

Nietzsche and Critical Social Theory

Affirmation, Animosity, and Ambiguity

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Contents

Acknowledgements	IX
Notes on Contributors	X

Introduction: Situating This Volume	1
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PART 1

Ressentiment and Redemption: Overcoming the Slave Revolt of Morals, Politics, and Aesthetics

- 1 Wounded Attachments?: Slave Morality, the Left, and the Future of Revolutionary Desire 31
C. Heike Schotten
- 2 The Trump Horror Show through Nietzschean Perspectives 60
Douglas Kellner
- 3 Nietzsche, Adorno, and the Musical Spirit of *Ressentiment* and Redemption 73
Nancy S. Love
- 4 Hip-Hop as Critical Tragic Realism: Cultural Analysis beyond Irony and Conflict 91
James Meeker and T.J. Berard
- 5 Nietzsche's Economy: Revisiting the Slave Revolt in Morals 135
Allison Merrick

PART 2

On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Nietzsche for Marxist Critique

- 6 Marx, Nietzsche, and the Contradictions of Capitalism 147
Ishay Landa
- 7 Labor's Will to Power: Nietzsche, American Syndicalism, and the Politics of Liberation 173
Kristin Lawler

- 8 Marxism, Anarchism, and the Nietzschean Critique of Capitalism 208
Gary Yeritsian
- 9 Between Nietzsche and Marx: “Great Politics and What They Cost” 226
Babette Babich

PART 3

Beyond Truth and Relativism: Nietzsche and the Question of Knowledge

- 10 Toward a Gay Social Science: A Nietzschean-Marxist Alternative to Conventional Sociological Theory 279
Michael Roberts
- 11 Resuscitating Sociological Theory: Nietzsche and Adorno on Error and Speculations 340
Jeremiah Morelock
- 12 The Science of the Last Man: Nietzsche and the Early Frankfurt School 361
Daniel Sullivan
- 13 The Death of Truth – Guilt, Anxiety, Dread, and Hope: Nietzschean Confessions 381
Christine Payne

PART 4

All-Too-Human: The Question of the Human Condition in Light of Nietzsche

- 14 Nietzsche’s Genealogy as a Critique of Racial Narratives and the Loss of Solidarity 405
Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy
- 15 Nietzsche’s “Anti-Darwinism”: A Deflationary Critique 416
Peter Atterton

- 16 Play as Watchword: Nietzsche and Foucault 434
Dawn Herrera
- 17 Critique of Subjectivity and Affirmation of Pleasure in Adorno and
Nietzsche 455
Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi
- 18 Nietzsche and Happiness 481
Bryan S. Turner
- 19 Beyond Good and Evil: Nietzschean Pedagogy in the History
Classroom 498
Eve Kornfeld
- Index 515

Wounded Attachments?: Slave Morality, the Left, and the Future of Revolutionary Desire

C. Heike Schotten

1 Introduction¹

Can Nietzsche's work serve as a theoretical or political resource for critical theorists seeking to imagine a better world, an emancipated humanity, or a more just future? Skepticism has historically greeted such a question, as well it might, given Nietzsche's harsh repudiations of human equality, much less any notion of "better" as it had hitherto been imagined or advocated for by modern social movements. A slightly different question, however – one related to, but perhaps also distinct from, the question of Nietzsche's usefulness for critical theory – is the question of his usefulness or appropriability for the left: is there such a thing as a left Nietzscheanism? Is Nietzsche a thinker of the left or capable of appropriation for left political projects and viewpoints?²

Answering this question has been something of a cult enterprise within critical and political theory, where various attempts at forming or salvaging a left Nietzscheanism have taken place, whether in the form of agonistic or so-called radical democracy (Brown 2001; Connolly 1992; Hatab 1995; Honig 1993; Villa 2000) or, in one case, ironic liberalism (Rorty 1989). In the following pages, I, too, am going to attempt to offer, if not a left Nietzscheanism, then perhaps what is better called a left Nietzschean critique, one based decisively in queer theory and queer approaches to political theorizing. I actually take it for granted that

1 Parts of this chapter are drawn from Schotten 2018a and Schotten 2018b.

2 There may, in other words, be a distinction between being committed to building a better or more just world and advocating a specifically left or liberatory politics. This is not to say that the latter does not involve the former, but it is to say that the former is compatible with nearly any liberal and "progressive" political position, to the point that even conservatives can (and often do) advocate their positions in the name of progress or improving the world. To be on the left, however, is very specifically to view both individual and social problems as fundamentally questions of group-based oppression, exploitation, and – aspirationally – liberation, questions that are neither addressed nor solved by appeals to progress or betterment simply.

Nietzsche is a conservative thinker but will attempt nevertheless to appropriate his work for left politics on the basis of a re-reading of his critique of slave morality. That re-reading will enact two decisive shifts from previous appropriations: first, it will openly and unqualifiedly advance its interpretation from the perspective of the oppressed, a move of which Nietzsche would of course disapprove (and the place where all too many Nietzsche interpreters falter); and, second, it will centralize the role of *desire* in this perspective-taking in order to articulate the specifically queer character of the left politics I advocate. The result is a formation I call revolutionary desire, which I will suggest is both the animus of left politics and necessarily queer.

To accomplish this, I will rely on an appropriated version of Lee Edelman's work, in particular his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), in order to re-imagine a queer(ed) left politics that opposes morality in a decisively non-hopeful, anti-futurist frame. Throughout, my foil will be Wendy Brown, in particular her famous essay "Wounded Attachments" (1995), which to this day remains a definitive statement of left Nietzschean critique and is still invoked by many as an important and relevant analysis of identity politics. Brown's failures of both imagination and commitment with regard to liberation, however, lead her to defeat a straw version of "identity politics" in the name of an ostensibly Nietzschean freedom that is not, in fact, all that liberatory. By clinging too tenaciously to a narrowly white, Euro-American, class-based version of leftism, Brown abandons the revolutionary desire she otherwise rightly argues is essential to liberation. As such, then, and despite her best intentions, Brown resigns herself to the end of left politics, which she characterizes as an impossible-to-satisfy and therefore ever-thwarted, resentful, moralizing desire.

Yet neither hope nor utopianism are necessary for a functional and vital left politics. Just as Nietzsche would reject such redemptive promises as evidence of illness or decline, a queer anti-moralism rejects hopefulness and utopia because they are futurist ideological political projects that secure obedience and social control via the moralized abjection of queer/ed populations. A successful Nietzschean leftism, therefore, would forgo his love of hierarchy but embrace his critique of morality as a punitive and vengeful will to power that accomplishes its queerphobic goals via dishonesty and projected self-loathing. Anti-moralism thus becomes able to serve liberatory ends. Thus it is not simply Nietzsche who can be marshalled to serve left political projects but, even more so, queer/ness and queer theory itself, which is both essential to left critique and simultaneously a demand that left critique respond to and undertake its own queer politics.

