Abjection and the Constitutive Nature of Difference: Class Mourning in Margaret's Museum and Legitimating Myths of Innocence in Casablanca

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This essay examines the connections between ignorance and abjection. Chanter relates Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection to the mechanisms of division found in feminist theory, race theory, film theory, and cultural theory. The neglect of the co-constitutive relationships among such categories as gender, race, and class produces abjection. If those categories are treated as separate parts of a person’s identity that merely interlock or intermesh, they are rendered invisible and unknowable even in the very discourses about them. Race thus becomes gender’s unthought other, just as gender becomes the excluded other of race. Via an exploration of Margaret’s Museum and Casablanca, the author shows why the various sexual, racial, and nationalist dynamics of the two films cannot be reduced to class or commodity fetishism, following Karl Marx, or psychoanalytic fetishism, following Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Whether they are crystallized in Marxist or Lacanian terms, fetishistic currencies of exchange are haunted by an imaginary populated by unthought, abject figures. Ejected from the systems of exchange consecrated as symbolic, fragmented, dislocated, diseased body parts inform and constitute meaning.

A good deal of feminist theory is in the process of attempting to formulate more adequately than has been done in the past the relationships among race, class, gender, and sexuality. Current terms of analysis are dominated by a model of intersectionality in which these categories are construed as interconnecting, overlapping, or intersecting with one another. While feminist theorists have put
such models to productive use, it is my contention that this way of envisaging the relationships inscribed in the complex field that now constitutes the terrain of feminist theory often remains problematic. Intersectionality models tend to attribute an analytic equivalence to the concepts of class, gender, race, and sexuality, to assume that these concepts are transparent, and that they have integrity in and of themselves. They sometimes fall short of conceptualizing the ways in which these categories have in fact been historically formative of one another, although the constituting role that, for example, race has played in configuring gender, has remained invisible in (white) feminist formulations of gender. Precisely as invisible, race has functioned in ways that have shaped, informed, and produced the discourse of gender, but its role has remained under-theorized, inarticulate. It has been included in covert ways, as an ambiguous ground. There is a compacted and sedimented history that cannot be parsed out without confronting the ways in which one category has served as constitutive of another in a particular historical epoch. If feminist theory fails to pay attention to the constitutive but invisible role that race, class, and sexuality, in different moments, have played in the configuration of gender, the apparently foundational and universal valence of gender will remain uncontested. Race, sexuality, and class will only be permitted to play second fiddle to gender, which will continue to operate as if it were neutral with regard to these secondary, derivative differences while in fact it retains the middle-class privilege of white heteronormativity.

The problem I am pointing to is not limited to feminist theory, but finds itself replicated in race theory. Race theorists have fallen prey to a similar theoretical impasse. Race theorists contest the hegemonic privilege of whiteness by rendering visible those who have been both historically and theoretically marginalized according to the invisibly normative standard of whiteness. In doing so, race theory has tended to draw attention to whiteness as the hidden privilege in terms of which the dynamic of racialization has played itself out. In order to maintain itself as the dominant narrative, whiteness has constructed for itself the racialized other, which has functioned as an excluded ground. Just as feminist theory has allowed the concept of gender to dictate its liberatory agenda, so race theory has allowed the concept of race to remain at the center of its analyses. Feminist theory thereby continues to marginalize the experiences of its racialized others, just as race theory continues to marginalize its gendered others.

In efforts to take seriously the fact that gender has relied upon an inarticulate, indeterminate notion of race, or race has a repressed gendered history, theorists have rendered determinate those racialized or gendered histories that have been left indeterminate. The very process of rendering determinate this indeterminacy can lead to the reification, or fetishization, of those marginal excluded others who have played a role in the configuration of gender or race
discourses, but whose role has not been acknowledged as such, or has only been acknowledged in exclusionary ways. Not only is there a danger of fetishizing previously excluded others, but in the process of bringing to light their abjection, in the process of giving shape to, or specifying the contours of their history and experience, as often as not, new others are abjected.

The logic of fetishism, employed in different ways by psychoanalytic theory and Marxist theory has found its way into feminist theory, race theory, film theory, and cultural theory. In questioning the continued theoretical commitment to recycling the logic of disavowal, even when this fetishistic trope is used as a critical resource, or even when its production is inadvertent, I suggest that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (1982) can provide critical resources. Neither object nor subject, the abject designates those unthought, excluded others, whose borderline (non)existence secures the identity of those who occupy authoritative positions in relation to dominant discourses. The mothers, daughters, and wives whose unpaid physical and psychic labor could not be recognized by Marxist class theory are abjected by a theory that is incapable of acknowledging the contribution of women due to its exclusive concentration on class relations and the categories of paid labor. In turn, those shadowy figures that people the imaginary of the official story that mainstream, white, middle-class, Western feminism tells itself function as abject. African-American or South Asian immigrant domestic workers render precarious the public/private distinction that has been so central to formulating mainstream feminist theory (Bhattacharjee 1997; Collins 2000; Carby 2000; Mohanty 1997). The very existence of racialized minorities that perform paid labor within the home is ignored by the representation of home as domestic space out of which (privileged, white, Western) women must migrate, and the public realm as a space of freedom and work that must be accessed. Far from being a space of liberation, as it is typically construed within Western feminist frameworks, the public realm operates in oppressive and imperialist ways for colonized peoples. The forced inclusion and incorporation of native women by U.S. governmental systems, and the imposition of U.S. citizenship on these (non)subjects, whose land and ways of life were appropriated, cannot be accounted for by the mainstream feminist categories (Guerrero 1997). Peripheral yet facilitating, the zones that these figures occupy are ambiguous border zones that straddle the neat dichotomy between public and private and complicate the legacy of civil rights as unambiguously liberatory.

