of this migrant drive eventually wears down the coherency of borders. Can we perhaps think of Miguel, a thinly camouflaged authorial surrogate, as a border Mexican with citizenship in a queer nation or a border queer national claiming citizenship in Aztlán?

Marga's Life

After this tour of different high-theory paradigms, I find myself in a position where I need to reassert that part of my aim in this book is to push against reified understanding of theory. The cultural workers whom I focus on can be seen as making theoretical points and contributions to the issues explored in ways that are just as relevant and useful as the phalanx of institutionally sanctioned theorists that I promiscuously invoke throughout these pages. To think of cultural workers such as Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Creme Davis, Richard Fung, and the other artists who

are considered here as not only culture makers but also theory producers is not to take an antitheory position. My chapter on Davis's terrorist drag employs Antonio Gramsci's theory of organic intellectuals in an effort to emphasize the theory-making power of performance. It should be understood as an attempt at opening up a term whose meaning has become narrow and rigid. Counterpublic performances let us imagine models of social relations. Such performance practices do not shy away from the theoretical practice of cultural critique.

Consider, once again, the example of Marga Gomez's performance piece *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay.* When the lesbian calls out to the young Marga, lasciviously flicking her tongue at the girl, the story of interpellation is reimagined with a comical and critical difference. One possible working definition of queer that we might consider is this: queers are people who have failed to turn around to the "Hey, you there!" interpellating call of heteronormativity. A too literal reading of Althusser's ideology cop fable suggests one primary moment of hailing. Such a reading would also locate one primary source or mechanism that hails the subject. But the simple fact is that we are continuously hailed by various ideological apparatuses that compose the state power apparatus. No one knows this better than queers who are constantly being hailed as "straight" by various institutions—including the mainstream media. The humor and cultural critique that reverberate through this moment in the performance are rooted in Gomez's willful disidentification with this call; she critiques and undermines the call of heteronormativity by fabricating a remade and queered televisual hailing. Through her disidentificatory comedic "shtick," she retells the story of interpellation with a difference.

After Gomez explains how she was "hailed" into lesbianism by the talk-show sapphists, she paces the stage and ruminates on her desire for the life-world these women represented:

> Mr. Susskind and the lady homosexuals chain-smoked through the entire program. I think it was relaxing for them. I don't think they could have done it without the smokes. It was like they were in a gay bar just before last call. And all the smoke curling up made *the life* seem more mysterious.
>
> *The life*—that's what they called it back then when you were one of us. You were in *the life*! It was short for *the hard and painful life.* It sounded so dramatic. I loved drama. I was in the drama club in high school. I wanted to be in *the life,* too. But I was too young. So I did the next best thing. I asked my mother to buy me Life cereal and *Life* magazine. For Christmas I got the game of Life.

Gomez paints a romantic and tragic picture of pre-Stonewall gay reality. She invests this historical moment with allure and sexiness. The performer longs for this queer and poignant model of a lesbian identity. This longing for *the life* should not be read as a nostalgic wish for a lost world, but instead, as the performance goes on to indicate, as a redeployment of the past that is meant to offer a critique of the present. After all the talk of smoking, she pulls out a cigarette and begins to puff on it.

> And as I moved the lonely game pieces around the board, I pretended I was smoking Life cigarettes and living *the life.* By the time I was old enough, no one called it the life anymore. It sounded too isolating and politically incorrect. Now they say *the community. The community* is made up of all of us who twenty-five years ago would have been in *the life.* And in the community there is no smoking.

She concludes the narrative by stamping out an imaginary cigarette. The performance, staged in many gay venues and for a crowd who might be called "the converted," does more than celebrate contemporary queer culture. Gomez's longing for a pre-Stonewall version of queer reality is a look toward the past that critiques the present and helps us envision the future. Although it might seem counterintuitive, or perhaps self-hating, to desire this moment before the quest for lesbian and gay civil rights, such an apprehension should be challenged. Marga's look toward the mystery and outlaw sensibility of *the life* is a critique of a sanitized and heteronormativized *community.* In Gomez's comedy, we locate a disidentificatory desire, a desire for a queer life-world that is smoky, mysterious, and ultimately contestatory. More than that, we see a desire to escape the claustrophobic confines of "community," a construct that often deploys rhetorics of normativity and normalization, for a life. *The life,* or at least Gomez's disidentification with this concept, helps us imagine an expansive queer *life*-world, one in which the "pain and hardship" of queer existence within a homophobic public sphere are not elided, one in which the "mysteries" of our sexuality are not reigned in by sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity, and finally, one in which we are all allowed to be drama queens and smoke as much as our hearts desire.

Part I
The Melancholia of Race