2 Slave Morality

As already noted, in this chapter I take for granted that Nietzsche is a conservative or a thinker of the right. By this I mean that he is a defender of natural(ized), elitist, socio-political hierarchy and understands the emergence of modernity and the enfranchisement of the masses as a direct threat to that hierarchy (Robin 2013).³ Nietzsche's most extended, explicit reckoning with this commitment occurs in his critical account of slave morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1967 [1887]). A specific rejection of Christianity and its modern derivatives, Nietzsche's critique of slave morality more generally suggests that any repudiation of hierarchy or social stratification must be understood not as

3 Citations are always possible, although as any reader of Nietzsche well knows, providing one or two quickly becomes tendentious since, despite his overall difficulty as a thinker, Nietzsche is nevertheless eminently quotable and his work is easy to cherry-pick. An interpretation of Nietzsche's oeuvre as a whole is therefore necessary to make any particular set of quotations meaningful (hence, see Schotten 2009). This chapter, however, is not an engagement with the question of *if* Nietzsche is a conservative; rather, it is an engagement with the question of if his work can be used to bolster left politics. That this is a question at all suggests there is at least some impediment to its realization; otherwise, there would be no controversy. Moreover, if "conservative" means what I have here defined it to mean, then it is abundantly clear that Nietzsche is a conservative because he is clearly in favor of natural(ized), elitist hierarchies of all sorts (whatever he might call them at any particular moment and however "serious" he may be about implementing them in "real life"). Thus, to claim Nietzsche's conservatism as a premise rather than a conclusion is neither an oversimplification nor an unacknowledged sidestepping of the controversy that has unfolded over this issue within Nietzsche studies over the years. Rather, it is an attempt to take Nietzsche at his word about hierarchy and meaningfully confront it, rather than defer this confrontation endlessly by, say, using his aphoristic style, proto-deconstructionist tendencies, or temporal location in an ostensibly less progressive historical moment to obscure or undermine an otherwise perfectly clear political position. Indeed, the claim that Nietzsche is an advocate of natural(ized), elitist hierarchy (whatever else he may be) remains controversial in some corners of Nietzsche studies only to the extent that such views continue to prove uncomfortable for superficially neutral yet implicitly liberal commentators who would prefer that the study of philosophy or political theory or Great Thinkers in general be separated from ostensibly pettier or more partisan questions of political positionality (this is a particular dilemma for philosophy, the discipline that continues to understand itself as the unvarnished pursuit of truth). Moreover, given that philosophy and political theory have largely resisted the critical epistemological and political challenges of critical race theory, women's/feminist studies, postcolonial studies, critical ethnic studies, and queer studies in their academic institutionalization and professionalization, it may simply be a more general allergy to politically "marked" and/or situated inquiry, rather than any substantial ambiguity on this point in Nietzsche's texts, that makes my otherwise banal statement about his political loyalties seem controversial.

righteousness but rather the vengeful path to power taken by weak and contemptible people who cannot survive or flourish any other way.

In §10 of the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche claims that the slave revolt in morality is the by-product of persons or groups who have somehow been prevented from acting and must therefore resort to other means in order to live and flourish. Reactive from the outset, then, Nietzsche notes that slave morality always requires a “hostile external world” in order to exist at all; “its action is fundamentally reaction.” This reactivity is essentially negative: slave morality says “no” to that hostile external world, to whatever thwarts its own activity and expenditure. The slavish type, then, comes to exist only via reference to an imposed external (set of) force(s) and can only understand and affirm itself through negation of that imposition: “slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different,’ what is ‘not itself.’” Nietzsche calls this negative reactivity *ressentiment*; its mightiest production and primary weapon is the concept of evil: “picture ‘the enemy’ as the man of *ressentiment* conceives him – and here precisely is his deed, his creation: he has conceived ‘the evil enemy,’ ‘the Evil One,’ and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pendant, a ‘good one’ – himself!” “Evil” is used to (de)limit, judge, and punish those deemed to have brought about the original imposition that has so bitterly limited the activity of the weaker. This production of evil is accomplished via the fabrication of the responsible subject, the notion of an actor with the ability to do otherwise, who thus may be held accountable – and, more importantly, punished – for his deeds. Incapable of acting themselves, impotent to strike back at the aggressors, and condemning the aggressors’ imposition as the very definition of evil, slavish types valorize their own weakness and produce the unwieldy apparatus responsible-subject/moral-opprobrium/political-punishment to restrain the activity of the strong. Nietzsche is clear about the effectiveness of this weapon (1967 [1887]: 1: 7–8) and equally clear that it is not a weapon the strong deserve to have wielded against them. For imposition is the character of life itself. It is erroneous to think that such fatality comes at one’s own expense or vengefully demand that life be otherwise. Rather, “to be incapable of taking one’s enemies, one’s accidents, even one’s misdeeds seriously for very long – that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of power to form, to mold, to recuperate and to forget” (1967 [1887]: 1: 10).

Noble morality, by contrast, does not emerge as the result of any necessary relationship to any other person or set of forces. Instead, noble morality is cast by Nietzsche as the anti- or non-morality; it might be characterized as unself-conscious self-affirmation: “the ‘well-born’ *felt* themselves to be the ‘happy’; they did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their

enemies, or to persuade themselves, *deceive* themselves, that they were happy (as all men of *ressentiment* are in the habit of doing)” (1967 [1887]: 1: 10). Unlike the slavishness of slave morality, masters regard encounters with foreign elements as at best unremarkable, at worst a negative confrontation so fleeting or light that it is quickly forgotten or otherwise dispensed with:

[The noble mode of valuation] acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks its opposite only so as to affirm itself more gratefully and triumphantly – its negative concept “low,” “common,” “bad” is only a subsequently-invented pale, contrasting image in relation to its positive basic concept – filled with life and passion through and through – “we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!” When the noble mode of valuation blunders and sins against reality, it does so in respect to the sphere with which it is not sufficiently familiar, against a real knowledge of which it has indeed inflexibly guarded itself: in some circumstances it misunderstands the sphere it despises, that of the common man, of the lower orders; on the other hand, one should remember that, even supposing that the affect of contempt, of looking down from a superior height, *falsifies* the image of that which it despises, it will at any rate still be a much less serious falsification than that perpetrated by its opponent – in *effigie* of course – by the submerged hatred, the vengefulness of the impotent. There is indeed too much carelessness, too much taking lightly, too much looking away and impatience involved in contempt, even too much joyfulness, for it to be able to transform its object into a real caricature and monster. (1967 [1887]: 1: 10)

Now, elsewhere I have argued that there is no reason to believe that the slaves of Nietzsche’s slave morality are coterminous with any specific oppressed group, nor that the masters of master morality are specifically related to the slaves as their oppressors (Schotten 2016). However, the upshot of this analysis is still that orders of rank or hierarchy of any kind are facts of life that only slavish, resentful, weak, and vengeful people seek to undo. Indeed, Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality is a critique of both morality and slavishness, which I would suggest are mutually definitionally implicated for him: to be slavish is to be a moralizer, and to moralize is to act like a slave. In either case, one is leveraging an indirect and ignoble form of power – lying, self-hatred, vengefulness – in order to take down those who are somehow “stronger” or “better” by declaring them to be “evil” and deserving of punishment. It is by means of these ignoble practices that the lesser-off, the worse, the weaker, and the undeserving come to dominate and rule. Their foremost aspiration, aside from this very

hegemony of course, is punishment of the “evil” ones. Indeed, punishment is slave morality’s *raison d’être*.

This critique seems to be, in its very essence, anti-liberatory. Hierarchy, domination, and exploitation are features of life itself. Any attempt to challenge, resist, undermine, or transform them is not simply hubris; it is contemptible and a form of nihilism. From a Nietzschean perspective, then, any left or liberatory project would constitute a resentful attack not simply on the strong or the exploitative, but in fact on life itself, and would be undertaken only by those unable to cope with or counter the stronger or better forces that naturally and necessarily (if not necessarily intentionally or purposefully) domineer over them. This recalcitrant commitment to naturalized, elitist hierarchy is *the* reason why it is effectively impossible to be a left Nietzschean. It is the philosophical substance behind Nietzsche’s seemingly more ambiguous and/or multi-faceted sexist, racist, and Eurocentric remarks, and it was the perpetual stumbling block in the way of any account of “Nietzschean democracy,” the production of which was something of a cottage industry in political theory in the 1990s. At some point, however, every one of these efforts had to resort to either tempering democracy with a Nietzschean element, insisting on some form of (sometimes “post-Nietzschean”) political agonism or contestation, or else claiming an anti-democratic element as necessary in order for democracy to remain democratic (see e.g. Brown 2001; Connolly 1992; Hatab 1995; Honig 1993; Villa 2000). In other words, Nietzsche’s conservative commitment to naturalized, elitist hierarchy proved too formidable to assimilate or overcome; instead, it had to be incorporated into liberatory or left political theory by preserving it as democracy’s necessary other or internal challenge.