Thus the ignorance that has allowed mainstream feminist theory to proceed in ways that are oblivious to the racialized exploitation of certain others has been explored in a variety of ways. Yet corrective analyses systematically encounter the problem of reinventing new forms of marginalization in the very attempt to redress hegemonic relations. The invention of new others can be specified as a problem of omission—where the interests or concerns of certain marginalized groups are simply neglected or overlooked. Or it can be construed
as structurally produced by the ongoing specification or inclusion of previously marginalized groups as no longer marginalized, or not-to-be-marginalized. To take just one example, the imperative that South Asian women should not be marginalized by white, Western, feminist discourse is issued with the self-consciousness that even the category "South Asian" functions hegemonically, reinventing the terms of imperialism, and privileging the experiences and reflections of some South Asians over others (see Bhattacharjee 1997).

The trope of fetishism that has proved itself so fertile as a theoretical paradigm for race theory is displaced either from a Marxist theory of class antagonism or from a psychoanalytically inspired reading of sexual difference. The racialized other is theorized as the ultimate white fetish, yet in this transcription of fetishism by race theory, the references to class and sexuality typically fall out of the analysis, giving rise to a theory of fetishism whose productivity succeeds only as it represses its historical and theoretical origins. In transferring the theoretical apparatus of fetishism from Marxism or psychoanalysis (or fabricating an amalgam of the two), race theory transposes class interest into race interest, or replaces a sexual dynamic with a racial dynamic.

The language of fetishism has gained currency and, with it, the concept of disavowal has begun to circulate, often in contexts that remain ignorant of, or disown, the ideological commitments to which purveyors of this term thereby commit themselves. It is recycled with varying degrees of success, but the economic laws governing its recirculation are not in question. They are governed by masculinist and racist assumptions, the measure of which has apparently not yet been taken, given the prevalence of the language of fetishism, which takes on a universal, homogenizing symbolic value, much like the monetary value Marx decried under the commodity form of production. An unreflective commitment to a universally fetishizing discourse recycles in a subtle but pervasive way the priority of white, heterosexist, masculinist, capitalist values, a tendency to be guarded against, especially in work that takes itself to be feminist, or presents itself as asserting the importance of race in the face of white feminist and psychoanalytic neglect of it.

Is the univocal register in terms of which theories of fetishism establish themselves as the cultural currency of theory accidental, or does it reflect something internal to the theory itself? If the universality with which gender or race or class assert themselves as the privileged, authoritative, and autonomous terms of radical discourses mimetically reflects the dominance assumed by the discourses of patriarchy, white supremacy, or bourgeois ideology against which they are mobilized, can the tendency to produce new dominant narratives of gender and race guard against new forms of abjection? Must each of these discourses retain a discrete, impervious focus that reinvents the hegemonic terms of the very discourses under protest in order to achieve success? What could help prevent the all-too-frequent relapse into a false universalism that undercuts the radical intentions of apparently progressive discourses?
By casting fetishism as only a moment of an ongoing process that is implicated in the fluidity of imaginary, amorphous, invisible, excluded, unthought others, we can draw attention to the logic of abjection that grounds fetishistic discourses, a logic that such discourses utilize more or less consciously. There is an ambivalent inclusion of subjects, who are, on the one hand situated outside of representation in a mythical, indeterminate past that is mythologized as prior to civilized society, and, on the other hand, granted access to forms of representation that are nevertheless shaped and informed by their exclusion. Access is granted to these forms of representation only if those who are excluded acquiesce to their representation as subjects who are essentially the same as those who control that access. Articulating this logic of abjection clarifies how discourses of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and nationalism are implicated in one another in ways that play off one another to produce their own internal others. At the same time, the prevalence of the trope of fetishism, a trope that has asserted itself in different ways within the discourses of Marxism and psychoanalysis, and has been imported into the discourses of feminist and race theory to create new dominant narratives, depends upon the erection and celebration of a univocal, monolithic value. While the value of fetishistic theory—whether in commodity fetishism or its psychoanalytic variant—resides in its capacity for transference across discourses, its reassertion of an apparently universal standard of value in every case marks the limits of its interpretive capacity. What needs to be problematized is the tendency of discourses that take themselves to be progressive to reinvent the universal appeal of fetishistic values, without heeding their own production of the abject.

By taking Kristeva's notion of abjection as a starting point, but developing a more politicized understanding of the abject than she does (Kristeva 1982), I address the ways in which the categories of race, class, sexuality, and nationalism need to be thought as constitutive of one another. It is not enough to see these as factors, vectors, or axes of discrimination that can be thought of as overlapping, intersecting, or operating in hybrid conjunction with one another. Rather than presuppose the coherence of these categories in and of themselves, I propose to advance the critical project of uncovering how they are always already shaped and informed by, implicated in, one another. That is, I focus on what might be called the prehistory of these categories, the processes by which they came to be recognizable as discrete categories, a process I suggest can be theorized in terms of the fetishization or reification of abject flows. The integrity of imaginary identities is often won at the cost of rendering others abject. The problem of combating discrimination, then, involves gaining epistemic access to habits of which we might not be fully aware, but which require some identities to occupy the position of the jettisoned other (Kristeva 1982). Dominant discourses operate in ways that gain legitimacy for themselves by maintaining the fantasmatic completion of some bodies only by requiring abjection of others, and then denying the completion thereby effected. Racist,
sexist, classist, heterosexist, and nationalist mythologies are thus held together through the expulsion or rejection of fragmented, abject bodies.

The enigma that woman came to represent for Sigmund Freud operated by means of a masculinist economy whose contours are still in the process of being drawn, which in turn appeals to a racial economy that has more recently come to light. By using the notion of abjection strategically, it is possible to clarify how the psychic economy that Freud put in place is subtended by a halting discourse about both race and femininity. Focusing attention on the maternal relation as the locus of a primal mapping that is not yet symbolic or syntactic, but semiotic, Kristeva's explanation of abjection offers a way of reworking the dominant psychoanalytic model (Kristeva 1982).