Perhaps intuiting this root incompatibility, the most influential appropriations of Nietzsche’s work for left politics have not attempted such hybrid formations at all, but rather chosen to adopt his conservatism outright and use it instead to critique left politics as itself a form of slave morality. The most famous and definitive version of this argument is still Wendy Brown’s widely-cited essay, “Wounded Attachments” (1995b),⁴ which offers a Nietzschean critique of identity politics as suffused with resentment and thus incapable of achieving freedom. In this celebrated piece, Brown casts identity politics as

4 Although different versions of it abound, particularly with regard to feminism, which seem to have set an unspoken precedent that only left movements – or only feminism? – should be subjected to this particular analysis, a noteworthy critical consensus that seems to reflect rather than challenge broader conservative and anti-feminist tendencies in academic philosophy and political theory. A more recent version of Brown’s critique of feminism as slave morality can be found in Halley 2008; for earlier examples, see Brown 1995a; Conway 1998; Stringer 2000; Tapper 1993.

grounded in “injury.” In other words, the “identity” that grounds or serves as the basis of identity politics – for example, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability – is understood as having been *brought into being* by racist, sexist, homophobic, or ableist acts of violence, discrimination, and harm. Thus, one’s individual “identity” or subjectivity exists only because and insofar as it is wounded or injured. If injury is constitutive of identity, however, then identity politics advocates find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they seek identity-specific redress for their injuries from the state, whether in the form of social welfare policies, affirmative action measures, or anti-discrimination laws. On the other hand, because these identities have been forged in the crucible of injury, identity politics adherents cannot actually attain the redress they seek, because any justification of reparative state policies requires a retrenchment of the very identity that warrants them and thus a reproduction of injury. In order to have the reparation, one needs to maintain the injury, and in fact keep it alive forever. Far from attaining freedom, then, much less freedom from harm, identity politics adherents instead become invested in retaining and perpetuating the very source and terms of their own suffering so that they can justify the reparative policy changes they seek to enact. Identity politics is thus a deeply conservative, even reactionary political formation that seeks to maintain the very structures of oppression that produced the injured *as* injured to begin with:

[I]n its attempt to displace its suffering, identity structured by *ressentiment* at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection. This investment lies not only in its discovery of a site of blame for its hurt will, not only in its acquisition of recognition through its history of subjection (a recognition predicated on injury, now righteously revalued), but also in the satisfactions of revenge, which ceaselessly reenact even as they redistribute the injuries of marginalization and subordination in a liberal discursive order that alternately denies the very possibility of these things and blames those who experience them for their own condition. Identity politics structured by *ressentiment* reverse without subverting this blaming structure: they do not subject to critique the sovereign subject of accountability that liberal individualism presupposes, nor the economy of inclusion and exclusion that liberal universalism establishes. Thus, politicized identity that presents itself as a self-affirmation now appears as the opposite, as predicated on and requiring its sustained rejection by a ‘hostile external world.’ (1995b, 70)

Identity politics are thus a kind of moralizing reverse discourse, an anti-liberal political formation that only retains and reproduces liberalism’s most

toxic formulations. Brown would thus seem to have turned Nietzsche's anti-emancipatory critique of slave morality into a deft tool of left analysis. Nietzsche's denigration of slave morality is not a reprimand of emancipatory social movements but rather a cautionary tale, a warning to the left to guard against political formations that seem liberatory on the surface but are, in fact, resentful and reactionary counterposes that obstruct the left's actual aims.

Unfortunately, there are significant problems with Brown's critique of identity politics as she presents it. First and foremost, it is a real question as to just who or what she is referring. Grace Hong (2015), for example, persuasively argues that Brown overstates the role of injured subjectivity as an animus of 1960s social movements and, specifically, that she overlooks women of color feminism's "alternative notion of subjectivity and community not organized around injury." Hong suggests instead that the politics of resentment Brown charts "became institutionalized" only later, "in the period of containment in the 1970s to the present" (2015: 156). The conservative identity politics formation Brown critiques in "Wounded Attachments," in other words, is actually a by-product of neoliberal retrenchment, rather than a failing of left or of liberatory social movements.⁵ This means that Brown is effectively blaming the victim, a criticism that has rightly haunted this essay since its initial publication. As Alexander Weheliye points out, identity politics' alleged attachment to suffering is "less a product of the minority subject's desire to desperately cling to his or her pain but a consequence of the state's dogged insistence on suffering as the only price of entry to proper personhood" (2014: 77). This is an observation one might well have expected Brown to have offered, given her incisive and relentless critique of liberalism in *States of Injury* as anathema to freedom (see e.g. Abbas 2010).

Moreover, as Hong explains, Brown's critique of "identity politics" completely overlooks some of the most influential and defining articulations of identity

5 Elsewhere, Brown notes "the virtual disappearance of the Left in the United States" in the 1980s (2001: 19), which she attributes not so much to the power of neoliberalism but rather to the ineffectiveness of socialism and communism as either political ideologies or the basis for actually existing regimes. In a point that will come up later, however, it is worth noting that while the 1980s in the United States were indeed characterized by the Reagan administration's almost total liquidation of the social safety net and racist imperial foreign policy, they were also a period of resurgence for women of color feminism in the academy and the institutionalization of women's studies and critical ethnic studies, not to mention the influential and wildly effective activist work of ACT-UP, all of which advanced the kind of radical, structural analyses of power that Brown argues the left could no longer muster at this point in the face of, alternatively, the demise of communism or the ascent of poststructuralist philosophy. These may be invisible to Brown however, because, as we will see, for her the left does not really extend much beyond white anti-capitalism.

politics in radical and social movement history; e.g. the Combahee River Collective (CRC) statement, Audre Lorde's work, the groundbreaking women of color feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's agenda-setting theorization of intersectionality (and its subsequent uptake in Black and women of color feminisms, both in the academy and in the streets). These versions of identity politics foreground the specificity of Black women's and women of color's experiences of oppression, not in a reactionary celebration of injury or vengeful insistence on punishment, but rather in order to better specify and foreground the oppressions faced by Black women and women of color and queer women of color, oppressions that had been summarily ignored, dismissed, and/or perpetuated by both the male left and white feminism. So, for example, the CRC write powerfully:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to someone else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g., mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western Hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. (2017 [1977]: 18)

Such an assertion seems quite far from a reactionary or vengeful attachment to injury. If anything, it seems more akin to the unselfconscious self-affirmation Nietzsche describes as mastery in the *Genealogy*, a robust affirmation of self that requires no reference to a hostile external world for its fulfillment (and indeed, the CRC suggests it is that very hostile external world – and being forced to define themselves in reference to it – that is so toxic for Black women). As well, the goal of this liberatory struggle is not a retrenchment of Black womanhood as injured or oppressed, but rather liberation from the “major systems of oppression” that they famously define as both “interlocking” and the “synthesis” that “creates the conditions of our lives” (2017 [1977]: 15). There is nothing moralizing about such an aspiration, which is neither a resentful nor

vengeful retrenchment of the status quo nor an attempt to preserve injured identity.