The missing phallus of the mother, the lack that is signaled by women's thematic absence from the Freudian corpus, is what drives the scene of representation and motivates the production of phallic goods. Woman as castrated is also the guarantor of meaning. Her lack serves as a motivating force in fetishistic production. In Kristevan terms, abjection signifies this impossible real, which both exceeds, and makes possible the configurations of the symbolic-imaginary. While such readers as Kristeva (1984), Luce Irigaray (1985a), and Sarah Kofman (1980) have brought to light the ways in which psychoanalysis situates woman as a site of indispensable impossibility or inscribes woman as a constitutive site of lack, they have been less inclined to question the racial and class assumptions of their own discourse. Less often remarked than its failure to come to terms with sexual difference is the extent to which the masculinist assumptions of psychoanalytic discourse are infused with an unmarked racist discourse. So, in his account of fetishism, Freud likened the substitutes that stand in for the penis “to the fetishes in which savages believe that their gods are embodied” (Freud 1905, 153). Here, Freud relied not only upon the mythical expectation that female sexuality should conform to masculine sexuality—and the production of that condition—by means of a fetish, when it does not obtain, but also upon a mirroring of the beliefs of “savages,” a reference that is typically ignored or left unexamined. Anne McClintock has argued that there is also an “elision of the nurse from the Oedipal theory” (1995, 93) and an “erasure of the female domestic worker” (94) from Freud's case histories, which amount to the abjection of the working class. Freud's account of fetishism thus relies on the imaginary assumption that women are castrated—which, despite its imaginary status, based on male morphology, Freud refers to as a “fact.” Castration is disavowed when it is substituted for by a tangible object (for example, shoes, fur, or velvet) that covers over the ostensible lack, the horror of castration. The possibility of men's castration that women threaten is thus kept at bay by the fetishist. When race theorists transcribe the theory of fetishism, race is theorized as an accessory to whiteness in a way that replaces (substitutes) femininity as an accessory to masculinity, rather than thinking through the mutual implications of such accessorizing maneuvers.
For their part, those discourses that have accorded race a central place have repeated to some extent the masculinist imaginary of psychoanalysis. Postcolonial and race theory critiques of film theory have tended to perpetuate the priority of the trope of fetishism. Frantz Fanon (1967), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Robert Gooding-Williams (1995), Henry Krips (1999), and Clyde Taylor (1996) have all appropriated the fetish in a way that allows the privilege of the phallus to continue its reign unchallenged, and in doing so, they have continued in varying degrees to marginalize the concerns that feminist theorists have put on the agenda. By the same token, feminists who adhere to the trope of fetishism have continued to marginalize not only the concerns that postcolonial and race theorists have vocalized, but also the efforts of gay and lesbian theorists and class theorists to prevent issues of sexuality and class identity from always being delegated as secondary to sexual difference. At the same time, they inadvertently pay homage to the masculinist discourse of the phallus that their interventions as feminists presumably are intended to disrupt.

The reason the discourse of abjection promises to provide a rewriting of the foundational Oedipal myth is threefold. First, by situating the abject as prior to castration, Kristeva also divorces it from sexual differentiation (1982). As prior to sexual difference, abjection can offer a model for thinking about primal differentiation along other lines, as structured by race, class, or sexuality. The positing of the maternal body as the privileged site of abjection takes place within a retroactive economy that constructs women's lack as constitutive of the reign of the phallus. If that retroactive construction is itself underwritten by an unacknowledged racing of subjects that dictates, for example, the racial genealogy of legitimated reproduction—including the racial and class-bound dictates of marriage—the historical and structural complexity of how race has played into the abjection of women and the elevation of the phallus must be confronted. The unconscious of psychoanalysis is populated not only by the abject maternal, but also by a history of colonialism and slavery. This is not to suggest that race necessarily represents a deeper level of abjection than sex, but rather that the retroactive history that psychoanalysis has constructed for itself has situated women as abject in a way that is inextricably implicated in a racializing of subjectivity for which psychoanalysis fails to account. When the discourse of fetishism is transcribed into race theory, it likewise typically fails to account for the abjection of women that it presupposes. Precisely the fluidity of abjection, and its consequent susceptibility to being shaped, and reshaped, by theories that fetishize a particular identity against an untheorized other—or series of others—renders it an appropriate way of figuring the constitutive nature of difference.

Second, because it is situated on the cusp of the symbolic and imaginary, operating as a semiotic affect, abjection includes the possibility of restructuring the symbolic, by opening up the question of which imaginary body—how it is raced and classed for example—fuels and informs the unconscious that
the psychoanalytic narrative has constructed for itself. As such, it potentially expands the compass of psychoanalytic thinking, making it possible to think the primal mapping of the body in terms of racial geographies, such as Fanon’s account of the corporeal fragmentation he experiences under the gaze of the child who points at him and says, “Look, a Negro! . . . I’m frightened!” (Fanon 1967, 112). Only by making psychoanalysis accountable not just for the abjection of the maternal, but also for its dependence on a racially specific production of meaning can feminist theory successfully contest the otherwise unchallenged privilege that sexual difference continues to arrogate to itself. So long as cultural theory continues to invest the cultural capital of fetishism in such areas as race theory, which are thereby made to replicate the phallic economy that continues to assert itself through a sublimation of raced subjects even as it has the appearance of taking seriously the question of race, the myth of sameness remains alive and well.

Third, abjection avoids the false move that infects some feminist theories of positing the mother as perfected and complete, as if the maternal body could provide a founding or originary narrative that might serve to dislodge that of the Oedipal father. To posit the mother as an alternative to Oedipal logic only succeeds in reversing that logic, in insisting that the mother’s body is not defined by its missing part, as castration theory would have it, but is rather the whole that the idealized paternal body was previously imagined to be. To construe the mother as founding an alternate myth is to idealize one sex rather than the other, but it is still to construe sexual difference as foundational. Abjection confirms that the body is in parts, and that those fragmented parts can be made whole both by the structuring myths of racism or phallocentrism, and by alternative myths, and in doing so it avoids positing alternate foundational myths that recycle a new version of universalism. To recognize the dynamic of abjection is not to confirm the particular configurations that current forms of racism and sexism sanction, but it is to perform the more limited strategic role of acknowledging that some subjects are abjected by others in a way that reproduces a chain of abjection. By drawing attention to this dynamic, we make available the question of whether the systematic and predictable disenfranchisement of subjects marked as raced, classed, and sexed can be challenged without the equally predictable production of newly abject people.