Ironically, then, although Brown construes identity politics adherents as reactively attached to their own subordination, it is she herself who ends up reiterating the naturalness or necessity of that subordination in her historically ungrounded misrepresentation of identity politics. This becomes evident when “Wounded Attachments” is read in the context of the rest of *States of Injury* as a whole. In the Introduction to the book, for example, Brown suggests that “identity politics” harbors an immature and short-sighted view of the world:

Ideals of freedom ordinarily emerge to vanquish their imagined immediate enemies, but in this move they frequently recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them. Consider exploited workers who dream of a world in which labor has been abolished, blacks who imagine a world without whites, feminists who conjure a world either without men or without sex, or teenagers who imagine a world without parents. Such images of freedom perform mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the *organization of the activity through which the suffering is produced* and without addressing the *subject constitution that domination effects*, that is, the constitution of the social categories, “workers,” “blacks,” “women,” or “teenagers.” (1995c: 7, original emphases)

At first glance this passage seems merely to anticipate the fuller argument made later in “Wounded Attachments.” Looking more closely, however, and reading both together makes clear that not only has Brown once again misunderstood the liberatory aims of CRC-type identity politics, but also that the real targets of her critical ire in this passage are, in fact, feminist and anti-racist “identity” politics. This is not simply because teenagers are the obvious and noteworthy exception to an otherwise familiar taxonomy of politically oppressed groups (workers, women, Black people), but also because Brown is clear later on in “Wounded Attachments” that identity politics formations are resentful precisely because and insofar as they are not class politics. In other words, largely unremarked but nevertheless central to the argument of “Wounded Attachments” is the old leftist chestnut that identity politics are diversions from “real” politics, which of course only ever means class struggle (1995: 59–61): “what we have come to call identity politics is partly dependent upon the demise of a critique of capitalism and of bourgeois cultural and economic values” (59). Indeed, Brown argues that identity politics obscure the real source of injustice – class domination – and therefore inhibit any political aspirations

beyond bourgeois comfort and conformity (60). Thus, she concludes, it is not just the failure of communism or the triumph of (neo)liberalism that are to blame for the foreclosure of a critique of capitalism: it is also identity politics itself (61).

To return, then, to the quote from the Introduction, it is unlikely that Brown is critical of workers who imagine a world without labor, since of course that is the very locus and thrust of left politics and not at all an issue of “identity.” Setting teenagers aside as well, then (since there are no known youth identity movements militating for the elimination of parenting as a form of oppression), the only political formations left to worry about in this quotation are anti-racist (identity) politics that imagine “a world without whites” and feminist (identity) politics that imagine “a world without men or without sex.” Leaving aside for now Brown’s reactionary foreclosure of social justice movements that might complicate, intersect with, or simply extend beyond class politics, it is necessary to pause at this formulation and ask just who, exactly, was advocating for a world without white people – much less a world without men – in 1995? Is this the same “identity politics” Brown critiques in “Wounded Attachments”? Does *any* identity politics, whether a CRC-type argument for Black women’s liberation or NAACP lobbying against the death penalty and gerrymandering, really imagine or aspire to a world without white people? We can ask similar questions with regard to feminism: even if one is Catharine MacKinnon – Brown’s primary target of critical feminist ire in *States of Injury* – is it really her (or, for that matter, anyone’s) feminist aspiration to eliminate men? In whose paranoid political imagination do such specters loom? For whom is the upshot of racial justice organizing and anti-racist protest a world without white people? For whom is the aim of feminist activism the elimination of men, a point of view so powerful that Brown must help warn and guard the left against them?

What is unwittingly revealed here is not simply a surprising anxiety regarding the demise of patriarchy and white supremacy, but also Brown’s implicit or unstated concession to Nietzsche’s naturalized, elitist hierarchy. That is, embedded in both Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality and Brown’s critique of identity politics as slave morality, even if not made explicit by either, are the presumptions that those “below” are necessarily weak and this weakness is both necessarily contemptible and somehow deserved. This is why moralism is objectionable to both thinkers: it is a dishonest and meritless (Nietzsche) or reactionary and anti-liberatory (Brown) means by which the subordinate seek to overcome their subordination. For Nietzsche, this moralism has been successful; modernity is effectively the era of slave morality, which has achieved dominance in every arena. For Brown, this moralism is *unsuccessful* because it

will necessarily fail in its efforts to redress its constitutive injury. But that lack of success is for the better, since this moralizing by the marginal cannot actually accomplish real freedom. Indeed, for both Nietzsche and Brown, those on the bottom are stuck in their place, somehow lower or weaker, and precisely *because* of the moralizing methods they employ. For Nietzsche, this moralizing is due to its advocates' natural weakness or slavishness. For Brown, this moralism is due to its advocates' immature (teenagers remember), short-sighted, freedom-hating embrace of the very terms of their own subordination. While Brown would likely not say this embrace is natural, she nevertheless provides no other reason as to why it occurs. She is clear that neither liberalism nor neoliberalism, much less the demise of socialism, are to blame for this reactive and reactionary political formation. Unfortunately, then, while it is unlikely that Brown would openly endorse naturalized, elitist hierarchy, her appropriation of Nietzsche's critique of slave morality retains its elitism intact to the extent that she blames identity politics adherents for (remaining attached to) their own injury and suffering. Another way of putting this is to say that Brown fails to clearly distinguish between oppressor and oppressed in her analysis and so ends up using Nietzsche to criticize the oppressed without first identifying them *as* the oppressed, thereby sanctioning (or at least not commenting on) the fact of their subordination, tacitly naturalizing it.⁶ Along the way, and as if to dispel any charitable doubts about what she is doing, she reproduces distasteful right-wing canards about the demise of white people, the obsolescence of the male sex, and the militancy of feminists who would destroy all freedom and sexual pleasure if they could.⁷

6 Indeed, part of the problem with identity politics for Brown is "its reproach of power as such" (1995b: 70), which for her is neither marked nor specified in terms of oppression and so is therefore neither objectionable in itself nor an object of critique for her. Thus, throughout *States of Injury*, Brown advocates neither liberatory movements nor liberatory praxis to get free from oppressive structures but rather a left power politics difficult to distinguish from the aspirations to domination and the free marketeering she might otherwise seek to dismantle. Without a critique of oppression as such, however, it is difficult to know how and why the power politics Brown advocates is distinct from a capitalist, neoliberal, or right-wing power politics.

7 In a particularly troubling aside in a later essay on feminism and the decay of revolutionary futurity, Brown names "various feminist nationalisms bound to race and ethnicity" as akin to "lesbian separatism" in their "more conservative *Weltanschauung*" which, she claims, tend "toward the consolidation rather than the disruption of identity, [are] often inward-turning in their politics, less consistently critical of capitalism and liberalism, [and] more inclined toward interest-bound reformism than with propounding a comprehensive vision for society" (2005: 110). In other words, women of color feminisms are *more conservative than* second wave white feminism, insufficiently anti-capitalist, and responsible for the decline of feminist radicalism overall, a truly bizarre reading of history. As is well-known, if anything, it was

It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that, while Nietzsche is surely a critic of morality, he is so from the perspective of those in power – whether we want to call them the oppressors, the ruling class, the “masters,” the elite, the great, the few, or what have you. Rather than use this critique to reprimand or discipline the left by blaming oppressed people for their own oppression and/or implying its inevitability due to their failed, weak, or infantile political visions, I suggest instead that Nietzsche’s critique of morality be appropriated and re-deployed from *the perspective of* oppressed people(s) so as to make it *useful* for left politics. Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality is more than simply a claim that the undeserving many have now taken the reins of power to the detriment of the exceptional few. This is, indeed, one thing it claims, and is a by-now familiar articulation of the troubles of the embattled white guy as well as one mainstream explanation for the surprise 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump.⁸ However, if Nietzsche is to become useful for left politics, this commitment to elitist hierarchy and consequent complaint about elite beleaguement in the face of the ascension of the great unwashed are elements of Nietzsche’s philosophical and political worldview we are simply going to have to leave behind.