By discussing the mutual implication of race, class, sexuality, and nationalism in two films, Margaret’s Museum (1995) and Casablanca (1942), I want to illuminate how these concepts are historically inscribed in one another. Both films can be read in terms of the trope of fetishism, yet such a reading fails to do justice to the dimensions of sexuality and race that operate in excess of the fetishistic tropes embedded in the logics of commodities and race relations.

With some legitimacy, one could read Margaret’s Museum in terms of commodity fetishism. By exposing the impact of a mining economy on the women
of the community, the film points to the hidden dimension on which the extraction of surplus value depends, a feminine economy of domesticity that lends value to the product without being recognized as valuable. In this sense, the activities of housework, the ideological and material reproduction of the worker both at the level of daily rejuvenation and at the level of the reproduction of the laboring class, serve to support the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist mine owners.

The surplus value that is created by women's work, by housework, is not accounted for by classical Marxism, the categories of which are dictated by a class analysis that privileges paid labor. Since Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels focused more or less exclusively on remunerated work, they failed to fully appreciate the value that work in the home added to the goods that men's wages brought home. Their primary analytic categories remained oblivious to sex (Hartmann 1981; Rubin 1975). Before it can be put on the table, the food that is eaten has to be cleaned, prepared, and cooked. Marxism's indifference to the value of women's work is a function of the assumption that only the labor accomplished outside the home, in the realm marked as public rather than private, is productive of the profits that drive capitalist accumulation. Such an assumption is itself a function of a privileging of the abstraction produced by the conversion of use value into exchange values, or the reduction of labor to a common, monetary value. The equivalence of paid labor represented by the common denominator that money comes to represent translates into the substitutability of laborers. Just as the qualitative differences between different types of labor is covered over, so the specificity of workers, including their gender and race, is obscured. If the specific value that housework adds to the product by enabling the laborer to return to work—wearing clean clothes, on a full stomach, or having slept in a fresh bed—remains invisible to capitalism, this invisibility is reproduced in Marxist analyses of the processes by which capital is created. The work of cleaning and cooking adds an indispensable yet invisible value to the product, the value of material and psychic renewal that allows the worker to return to work. Housework does not qualify as capitalist labor, escaping Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism precisely because the use values it creates are not converted into abstract exchange values, but remain in a nondialectical relationship defined by home and family.

Since the use value of housework is not converted into exchange value, not reified or represented in terms that come to stand over and against the worker, its significance is not captured by the theory of commodity fetishism. One response to this is to follow the logic of commodity fetishism by demonstrating that the value of the work women do, of which housework is representative, can be cashed out it terms of this logic. Another response, the one I want to develop, is to resist the hegemony of commodity fetishism, to affirm the value of the work that women do as in excess of or resistant to capitalist, fetishistic forms of reification. In pointing to this excess, it is not so much a question of
claiming the fluidity of a feminine imaginary in relation to capitalist symbolic forms of representation. Rather, it is a matter of showing how such symbolics rely on affective economies that are excluded from the very terms of representation that are permitted to remain dominant. Dominant symbolics thereby trade in affects that circulate among women and other minority groups in ways that achieve the coherence and legitimacy of these symbolics, without mapping out how peripheral identities function to legitimize them.

While showing how circumscribed the lives of the miners and their families are by the economy of the mine, Margaret's Museum focuses upon the often untold stories of women who are left behind when their husbands, sons, and brothers die. Their job is to clean up the psychic and economic mess that their lives become when the mine takes its inevitable toll. The film thereby does more than elaborate the blind spot in Marxist theory that it was left up to feminist theorists to point out. It is not merely a matter of revealing the various ways in which women contribute to the end product of capitalism, an analysis that contains the value of women's work within the profits of capital. Rather, the film explores the psychic or emotional cost of the production of coal on the women who are routinely left behind by the miners whose death punctuates the working rhythm of the mine. The reproduction of the worker is facilitated not just by housework or low-paid work in the service sector of the economy, but by another facet of uncompensated work that has traditionally been reserved for women, namely the psychic work of mourning. Margaret's Museum highlights the facilitating work of love, reproduction, and caring, work that remains invisible to a masculinist analysis of capital, but which is indispensable for the reproduction of its workers. At the same time, it explores the cultural homogenization that capitalism imposes in its systematic obliteration of historical, linguistic, and cultural traditions that do not conform to its logic.

Without the proper functioning of the family and the service sector of labor, workers will not be replaced. Margaret (Helena Bonham Carter) understands this as she evades the spell that capitalism weaves, whereby the choices of workers are circumscribed by the capitalist system, an economic system that appears implacable and unavoidable. Margaret does all she can to avoid repeating the pattern that her mother warned her against. She marries someone who has renounced working in the mine and leaves him when he returns to work there, declaring that she will not go to his funeral. But she still ends up "in the nuthouse," where her mother predicted her husband would put her.