Doing so is entirely possible because Nietzsche rejects not simply the unjustified advancement of modernity’s excluded and undeserving masses but also, as Brown rightly recognizes, the *method* by which he argues they have advanced and triumphed. It is their employment of this method that, in his view, redounds back upon them and (further) renders them weak and contemptible. That method is moralism. In Nietzsche’s view, the weak or the many or the otherwise undeserving have come to power by transforming the natural, hierarchical order of things into a moral problem of agency, harm, and suffering, a

more that feminisms of all kinds and most anti-racisms were considered inessential “distractions” by socialist organizers in the 1960s and 70s, an attitude that soured women of color on socialism (not to mention white feminism) as their primary *social movement location*, but by no means on anti-capitalism as such (see e.g. Taylor 2017). Moreover, as Deborah King (1988) points out, throughout history it has been white feminism that has followed upon the heels of Black organizing and taken its cues from Black people’s freedom movements, so at a minimum Brown’s story needs to be reversed; even more so, however, many scholars have argued that it is accommodationist white feminism that should be blamed for the de-radicalization of U.S. feminism overall (see e.g. Mink 1998, and Richie 2012, esp. Chapter 3). Needless to say, Brown does not provide a single example of racial or ethnic feminist “nationalism” here (much less any specific formation of lesbian separatism) to substantiate her point, perhaps because she would be hard-pressed to find one that matched this straw depiction of – and what seems like an outright attack on – women of color feminisms.

8 Thus it may be a better analysis of reactionary conservatism than left-wing identity politics; see e.g. Nealon 2000; Schotten 2016.

fundamentally de-politicizing move that becomes hegemonic by abjecting dissenting positions, existences, and worldviews as evil, irresponsible, immoral, or nihilistic. While Brown understands herself to be arguing against moralism as well (see Brown 2001), she fails to advance this critique from the vantage point of the oppressed, instead echoing Nietzsche's commitment to elitist hierarchy by rebuking the left for its failed and futile critiques of power. My suggestion is that queer theory can better marshal Nietzsche's critique of moralism for left politics than Brown because queer theory's distinctly liberatory character and commitment extends well beyond the narrow parameters of white Euro-American anti-capitalism. While it is true that queer theory has been rigorously critiqued for its own constitutive whiteness, maleness, and bourgeois inclinations, what queer theory as a critical political enterprise shares in common with Nietzsche is the conviction that morality is a political tool by which populations are segregated according to manufactured idealizations of merit or worth in order to stigmatize, demean, ostracize, and punish those deemed undeserving by its measure. This critique has thus simultaneously been used to analyze not simply the oppression of LGBTQ people, but also the operations of racism and racialization, (settler) colonialism, nationalism and empire, ableism and (dis)ability.⁹ Rather than employ Nietzsche's critique of morality to defend or uphold a decaying aristocratic order, then, as he himself does, or offer misplaced critiques of social movements for their resentful attachments to their own injury, as Brown does, queer theory instead marshals this critique *on behalf of* queers, an evasive if expansive collection of anti-normal, anti-normative, anti-moral refusers of propriety and its dictates. Rejecting both Nietzsche's view that those on the bottom are by definition contemptible and Brown's subtle acquiescence to this view in her dismissal of left *ressentiment*, queer theory instead champions bottoms and all those *on* the bottom as the abjected dissidents of a stultifying moral order that effectively works to oppress everyone by hegemonically imposing impossible-to-attain ideals regarding the proper, upright, and best way to live. "Queer," then, is simultaneously a mark of abasement and a badge of dissent. It is neither the self-serving sanctity that Nietzsche argues the weak use to compensate themselves for their inevitable failure to win at the game of life, nor a reactionary shoring up of one's own status as injured or oppressed. It is rather an open and radical embrace of the elimination of morality and its array of punitive moralisms once and for all. This makes queerness simultaneously an instantiation of immorality and an emblem of revolt, an emancipatory positioning more

9 See e.g. Abdur-Rahman 2012; Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 2005; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Kafer 2013; Puar 2007; Rifkin 2011.

opposite to left politics than either “Nietzschean democracy” or the accommodationist reprimands of the left that have hitherto been advanced in his name.

3 Queer Theory

For Nietzsche, moralism is a weapon of the weak, and that is how and why it is objectionable. From a queer and/or left perspective, however, moralism is the means by which morality is institutionalized; it is, in other words, the perpetuation of oppression. Indeed, what both Nietzsche and queer theory at its best recognize is that morality and its idealizations *are* politics and in fact serve power’s authoritarian function of abjecting all those who fail to comply with its mandates. In Foucaultian language, morality serves the normalizing and disciplinary functions of power, stigmatizing, ostracizing, and punishing some in the name of an abstract and coercive ideal such as the common good, social welfare, the defense of society, or the protection of children.

I have argued elsewhere that the founding moments of queer theory as a field are both fundamentally liberatory and specifically committed to left politics, both in spite and because of the field’s initial whiteness (Schotten 2018a; Schotten 2018b). Here, I want to briefly explore another famously white text in queer theory wherein I nevertheless see the liberatory critique of morality unfolding particularly acutely: Lee Edelman’s oft-reviled 2004 polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.¹⁰ In *No Future*, Edelman argues that temporality itself is heteronormative, unfolding a linear, teleological progress narrative that demands self-sacrificial anticipation of an ideologically rosy future that, by definition, never arrives. That future, symbolized by an iconographic Child, is innocent, infinitely valuable, and vested with redemptive potential. The future as Child is a future that never ends, a future that never grows up, a future in which life and survival – if not ours alone, then ours in the guise of the species and its future generations – will be preserved to infinity. The impossibility

10 Edelman’s work has been rightly criticized for its failure to theorize any other person, position, situation, or identity than that of the white, bourgeois, gay male (the literature here is vast; one emblematic example is Muñoz 2009). These criticisms are not wrong but, as with Nietzsche, they do not exhaust the liberatory or critical potential of their author’s work. In Edelman’s case, there is actually far less work to do than with Nietzsche to appropriate it for the position and perspective of the oppressed: one need only make this positionality explicit in a way that he declines to do (unlike Nietzsche, who openly embraces naturalized, elitist hierarchy and thus proves far more obstinate). I address this issue extensively in Schotten 2018a, Chapter 4, where I make the case for a liberatory (re-)reading of both Edelman and queer theory and defend it more fully.

of such an achievement is, of course, by both definition and design. Yet futurism obscures this impossibility and secures its own smooth functioning, Edelman argues, via the production of queerness. Queerness designates all those who reject the future or stand in the way of reproduction or refuse to sacrifice their present aims or defer gratification. The fundamental antagonism of social life, in other words, is not class struggle but rather the conflict between the futurist attempt at closure and social meaning-making vs. the destructive antagonism of what Edelman sometimes calls “the negative” and in other places calls “queerness.” Regardless, this queer negativity is impossible to definitively vanquish and thus perennially threatens the integrity, wholeness, and persistence of the social, well into the future it coercively envisions for us all.

Now, there is much to be said about Edelman’s argument (here only incompletely stated). For the purposes of this chapter, however, what I want to suggest is that a major point of *No Future* is that the future’s symbolization in the form of the Child functions to moralize that future, and it is precisely this transformation of a political – and thus contestable – assertion into a moral – and thus incontestable – foundational principle that makes reproductive futurism oppressive. In *No Future*, Edelman argues that “every political vision is a *vision of futurity*” (2004: 13, original emphasis), calling reproductive futurism “the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (2004: 2). Its “pre-supposition [is] that the body politic must survive” (2004: 3), and although the defense of children and social survival are widely taken to be apolitical, this is precisely what makes them “so oppressively political” (2004: 2). To participate in politics at all, even in protest or dissent, means to “submit to the framing of political debate – and, indeed, of the political field – as defined by the terms of...reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such” (2004: 2). The question of the future, Edelman declares, is beyond any pro or con. Whether it is survival or children, the issue of the future is necessarily one-sided and decidedly pro-life. Futurism is the “party line” that “every party endorses” (2002: 182).

Elsewhere I have argued that there is no necessity that the future be symbolized by the Child, and that there are any number of forms the future can take, including among them Christianity, the settler state, the Hobbesian Commonwealth, and U.S. imperialism (Schotten 2018a; Schotten 2015). Indeed, although much attention has been paid to the specifically Childish version of the future Edelman opposes, what too often gets missed is the fact that the particular content of that future is much less important or problematic than the dogmatic insistence on that future’s irrefutable *value* and *worth*, an insistence that secures its own hegemony via the exclusion, abjection, and negation of those who deny or defy it. Futurism’s oppressiveness, in other words, resides in its

totalizing demand that everyone worship at its altar (the altar of, as Edelman puts it elsewhere, the Futurch [2006: 822]) and that anyone refusing refuge in its sanctuary are “whatever a social formation abjects as queer” (Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 29). That altar of futurism symbolizes morality; the abjection of its apostates are the workings of moralism. Indeed, a broader and perhaps more useful designation of reproductive futurism may simply be morality itself, which operates and disperses its punitive effects through the vehicle of moralism. And indeed, as a morality, futurism functions much the same as Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal. It is a hegemonic regime of social truth that “permits no other interpretation, no other goal; it rejects, denies, affirms, and sanctions solely from the point of view of *its* interpretation...” (Nietzsche 1967 [1887]: III: 23, original emphasis). Just like the ascetic ideal, futurism allows no other possible interpretation or mode of existence. Any violation of its rules or failure to conform to its dictates entails the visitation of some form(s) of violence, stigma, and punishment, on the grounds that such failures are both intolerable and unthinkable. Like the ascetic ideal, in other words, reproductive futurism – or any other morality – is a regime of truth that exists primarily in order to secure social control and exact punishment as the price of deviance. Edelman’s word for this deviance is queerness, and his analysis of the social (re)production of queerness is Nietzschean insofar as it understands morality as a kind of oppression that works to produce resistance to hegemonic social formations as evil, nihilism, or craven wickedness.¹¹

Although Nietzsche, in his own analysis in the *Genealogy*, focuses on the punishing effects of morality on the elite few, there is no reason why we cannot re-situate his critique of morality from the terrain of the embattled white guys

11 This is how and why his critique has a liberatory potential that is absent in both Nietzsche and Brown, if for different reasons: “queerness” here is a non-identitarian, structural determination of oppression, not a reified identity category of exclusion and difference. Thus the critique of morality I extract from *No Future* (which Edelman himself may or may not endorse as a reading of his work) is wholly relevant for anti-racist, anti-colonial, and feminist inquiry, especially insofar as white supremacy, (settler) colonialism, and patriarchy are profoundly moralized political formations that abject all resistance and dissent to them as unthinkable, perverse, nihilistic, and evil. Recall the CRC’s delineation of the derogatory names and pervasive stereotypes of Black women cited above, or remember the Moynihan Report’s disparagement of Black families as enmeshed in a “tangle of pathology,” or think of the standard litany of denigrations of liberatory social movements and actors as aggressors, security threats, nature-deniers, infiltrators, abortionists, child-killers, gangs, “thugs,” “savages,” and “terrorists” – and of course much worse terms I cannot bring myself to reproduce here – all of which, however, effectively mean the same thing: “unthinkable threat to the very social and moral order that renders the world coherent and intelligible, and therefore requiring elimination.”

of the world to the situation and perspective of the oppressed. This is what queer theory, in my view, does at its best. Indeed, despite some reticence of the field to explicitly position or understand itself as a tradition of the oppressed (see e.g. Wiegman and Wilson 2015), queer theory is, I contend, a liberatory critical theory to the extent that it understands morality as a form of oppressive power – a kind of Foucaultian biopower, that delineates populations in order to target them for death, and/or a kind of Foucaultian discipline, that normalizes through examination and surveillance in order to produce compliant and docile bodies. This is queerness's specific contribution to critical theory and liberatory politics. Moreover, this contribution is possible because of the field's distinct focus on sexuality and desire. Unlike Nietzsche, who sees morality as the vengeful accomplishment of weak people who resentfully deploy it as and through punishment, Edelman instead argues that futurism becomes hegemonic via the moralization of human existence into a temporal narrative of desire and (dis)satisfaction. Thus, what is distinctive and useful about queer theory for left politics and critical theory is the insistence that desire itself is an arena for the constitution, enforcement, and reproduction of oppression and its subsequent ability to identify morality as a distinct form of oppression.

Reading Edelman in this way aligns him not simply with Nietzsche, a perhaps unlikely forebear of queer theory, but also with Gayle Rubin, whose justly famous 1984 essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes Toward a Radical Politics of Sexuality," is widely considered to have made the 1990s emergence of queer theory possible.¹² It is known for, among other things, a set of charts that visually map the myriad ways that various forms of sexual activity are hierarchized and (de)valued. It is also known for Rubin's indexical listing of the theoretical obstacles that impede the construction of a radical politics of sexuality. These five obstacles are: (1) sexual essentialism (the presumption that sexual desire is an innate, pre-social drive); (2) sex negativity (the belief that sex is dangerous, unhealthy, destructive, or depraved); (3) the fallacy of misplaced scale (the exceptionalizing of sex to the point that it becomes burdened with "an excess of significance"); (4) the domino theory of sexual peril (the fear that sex must be contained or else it will leak out and spread and destroy everything); and (5) the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation (as Rubin puts it, "One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way" [1984: 283]). Among other things, these

12 I defend the controversial claim that Nietzsche can be seen as a forebear of queer theory in *Nietzsche's Revolution* (2009); Rubin's iconic "Thinking Sex" (1984) is well-established as having helped inaugurate the field.

five obstacles offer a useful map of the many ways that sex and sexuality are moralized and, in calling for their elimination, Rubin effectively authorizes and demands a strictly political, non-moral(ized) analysis of sex and sexuality. Now, in her essay, Rubin writes in terms of “value,” not morality per se, noting the ways that medical, legal, social, and religious discourses classify and rank different forms of sexuality and sexual activity. But she sees clear continuity across these different classificatory and ranking schemes. The common element that gives them their power and coercive force is, I suggest, that of morality. Indeed, it is by now a commonplace that the seemingly more scientific or “objective” categories of pathology and neurosis are medicalizations of formerly moral categories and, as such, carry punitive and normalizing force. And whether religious, scientific, philosophical, or lesbian feminist, Rubin calls all such frameworks for ranking and classifying sex “systems of sexual judgment” (1984: 122). A central premise of Rubin’s important essay, then, is that politics and morality are mutually exclusive endeavors, and that we must refuse the moralization of sex and sexuality if it is to remain a site of contestation, interrogation, and dissent, rather than an uncovering of nature, value, or truth.¹³ As we know, these latter terms – nature, value, truth – are different modes of insulating otherwise contestable claims from interrogation or critique. Nietzsche argues as much, further instructing that this act of insulation is simultaneously the operation of moralism, which attempts to bypass politics altogether, even as it asserts its own will to power. As Judith Butler similarly pointed out in her early, embattled defense of poststructuralist feminism, the determination that a premise is beyond question because it resides in the realm of nature or truth is a quintessentially political act: “To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality” (1995: 39). Later in this same essay, she argues that “this movement of interrogating that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest...is, in my view, at the heart of any radical project” (1995: 41).