Margaret's abject, leaky body marks her as one who does not operate according to traditional boundaries, one whose resistance to the dominant ideology of the mining community has already been built up. Known for her runny nose, she has mourned the death of her father and brother, and she cannot or will not tolerate the death of her husband and a second brother. When Margaret takes the corpses of Neil Currie (Clive Russell) and Jimmy (Craig Oleinik) to her mother's house and cuts them up, it is not because she has a melancholic
attachment to them, not merely that she cannot let them go. What she cannot
tolerate is the total disregard that the mining company has for the value of
human life in its imposition of apparently all-encompassing constraints on the
community. If her reaction is unconventional, it is not irrational—not unless
rationality is determined by the measure of capitalist values. By pickling the
lungs of her husband, who played the bagpipes and refused to return to the
mine until Margaret declared she wouldn't have children she couldn't afford to
feed, Margaret wants to show what healthy lungs should look like. By pickling
the lungs of her grandfather, whose black lungs reflect a lifetime of working as a
coal miner, she wants to show what the work conditions have done to them. By
pickling the penis of her fifteen-year-old brother, she puts on display the body
part that was most important to him at his age. By subjecting an unwitting
public to this display of body parts, Margaret transforms her abjected status
into a demand for change, and in doing so, she brings about the abjection of
others. At the same time, director Mort Ransen recalls the fate of Saarjite
Baartman, who became known as the Hottentot Venus, and whose genitalia
were preserved in formalin and put on display in a bell jar by the Musée de
l'Homme in Paris for a curious public to view (Schiebinger 1993, 163). He thus
contests the racist assumptions of a viewing public who turned Baartman into
a monstrosity, transforming the method used to display parts of her body into
a challenge to the routine production of death by unsafe, capitalist mining
practices. In so doing, he reveals as monstrous the exploitation of the capitalist
system while recuperating the abject spectacle to which Baartman's body was
reduced by a colonial gaze.

The scream of a tourist fleeing the museum of body parts is the inarticulate
expression of wordless horror that frames the film, opening and closing its
depiction of the suffocating and eviscerating economy of the mine. Margaret
imposes on others the abject bodies of her relatives. If it is a cathartic moment
for Margaret, it is also a refusal to submit to the system, a refusal to submit to
this burden without communicating its horror to others, as she invites others to
witness, albeit at some remove, the horror she has undergone. That her response
is to create a museum, to aestheticize the political, exemplifies the way in which
art has become a substitute for more traditional forms of political protest, a site
in which the political is sublimated. That the museum is created not so much as
a memorial for the dead but rather as a protest against the ongoing exploitation
of capitalist mining companies raises the question of what kind of intervention
Margaret is effecting in putting the body parts of her dead male relatives on
display. By creating a space that she calls a museum, by inviting members of a
presumably unknowing and uncaring public to witness, albeit in a limited way,
the horror of the system that produced their death, she is asking the public not
to forget, but also inciting action.

Margaret's acts provoke us to think about the political impact of art in
creating a museum that challenges the role museums have typically played, as
productive of imperial, colonial knowledge, or as confirming what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997, 7) refers to as the triumphal role of the capitalist march of progress. It thereby follows in the tradition of museums that function as memorials to a past that is never to be forgotten, not to celebrate that past as honorable, but to prevent its repetition. In this way, it recalls the Holocaust Museum, which commemorates an event that in some sense exceeds the bounds of representation, an event to which the film refers more explicitly, as we shall see in a moment. At the same time, the film thematizes in a narrative form the question it asks at a more formal level, namely, what will be the political effects of such films as Margaret's Museum? Abjection can be a response to the failure of politics, but it can also reinstitute the political. The process by which sublimation of the political takes place needs to be elaborated. If no attempt is made to desublimate the processes that occur in cultural productions that become sites of sublimation, then no challenge will be registered to the laws that require sublimation.

Having returned to work in the mine, Neil takes Margaret to experience, for the first time, taking a shower. The wire mesh of the perimeter of the mine, through which we see Margaret looking in, and the grim, hardened, empty expressions of the men in the elevator which is about to take them down to the pit, prepare for the image of the showers that unmistakably evokes the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. The tension of the scene is relieved when it is juxtaposed to Margaret's delight as hot water, not gas, flows down on her. The water flows not to wash away the coal dust that has penetrated her grandfather's lungs and incapacitated him, but for Margaret's gratuitous pleasure. The lovemaking that follows is an apparently joyful scene of reconciliation between Margaret and Neil, but its foreshadowing by shots of the wire perimeter, the elevator, and the shower heads, symbolizes the inhumanity of the oppressive and dangerous work conditions of the mine, evoking the ultimate, unrepresentable atrocity.

Their love for one another and their aspiration to have children are circumscribed by the mine in which this scene takes place, and which will shortly be the death of Neil, whose attempts to escape its hold have failed. When Margaret asks him "How long does it last?" she means how long will the hot water keep running, but Neil's answer "forever" also refers to his love for her. "Don't you dare leave me," Margaret tells him, but the promise of forever is undone when Neil's life is cut short by the mining accident that was all but inevitable once he had made the decision to return to the mine. As the accident occurs, Margaret's grandfather, who was also a miner and has been suffering from lung disease for years, is in the last throes of death. Thus the implacable economy of the mine, which has already claimed the lives of Margaret's father and one of her brothers, now claims the life of her grandfather, and, at the same moment, not only her husband, but also her younger brother, Jimmy. With the weight of death across three generations of his family, Margaret's Uncle Angus, who has done everything he can to prevent Jimmy from working in the mine
and whose efforts have failed, stands speechless and abject. Like death itself, he can only clutch Margaret to him as he faces her, unable to tell her the news, unable to say what must be said.

By juxtaposing concentration camps with the work ethic of the coal mine, Margaret's Museum asks us to think about the wider political context, posing the question of how far capitalism requires the working class to play the role of a dispensable subhuman category of workers whose disposability is necessary for the maintenance of capitalism. It explores the hidden psychic economy on which capitalist exploitation rests, by examining the psychic toll that the death of husbands, sons, and brothers exacts on the wives, mothers, and sisters who mourn them. A mining company operates with apparent impunity on the assumption that the lives of working men are expendable and takes death to be an inevitable, routine part of every day economic calculations. The production of corpses, the expendability of workers, is itself dependent upon the reproducibility of workers, and as such dependent upon the women who are mothers, and homemakers, but whose physical and psychic work remains invisible to the symbolic of the capitalist mining company.