13 Indeed, part of the controversy of Rubin’s essay was its suggestion that feminism was one of the moralized discourses that insulated sex and sexuality from political analysis and inquiry. In a particularly memorable passage, for example, Rubin aligns lesbian feminism with the Catholic Church: “Sounding like the lesbian feminist Julia Penelope, His Holiness explained that ‘considering anyone in a lustful way makes that person a sexual object rather than a human being worthy of dignity’” (1984: 298). This episode of the feminist sex wars suggests that queer theory emerges at least in part as a response to and rejection of a specifically left movement that, in and because of its moralism, became a conservative, even reactionary force for women in their sexual lives. In this vein, see also Califia 2002 [1979]; Moraga and Hollibaugh 1992 [1981].

To follow on (the early) Butler and Rubin, then, and also borrow from Rubin's terminology a bit, I want to suggest that queer theory's contribution to left politics is its claim that morality itself is a "vector of oppression" (1984: 293). Recognizing with Nietzsche that all moralities are more or less elaborate systems of punishment and cruelty, Edelman's queer political theory is a critique of oppression insofar as it recognizes the operation of morality as the production of queerness and a reproductive stranglehold on the lives of everyone else. This is why, as Michael Warner observed already in 1993, it cannot be determined in advance who or what queers are or what constituency they name, even as we can be sure that queerness is a radical, indeed "fundamentalist" resistance to the hegemony of the social order. As I have argued here, queerness entails a rejection of moralism and the moralist pieties about survival and preservation of the social order that constitute political, social, and subjective intelligibility. It is no accident, then, that queer theory focuses on and emerges from sexuality, a privileged locus of morality, moralisms, and moral panics of all sorts, as "Thinking Sex" aptly documents. This emergence, however, is also an astute recognition of the political importance of desire and a crucial argument for the foregrounding of desire as integral to liberation and liberatory politics. Because, in the end, politics is not a moral enterprise. Politics is about power: who has it and who does not. What both Nietzsche and queer theory at its best recognize is that morality and its idealizations *are* politics and in fact serve power's authoritarian function of condemning all those who fail to comply with its mandates. Thus morality is never emancipatory – an important reminder the left must heed – but perhaps a Nietzschean critical queer theory actually might be.

4 The Future of Revolutionary Desire

I want to return to one final problem with Brown's critique of identity politics, a problem perhaps external to its Nietzscheanism but not to its dalliance with a kind of moralism of its own. That problem is Brown's insistence on the necessity of utopia or utopian aspirations for left politics (an undeniably futurist argument) simultaneously as she asserts the impossibility of satisfying that utopian desire given its dissolution via the 20th century fall of communism. Far more than identity politics, this is the dilemma that occupies Brown's attention and endures throughout much of her work from *States of Injury* onward, although she articulates it differently at different moments.¹⁴ In "Wounded

¹⁴ Despite the long citational life of "Wounded Attachments," Brown made clear only a few years later that she wanted to revise its argument significantly (2001: 22). Even in "Wounded

Attachments,” Brown begins to outline this problem by claiming that identity politics cannot construct a future. So mired in its reactionary clinging to its own injured identity, identity politics forecloses the “desire for futurity” essential to freedom projects (1995: 75), a problem that cannot be resolved by “the kinds of ahistorical or utopian turns against identity politics made by a nostalgic and broken humanist Left” (1995: 75–76). This rudimentary articulation of the foreclosure of futurity becomes, in her next book, “a crisis in political teleology” (2001: 22), wherein Brown forthrightly declares that the left is bereft and purposeless in the face of the triumph of capitalism and the foreclosure of any alternatives to it. Here she adapts the argument of “Wounded Attachments” to suggest that left moralism instead emerges in the wake of the fall of the communist bloc and the demise of progress narratives:

Neither leftists nor liberals are free of the idea of progress in history. Neither can conceive freedom or equality without rights, sovereignty, and the state, and hence without the figures of a sovereign subject and a neutral state. The consequence of living these attachments as ungrievable losses – ungrievable because they are not fully avowed as attachments and hence are unable to be claimed as losses – is theoretical as well as political impotence and rage, which is often expressed as a reproachful political moralism. (2001: 21)¹⁵

Attachments” itself, she concedes that she may have misconstrued identity politics all along and therefore that the argument of the chapter itself does not hold up: “if I am right about the problematic of pain installed at the heart of many contemporary contradictory demands for political recognition, all that such pain may long for—more than revenge—is the chance to be heard into a certain release, recognized into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence losing, itself” (74–75). Although this, too, seems like an unlikely reading of the aspirations of “identity politics,” it is nevertheless an enormous admission coming at the end of a fairly scathing critique (which she denies is a critique, 55), an admission that allows Brown to conclude that the political task is neither the overcoming of left resentment nor a Marxian-type liberation (since identity politics are not class politics) but rather the construction of “a radically democratic political culture that can sustain such a project in its midst without being overtaken by it, a challenge that includes guarding against the steady slide of political into therapeutic discourse, even as we acknowledge the elements of suffering and healing we might be negotiating” (75). Given that it is Brown herself who has introduced the therapeutic reading of identity politics as a longing for release and self-overcoming, however, one wonders what exactly must be guarded against and by whom.

- 15 Although in her famous essay, “Resisting Left Melancholy” (1999), Brown offers a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of this “crisis in political teleology,” suggesting that the radicalism of identity politics was blunted by Reagan-Thatcherism and forced the left into a more traditionalist and accommodationist loyal opposition, this analysis does not make it into her other writings and is an outlier in the context of her larger work, which overall is more interested in the collapse of modernity and modern “progress” and the

The left's major problem is thus no longer resentful attachment to injury, but rather the specific philosophical problems of temporality and progress, along with the psychodynamics at stake in the left's desire for and loss of utopia and the grief and rage that accompany these losses (see also Brown, 2005). Indeed, as this problematic develops in Brown's work, it is almost as if utopia becomes the left's own wounded attachment – it is the aspiration that defines the left's identity, but it has become impossible, leaving us stranded on the shores of a broken and futile, if nevertheless wholly necessary sea of desire, an impassable barrier to freedom that we can only contemplate and/or drown ourselves in out of pure sorrow and despair: “We are awash in the loss of a unified analysis and unified movement, in the loss of labor and class as inviolable predicates of political analysis and mobilization, in the loss of an inexorable and scientific forward movement of history, and in the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism” (1999: 22).¹⁶ This problem is restated in less lachrymose terms even in Brown's more recent work, wherein she declares that “the Left opposes an order animated by profit instead of the thriving of the earth and its inhabitants,” but “it is not clear today how such thriving could be obtained and organized. Lacking a vision to replace those that foundered on the shoals of repression and corruption in the twentieth century, we are reduced to reform and resistance – the latter being a favored term today because it permits action as reaction, rather than as crafting an alternative” (2015: 220).¹⁷

effects of this on a left almost entirely, in her account, bound up with that version of progress.