Set in Nova Scotia, Margaret's Museum depicts the obliteration of the Gaelic identity embodied in Neil's playing of the bagpipes, his songs, and his attempts to keep alive the Gaelic language. As Neil says of Margaret's grandfather, addressing her brother, "He can't breathe, he can't talk, he can't walk. You know the only thing he's got? Some old songs in his head, that he can hardly remember, that your father hardly even knew and you don't know at all. Came here and lost their tongues, their music, their songs. Everything but their shovels."

Neil's song of mourning for Margaret's brother, Charlie-Dave, reinvigorates the tradition of Gaelic songs, connecting Margaret to a past that is lost to her, a past that has no place in the symbolic economy of capitalism, except in the form of absence as omission. In giving symbolic form to this lost past, Neil's music also asserts the validity of another symbolic, one that translates the affects of loss into meaningful and legible signs, rather than a symbolic that severs its connection to the death it produces, to its own history. The symbolic of capitalism only deals in signs whose value can be converted into abstract exchange values; it cannot recognize value or meaning in songs unless it converts such value into commercial value, canceling any excess signification, rendering melancholic effects pathological.2

The mine is the only viable way to support a family. Neil's attempts to find alternative employment or to keep alive his Gaelic culture are neatly contained by the capitalist economy of the mine. Neil loses his job as dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant when a relative of the family arrives. If in one way the restaurant offers an example of an alternative economy, which, in sharp contrast to the mine, regards loyalty to family as premium, in another way, this exemplary loyalty is dictated by the racism that would no doubt prevent members of this family from participating in the wider economy.
In 1992, an explosion killed all twenty-six miners working in Westray Coal Mine, Stellarton, Nova Scotia. Justice K. Peter Richard, commissioner of the Westray Mine Public Inquiry, concluded that "the Westray operation defied the fundamental rules and principles of safe mining practices. . . . Management failed to adopt and effectively promote a safety ethic underground. Instead, management, through its actions and attitudes, sent a different message—Westray was to produce coal at the expense of worker safety" (Richard 1997).

While Margaret's Museum offers an opportunity for a meditation on the implicated nature of gender, class, and Gaelic culture, Casablanca offers fertile ground for a consideration of how nations imagine themselves on the basis of legitimating myths of racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities. The propagandist subtext of Casablanca is well known. It was used to support America's involvement in World War II, and it thus played a role in the United States' decision to help the Allied forces prevent Adolf Hitler's attempt to exterminate Jews and ostensibly purify the world. I suggest that a complex network of myths concerning sexuality, class, and race function as the subtext of Casablanca, facilitating America's representation of itself as Europe's savior. This mythical self-representation of America rests upon a repression of its own racialized history and the perpetuation of a myth of purity around which it seeks to consolidate its national identity—a myth that appeals to the purity of Ilsa (Ingrid Bergmann) as a white, heterosexual, feminine woman. I draw attention to the ways in which discourses surrounding the prohibition of miscegenation, homosexuality, and unproductive sexuality subtend America's nationalist representation of itself in Casablanca. More recently, in justifications for the war against Iraq, the values that the United States stood for were invoked in terms of a history that recycles enduring racial and sexual mythologies by giving them a new twist. Once again, America articulated its role on the world stage by appealing to ideologies that stipulated its identity with reference to a mythology that required an implicitly white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western idealized version of women to be representative of the alleged purity of its intentions. A racist subtext underlies the invidious comparisons that were drawn between Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, as the United States set itself above the authority of the United Nations as the protector of Iraqis' true interests, and appealed to the need to liberate Iraqi women from their oppression. The implicit message was that Iraqis should become more like the ideal of the liberated, white woman America imagines to be representative of itself, conveniently forgetting all those "other" women whose economic, racial, or sexual status precludes them from enjoying the ideal of freedom America sees itself as exporting.

Robert Gooding-Williams has argued that Rick's allure for Ilsa in Casablanca can be illuminated by interpreting Sam's role in terms of commodity fetishism. On this reading, Ilsa remains an object of exchange, an object of white, heterosexual desire, for which Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) and Victor Laszlo (Paul Heinreid) compete, while Sam (Dooley Wilson), an African American, carries
the erotic baggage of the relationship between Rick and Ilsa. As the minstrel figure, Sam's role is confined to that of a worker who produces entertainment for the customers at Rick's café, but at the same time, his singing conjures up the mythic, Edenic past of the Parisian romance between Rick and Ilsa. Gooding-Williams suggests that there is a homoerotic subtext to Rick and Sam's relationship, one that is only allowed to come to the fore in the scene where Sam tries to protect Rick from an encounter with Ilsa. Afraid that Ilsa will hurt Rick, Sam suggests that they take the car, drive into the night, go fishing, and get drunk. Rick, reinscribing the heterosexual and racial boundaries of their relationship, refuses him, thereby putting Sam back in his place as subordinate employee.

Building on the contrast between Rick as the outlaw hero and Laszlo as the official hero that Robert Ray (1985) had drawn, Gooding-Williams suggests that Sam's racial identity lends Rick a sexual attractiveness that he would not otherwise have. Yet in circumscribing Sam's role within the trope of fetishism, he does not give himself scope to explore the ramifications of this as fully as he might. If it is true that Rick's association with Sam lends him a sexual allure that Laszlo lacks, this reading serves to confirm Sam as the fetish, the condition that allows Rick and Ilsa's heterosexual, white desire for one another to flourish. But to read Sam's desire for Rick merely from this point of view is to accept the rules of the game as white and heterosexual. It is to confirm Ilsa as the white castrating female and Sam as the black fetish Rick employs in order to ward off the threat of castration that Ilsa represents. Such an interpretation fits well with Freud's observation that the fetish "saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects" (Freud 1905, 353–54).

To conform to Marx's commodity fetishism, the value of Sam's singing would have to be reducible to the capital it produces. At first glance, it might seem that commodity fetishism adequately describes the relationships that bind Sam to Rick. As Marx explained, "A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her song for money, she is to that extent a wage-labourer or merchant. But if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she produces capital directly" (Marx 1977, 1044). Yet Sam's singing is irreducible to the capital it produces, since Rick's exploitation of Sam is not limited to that of an indifferent capitalist. The nostalgic value of Sam's rendition of "As Time Goes By" sustains the romance between Rick and Ilsa. "As Time Goes By" is inseparable from Sam's person, and from his racial history, as subordinate. It is this particular song played by Sam in the particular way that he plays it that conjures up memories of the past for Ilsa and Rick. His "productive labour" is not "like any other," and his singing is not "simply a means of reproducing the means of subsistence" (Marx 1997, 1046). The product of Sam's art is not "distinct from the artistic achievement of the practising artist" (1048). His "product is not separable from the act of producing" (1048). For Rick and Ilsa, the "character
of the actual concrete labour employed" in Sam is far from being a matter of "complete indifference" (1046).

The difficulty of applying Marx's theory of commodity fetishism to Sam's role as musician stems in part from the nature of his labor, but in part from the inability of commodity fetishism to account for the racial and sexual economies that inform his role. Sam's singing falls under the rubric of those "types of work that are consumed as services and not in products separable from the worker" (1044). Hence, it is "not capable of existing as commodities independently of him" (1044). Marx designated such service work as "of microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production" (1044–45). While Marx acknowledged the existence of such work where the "product is not separable from the act of producing" when he said "I want the doctor and not his errand boy" (1048), he nonetheless thought it could "be entirely neglected" (1045). "Such peripheral phenomena can be ignored when considering capitalist production as a whole" (1048). Marxist theory thereby preempts the possibility of analyzing in detail Sam's singing both as a significant contribution, as part of the entertainment economy, and as a labor of love that anchors and stabilizes the heterosexist and racist values that it allows to flourish. There is a sexual and racial economy in operation here that the terms of Marx's commodity fetishism cannot account for. The fantasmatic production of bodies by fetishism continues to produce the integrity of some bodies by the abjection of others, without confronting the specific dynamics of racialization or sexualization that maintain their integrity. Abject, fragmented bodies thus continue to be produced as the waste products of systems of representation that do not own the processes by which they abject their necessary but unrepresented others.

Sam's desires are barely recognized, and consequently, in psychoanalytic terms, he is barely a subject. He is, precisely, abject. Sam is not yet allowed to be a subject, let alone take responsibility for his desires, be they his or someone else's, someone to whom he still, perhaps, belongs. The vessel that Sam's musical body is pours the romance into the white relationship between Rick and Ilsa. His song utters the truth that neither of them wants to see: that the past is over and never was what it seemed to be. Their idyll is a myth. Ilsa was never free to be Rick's lover. She was always, unbeknownst to her, still, married. According to convention, she was not allowed to be occupied elsewhere, she was owned by another man. The only way that she can be a diegetically sympathetic love interest for Rick is by not knowing that Laszlo is still alive, although one must wonder what her assumption that he is dead means at an unconscious level. Is her attachment to Rick a desire for the lost husband that she never had, even when she thought he was alive? If she thinks he is dead, her attachment to Rick operates as a melancholic attachment to him.

Judith Butler has suggested that strong libidinal attachments occur after the loss of an object, and has invested this suggestion with the valence of homosexuality (1997). Perhaps it could equally be invested with Ilsa's sublimated
attachment to Sam's blackness, an attraction that is only available to her in the acceptable form of her desire for Rick—whose romantic allure is nonetheless assured by Sam. Sam's minstrel existence invests Rick with the eroticism of blackness that attracts Ilsa. Sam contaminates the whiteness that the collective unconscious of the studio-produced *Casablanca* worked to achieve, and which the world of Hollywood served to protect, even as he facilitates its desire and subjectivity. Sam's eviscerated, emasculated body lends its phallic status to Rick, producing the music that flows and, in flowing, stimulates the desire that cements Ilsa and Rick, while feminizing Sam. The part-object that this body becomes invests Sam with a maternal, nurturing, compliant role. As their muse, he eroticizes Rick and Ilsa's relationship, while marginalizing his own desire, a desire that is only allowed to subsist so long as it is sublimated in the white, heterosexual, legitimated desire of the costars. Sam's desire is only allowed to exist as subordinated to, yet supportive of, a white narrative of heterosexual desire. The narrative holds out the promise to Sam that his desire can also be legitimated, but only at the cost of mirroring the desire it helps to produce and sustain, or rather to recapture and establish retrospectively as legitimate. Sam's song is what breathes life into the relationship that has foundered on Ilsa's desertion of Rick and her rediscovery of her legitimate husband.

One can see the attraction of applying the trope of fetishism to Sam. He serves as a substitute for the mythical relationship that never was, and his song preserves its memory. But to read Sam as fetishistic does not capture the sense in which he is disenfranchised by the role he plays—it only captures his value from a white point of view. The promise to Sam is that you too can become like us, but you can never be us, because we are what we are partly because of you. You are not one of us, and if we create you in our image, you will still always only ever be becoming us—even as you helped us become us, since we profited from your labor. We'll make you no more than one of us, no different from us, since to acknowledge your difference might also be to acknowledge our guilt and your productivity. You can only exist in comparison to us, as subordinate to us, as lesser than us, as created by us, as allowed to exist by us, but how you helped us be us cannot be acknowledged. As soon as any attempt is made to take seriously the ways in which Sam makes Rick who he is, lends him romance, adds to his allure, the trope of fetishism is shown to be wanting as explanatory not only of how Rick functions for Sam and Ilsa, but also of how they are who they are, they become what they are, in part through excluding Sam from full humanity.