- 16 And indeed, the upshot of this analysis is what Brown calls, borrowing from Benjamin, “left melancholy,” a defensive, reactionary, and self-serving shoring up of an exhausted and no-longer-viable identity/politics: “What emerges is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing” (1999: 26). Arash Davari (2018) extends Brown's notion of left melancholy in his articulation of what he calls “left-liberal melancholy,” a political position engendered by the losses of revolutionaries who experience failed revolutions and, as a result, turn to liberal ideals of human rights and American-style “democracy” as more sensible and practical political goals. Davari is clear that this, too, is an ultimately reactionary political position that reinforces U.S. imperialism.
- 17 Although even here is perhaps a hint of the old Nietzschean analysis, insofar as Brown dismisses “resistance” as “action as reaction,” which Nietzsche at least is clear is the behavior of slaves, not of masters. This bereftness of the left, then, continues to render us weak,

Lisa Lowe (2015) has argued that Brown's critique of neoliberalism constitutes a "mourning [of] Western liberal democracy as the only form for imagining 'the political,'" a grief that "universalizes the future of politics across the globe" and "subsum[es] the histories of decolonization in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East to the normative narrative of liberal democracy – even in the critical project of observing how it has been hollowed out while being ideologically touted" (2015: 198n54). Lowe's hunch is not wrong, as Brown explicitly confirms in *Undoing the Demos*. There, she observes that the demise of the left's revolutionary vision is no longer specific to the left anymore, but is rather symptomatic of "a ubiquitous, if unavowed, exhaustion and despair in Western civilization" (2015: 221). No longer a particular or particularly challenging strategic situation, the impossibility of left revolutionary desire *tout court* now signals for Brown the decadence of the West and its civilizational collapse:

At the triumphal "end of history" in the West, most have ceased to believe in the human capacity to craft and sustain a world that is humane, free, sustainable, and, above all, modestly under human control. This loss of conviction about the human capacity to steer its existence or even to secure its future is the most profound and devastating sense in which modernity is "over." (2015: 221)

Here Brown confirms that her lamentations for the left have been and remain the laments of a rarefied white Euro-American socialist left that already foresaw its own demise with the rise of "identity politics" and the fall of "actually existing" communism. As Lowe correctly points out, Brown's stubbornly north Atlantic geographic focus limits the domain of the political to the liberal democracy of which she is otherwise famous for being so critical; her sorrow over the loss of "alternatives" to it actually shores up its power by naturalizing it as the only possible and foreseeable future for political struggle.¹⁸

contemptible, and without the ability to act or affirm ourselves except in reaction to a "hostile external world."

18 Brown not only ignores anti-colonial and decolonial political criticism and projects, then, but in a strange way actually seems to accept the main contours of conservative and neo-conservative claims that the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy signal the "end of history." Although she may mourn this demise rather than celebrate it, her acceptance of this narrative is noteworthy and, like her disparagement of any politics that is not class politics, largely unremarked in the reception of her work more broadly. (I am grateful to Nicolas Veroli for this astute observation.)

But what if Brown is wrong? Not simply in the racial, geographical, and political narrowness of her political diagnosis and what she very unfortunately both reproduces and laments the loss of under the rubric of “Western civilization,” but also in her dogged insistence that a utopian or aspirational futurist vision is essential to left politics? It would seem from Brown’s work that the loss of revolutionary futurity leaves us with nothing or, what is the same thing (if not worse), nothing but what Heather Love might call backward feelings – “feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness” (2009: 4). Although in her own work, Love correlates these feelings with “the experience of social exclusion and...the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire,” she is tracking a similar problematic as Brown in her attempt to document the tension at stake in telling queer history as a story of progress without turning its back on the vast archive of pain, suffering, oppression, and exclusion that constitutes the queer past, a past that is not yet (and may never finally be) over. Although such “negative” affects do, Love admits, pose significant obstacles to political action and also seem to evacuate the present of its ostensibly progressive valence, she nevertheless does not conclude that politics can therefore only flourish or thrive on “positivity.” Instead, she encourages the development of a history and a politics of “feeling backward,” a timeline and praxis that is neither linear nor futurist nor exclusively focused on a brighter tomorrow. This is a history and politics that does not let us neglect, ignore, or leave behind all of the closeted loves, prematurely ended lives, shame-filled childhoods (and adolescences and adulthoods) – in short, all the failures, disappointments, and self-sabotages – that are part and parcel of queer history and, therefore, essential to any aspiration or vision of queer futurity. This “at times can simply mean living with injury – not fixing it” (2009: 4).

Even more than Love’s insistence on the necessity of including the unhappiness of the past in our account of the present, in letting that unhappiness inform how we might think about or imagine the meaning of “progress,” is Edelman’s even stronger criticism of aspirational futurity. Recall that, for Edelman, futurism’s linear temporality is precisely what secures the hegemony of futurism and ensures the (re)production of abjected queerness. This is the operation of moralism as Nietzsche defines it, a reading I have argued can be marshalled for liberatory politics by reading it in conjunction with queer critique. Indeed, if any and all futurity – even left futurity – is already co-opted by the cult of the Child in whose name the future is always wagered and promised, and from which queers are necessarily abjected, then even left, utopian visions remain committed to the ideological operation that endlessly (re)produces abjected queerness. Thus, although Brown is wholly correct that the “desire for

freedom" (1995), or the "exuberant critical utopian impulse" (2005: 114), or what I would call "revolutionary desire" is essential to left politics, she is wrong in her assessment that such desire requires a demonstrably desirable and obviously attainable object for its satisfaction. For, what queer theory teaches (and what every queer knows) is that desire all too often simply does not want the right things and that "satisfaction" is not actually all that satisfying.¹⁹ Yet this does not mean that we ever really or finally "finish" with desired objects – much less desire itself – once and for all. In some sense, all these "failures" of desire are what queerness names. Those other fictitious, aspirational notions about desire – that it can and should be for the "right" objects, the attainment of which will make you truly happy, thereby allowing you to move beyond the petty indignities of sex (and gender) and go on and live a meaningful life – are the stories that get told by every authority figure ever, all of whom are actually seeking to order, systematize, predict, and control desire's waywardness in order to secure docility and social control, a disciplinary imperative couched in sanctimony so as to conceal its own will to power. This is not to say that desire is *per se* liberatory. It is to say, however, that queerness as inappropriate, immoral, unthinkable, impossible, deviant, and/or depraved desire will inevitably be produced by politics' moralizing imperatives, and therefore that liberatory politics cannot do without desire, and even more so without queerness, if it is to resist and surmount this moralism. In other words, the left can and must learn from queers' and queer theory's lessons regarding the futility and reactionary anti-queerness of the moralized insistence on futurity, even when that future is a leftist or utopian one.

Brown is therefore right to see revolutionary desire as crucial to left politics, but she is wrong to think that it is in danger of being extinguished (1995b) or, worse, that it must be "educated" for freedom by the intellectual class (2015: 11). Such elitist, Platonic disciplinarianism is out of place in any liberatory politics that recognizes that (improper) desire lies at the very root of (anti-)moralism and that anti-moralism is crucial to aspirational freedom projects. Left politics is neither dead or dying; nor, moreover, does it reside solely in the domain of Euro-Atlantic class struggle or the morose, impossible refusal of neoliberalism. Rather, its life is and resides in queerness, which is a dissident refusal of and opposition to morality and moralisms of all sorts, which only stigmatize, demean, and destroy freedom. Realizing this requires that we break not simply with outmoded, narrowly socialist versions of the left such as the one Brown advocates, but also its constitutive futurism that dooms queers and queer radicalism to the

19 For a reading of impolitic, inappropriate, failed, and/or futile desire as a (sometimes disavowed) basis of trans*ness, see Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women" (2018).

unspeakable domain of negativity and death. It means, in other words, that we must break with the heteronormativity of left politics if we are to engage in a radical praxis that can actually aspire to a liberated world.

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