While Rick absorbs the primitive, magical, bestial sexuality Sam has on offer, Sam is also replete with uncontrollable, insupportable myths of negroses (see Fanon 1967). Sam's body communicates, channels, directs, lends itself as a vessel, containing raw unformulated desires, to Rick, his master, who shapes those desires into something new, or some new version of the same—white, heterosexual desire (see Irigaray 1985b). Sam's desires have no value in this
system, and as such are not desires. Their delegitimation occurs before they can be recognized, so that even their expression is only ever indirect. Sam can be the cupid, the gelling agent, the go-between, the feminized glue, the simple, uncomplicated innocent whose raw, untrained, natural, unformed musical talent is harnessed in the service of white desire, cultivated by white law, regulated by heterosexual, paternal authority (Cripps 1977, 373). He is not a man with legitimated, well-formulated desires of his own. In short, he is not a subject, but neither is he an object, commodified or fetishized. He is precisely abject. Sam is constitutive of Rick and Ilsa's relationship in a way that goes unacknowledged.

Not only is there a need to gain access to the imaginary, fantasmatic structures that uphold unconscious symbolic structures which are sexist, racist, heterosexist, and classist, but there is also a tendency of these discourses to reify or congeal into new forms of discrimination that render one another abject. I am interested in the difficulty of articulating forms of oppression and domination without succumbing to the tendency to homogenize or universalize discourses that privilege one opposition over another. I have suggested that the trope of fetishism, which is itself subtended by masculinist claims masquerading as universal, collapses race and class. It fails to see the intricacy of relationships in all their constitutive complexity. In Casablanca, Ilsa's construction as a heterosexual white woman is constituted by Sam's abjection in a way that assures America of a myth that it has constructed for itself, a myth of innocence and racial purity, driven by fear of miscegenation and fueled by denial of slavery. Ilsa must go to America with the white, heterosexual Laszlo, who is uncontaminated by the black and homoerotic allure of Rick with which Sam contaminates the outlaw hero. She can thereby reproduce white babies, preferably male, who can grow up and perpetuate a logic of commodification that continues to exploit racialized others. This logic assures for America its purity as unassailable, its goodness as unimpeachable, and its mythical origins as white. Colonialism and slavery are consigned to a prehistory that cannot be thought, and white, heterosexual America can be safeguarded by a white, European, heterosexual woman, Ilsa, who becomes the ground on which nationalism is supported and protected by white, heterosexual, capitalist patriarchy. This can only be sustained against a background in which Arabs are represented as thieves and cheats, living in a country to which Sam is consigned, keeping his blackness and homosexuality well away from America, on the periphery of Africa, in a border zone, that free town Casablanca (white house). My point, of course, is not to outlaw the discourse of fetishism, which remains useful and illuminating within certain contexts, but rather to point out that it has taken on the role of a currency that is often ignorant of its legacy, and thereby inadvertently perpetuates that legacy.

One of the productive insights that psychoanalysis can contribute, notwithstanding its white, Western, masculinist, bourgeois, Oedipalized narrative
that ceaselessly returns us to an ancient Greece whose mythic imaginary has apparently continued uninterrupted by colonialism and slavery, is a theory of the unconscious. Even if the effect of unconscious commitments needs to be excavated within the narrative that psychoanalytic theory tells itself, the difficulty of combating repressed beliefs remains salient for race, class, and gender theory. If Marx, despite acknowledging that sexual difference operated as the original class difference, failed to follow through this insight, if the logic of commodity fetishism remains blind to the surplus value that women produce in their unpaid labor, there is a moment of his analysis that I want, in particular, to retain. The moment is the one in which Marx sees that the only way in which the form of commodity production can be challenged is the moment at which it is confronted with another form of production. If it is true that the particularity of commodity fetishism needs to be confronted with a different mode of production in order not to pass itself off as universal, and if Marx's neglect of the racial and sexual economies underlying and facilitating capitalist production testifies to the racist and masculinist assumptions of his own discourse, is it not also true that these need to be confronted with a new symbolic economy in order to give up their universal claims? How, then, does a new mode of symbolic production occur? Marx's appeal to the interests of the working class as universal is his answer to this question. Must feminist theory and race theory make universal claims in order to be heard? Must their pretensions to universality condemn them to operating on a single axis, so that to legitimate itself feminist theory must falsely claim that the interests of all women are the same? Must race theory falsely claim that all racial minorities share the same interests? Is the only way to establish new symbolics to falsely claim their universality, thereby perpetuating the logic of the same?

I have suggested that the notion of abjection can help us move beyond the analogical parallelism to which even well-intentioned race and gender theorists fall prey in their continued appeal to the trope of fetishism. It can do so precisely by construing as inarticulate the normative function or constitutive role that gender plays in consolidating class relations, as in Margaret's Museum, or that sexuality, race, and class play in consolidating myths of nationalism, as in Casablanca. In drawing attention to the implicit ways that gender, sexuality, race, or class play as constitutive of imaginaries that do not acknowledge having been shaped by them, in rendering them articulate, one invites a new type of reification. There is a danger that in doing so one fetishizes the abject.

In elaborating this constitutive role, in theorizing it, one is not just liable but condemned to produce new versions of old hegemonic forms of thought. The point is to insistently interrogate these forms of thought rather than confirm their ideological power. Only thus can one resist a logic of equivalence between different forms of oppression, remaining alert to the ways in which political struggles are liable to find new targets, thereby reinventing the oppressive structures they seek to put in question. The implication, of course, is not that
we should give up trying, but that we should be reflective about the tendency of exclusionary gestures to inhabit even ostensibly progressive politics.

Notes

1. Bhattacharjee (1997) and Mohanty (1997) have shown in different ways how both Marxist feminist analyses and the feminist distinction between the public and the private have operated to obscure how race has defined specificities of Third World women immigrant experience and of domestic workers.

2. Currie 1995, 22. This is the novel upon which Mort Ransen based his film script.

References


